

Three Presidents. One Lesson.

Greatness comes down to character.

BY PEGGY NOONAN Friday, February 9, 2001 12:01 a.m. EST The past week was dominated by three presidents, the new one, the last one, a past one. It was instructive.

The new one continues to move forward, becoming accepted by the country as president. The recount seems if not long ago then just another strange mishap, like Al Gore's makeup in the first debate.

George W. Bush is pushing the programs he ran on, doing what he said he'd do. There have been interesting and even unusual appointments, such as John Dilulio, a public intellectual, a writer, to head the office of faith-based initiatives.

Normally someone with that résumé would be picked and publicized as an outside adviser, not as the person who actually runs the agency.

This is startling, like Bill Bennett coming up from the University of North Carolina 19 years ago to head the National Endowment of the Humanities. But the president knows Mr.

Dilulio's work, knows his leadership in the area of kids and crime, probably knows of his caginess in advancing his ideas, and is no doubt pleased that Mr.

Dilulio is a Democrat who looks like a union official. An engaging choice.

Is the tax cut too small? Probably. Is the education bill too modest? Arguably. Will the Pentagon get what it needs? "Let everyone argue," Mr. Bush seems to be saying. "I'll get as much as I can playing the moderate moderator." His lovebombing of Democrats is not mere Bushian bonhomie. He doesn't think they'll be bought off by nicknames. But in showing great warmth and regard for them he lays down a standard of behavior, shows the country he has the temperament to lead, shows Democrats he's open for business, and loses nothing with his base.

Mr. Bush is a crossover artist. When Ronald Reagan entered politics in the 1960s it was a time of high drama, and of the extremes that drama brings. Soviet expansionism, the possibility of nuclear war, Vietnam, riots in the streets. The left was for this, the right for that, the twain did not, could not meet. When Mr.

Reagan reached out to liberals and the left they ignored him; they shunned him. He shook his head, made jokes, and talked to the country instead. He'd go to the Rose Garden and make a statement, throwing the ball over the heads of the press and into the hands of the American people, who caught it and ran with it.

When Bush Senior came to the presidency, he announced that "the people didn't send us here to bicker," and literally offered his hand to the Democrats of Congress. They took it--and ran. Mr. Bush gave the left much of what it wanted: tax increases, high regulation. But you don't impress your opponents by giving them half, you embolden them; they don't respect you more when you break your word, they respect you less. He lost his base and gained no converts.

Bush the Younger does not govern in a time of Reaganesque drama and is able to lovebomb just as his father did early on--but with a difference. Bush the Elder, raised in wealth in Greenwich, Conn., and made to feel guilty about it, nodded to traditional liberal concerns and accepted liberal remedies, all while warning against breaking the bank. Bush the Younger embraces traditional liberal concerns--poverty, injustice, children--while rejecting liberal

remedies. "We'll stimulate through tax cuts, educate through accountability, add choice and freedom to the mix."

When you know what you stand for and why, when you know you won't sacrifice those things because to do so would be self-defeating and wrong, then you can lovebomb the other side forever.

It is all interesting to see, and holds promise. The American people are not the same as they were a generation ago, when Mr. Reagan threw the ball over Sam Donaldson's head. Mr. Bush will have to throw straight but soft for the American people to catch it, and urge them to run.

The last president, Bill Clinton, has experienced a fall as steep as Mr. Bush's rise. Never has a departing president's reputation so crashed and broken. We all know the obvious and well-publicized reasons, but it is surprising nonetheless to see his final abandonment by his friends, by the previously respectful in the media, and by those who loved posing with him at fundraisers. For some of us it is startling: He gave China military technology in return for cash, and you're mad because he pardoned Marc Rich? But perhaps it shouldn't be. Maybe his supporters had been as embarrassed by Mr. Clinton as his critics--maybe even more so. What better time to show your independence and disgust than when he leaves power?

And the Bush White House had little to say, appearing dignified, but following the tough old maxim: Never interrupt your enemy while he's in the process of destroying himself.

And the past president, whose 90th birthday came as the new president rose and the old one fell. Ronald Reagan, though he cannot know it, has lived to see himself lauded and embraced not only by the country but by its opinion leaders, its media, its historians and elites.

It is 20 years since Mr. Reagan walked into the White House, and so much is now clearer. Ideas such as missile defense, once spoofed as Star Wars, are now being judged more coolly, and fairly; what was visionary then is more acceptable now. The origins of the economic miracle of America, 1980-2000, are clearer too. Proving that so much depends on perspective: Up close, a mountain's just a mass of rocks, but travel some distance from it and you can look back and see how it towers, how it changed the landscape.

All week in the Reagan specials they celebrated, without saying the word, his character. But that's what his political victories were about. He swam against the tide, always--in Hollywood, when the whole town was going this way and he went that, in his political career, in the way he ultimately led. He swam against the tide, moved forward, made progress, and got, ultimately, to shore.

The last time I saw him was in January 1999, in Los Angeles. I brought my son, then 11. He had seen a recent PBS documentary on Mr. Reagan, and suddenly Ronald Reagan was real to him, not a family rumor or a man in a picture but a figure in history. "He ended communism," my son told me. Close enough. Mr. Reagan walked into his office like the Reagan of old--erect bearing, hands cupped softly at his sides. But eyeglasses, and thick hair, longer, gray-streaked. He wore his old brown suit, but it had been altered, because he has lost muscle mass.

I had wanted to thank him for all he'd done to change the world, but I looked and knew: Don't. Don't make him come up with the response.

Instead, I introduced myself and said, "I just came here from New York because I wanted to tell you that I love you."

And he smiled a wonderful smile and said, "Oh thank you!" And we held hands and gently moved them back and forth. Words can confuse and communications go awry, but everyone understands love, from little babies to great old men. He posed with my son, we chatted, and someone took a picture.

Later my son and I walked wordlessly to the McDonald's down the street, and finally as we sat down he said something. "You know that picture of Clinton and John F. Kennedy? When Clinton was young and he met him?" I nodded yes. And then I realized what he was saying, and how his moment with Mr. Reagan had struck him.

The young are moved by greatness. They are inspired by it. Children need heroes. They need them to lift life, to suggest a future you can be hungry for. They need them because heroes, just by being, communicate the romantic and yet realistic idea that you can turn your life into something great. The key, of course, is to have the right heroes--to be lifted by greatness and not just by glamour, to be lit by the desire to do good, as opposed to the desire to do well.

The lesson, compliments of three presidents: Be brave, have guts, do what you think right no matter the cost, and mean it, be sincere, it's not a game. Do these things and you will be remembered, whoever you are, whatever you are, with love and gratitude. Fail to do them and you'll wind up an object of embarrassment and derision. Who'd have thought three presidents could teach us so much, in one week?

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Her column appears Fridays