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Presidents' Day

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Distinctly Catholic

Historians and others like to rank presidents in terms of their greatness. The exercise has value insofar as it helps to clarify what we can and should expect from our political leaders and, as a parlor game, it is fun to hear why some people advocate for one president over another.

Greatness seems to require two things. First a great president must be a skilled politician, able to harness both public opinion and the intentionally distinct levers of political authority built into our constitutional framework, he must be able to get things done and to get the right things done. Second, the times must require greatness. As written, the Constitution does not vest extraordinary power in the executive and through much of the nation's history, the key political players were in the Congress not the White House. It is easier to recall Clay and Calhoun and Webster than any of the presidential nonentities who governed in the antebellum era. Great president emerge when there is a systemic, profound crisis that requires greatness.

So, with these criteria, I submit there were four great presidents.

George Washington would fail the measure if he was the second or eighth or twenty-first president. But, because he was the first, his actions were seminal, especially his decision not to seek re-election for life. Washington took office with an untested Constitution and had to make it work, and to work in a way that guaranteed its legitimacy for those who would follow. He made many mistakes, mostly attributable to his Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, but Washington nonetheless lent his personal authority to the new government at a time when it might have collapsed in any one of a zillion ways.

Abraham Lincoln faced the greatest crisis a political leader can face: Civil War. He understood that he must do whatever it took to keep the Union together, including running fast and loose with the Constitution. His commitment to preserving the Union at all costs can be seen most clearly in his stance

towards slavery. He famously said that if he could preserve the Union by freeing all the slaves, he would do that. If he could preserve the Union by freeing none of the slaves, he would do that. And, if he could preserve the Union by freeing some slaves and not others, he would also do that. This last, the most morally incoherent posture of the three, was the course he took. But, he succeeded in keeping the Union together.

Franklin Roosevelt faced an economic crisis worse than any the country had ever seen. The Great Depression left widespread want throughout the land. Roosevelt took steps to stop the bleeding in a flurry of activity known as the First 100 Days. Larger projects, such as the enactment of Social Security, took longer but succeeded in putting policy meat on the bones of the Common Good, a Common Good that had been ignored during the days of laissez-faire economic policy that preceded his tenure. As Washington had lent his personal authority to the new government, Roosevelt lent his personal optimism, and backed it with policies that demonstrated the government would not stand on the sidelines in the face of the suffering of the citizenry.

Harry Truman took office only one month before the defeat of the Nazi tyranny. But, while the elimination of the Nazis from their seat of power in Berlin was a great event, it came with an unhappy consequence: The Soviet tyranny now controlled Berlin and half of Europe. In the face of calls for a return to America's normal isolationism, combined with the understandable desire of all for rapid demobilization of the armed forces, Truman recognized the danger posed by Stalin's armies. The Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine represented a significant departure for United States foreign policy but they not only kept the peace and halted the spread of communism, they refashioned America's place in the world. For all the mistakes we have made as a nation since, on balance, the United States is usually a force for good in the world and it is horrifying to think what evil might have filled the vacuum of global leadership had America not stepped up to the plate.

Polls about great presidents tend to suffer from a lack of historical breadth. So, Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton often make the list of great presidents. To be sure, each man has some claim on the designation. Kennedy's masterful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis set the precedent that it is the job of the president to seek alternatives to war. But the Cuban Missile Crisis stands out in part because Kennedy was so ineffectual in other ways, most notably in passing Civil Rights legislation. Reagan, whatever you think of his policies, changed the political landscape, but he did so by appealing to our most selfish instincts and he saddled the nation, or much of it, with goofy ideas about economics that continue to plague our polity. Clinton did many good things, but the times did not demand greatness, only competence and direction. Passing the Family Medical Leave Act was a good thing, but it pales in significance when compared with the Marshall Plan.

So, who makes your list? (Please, let some Tea Partyer nominate Calvin Coolidge!) These lists may or may not tell us much about the men who have lived in the White House, but they tell us a lot about ourselves.

N.B. It is evidently not a holiday in Kansas City, but it is in DC. So check in with other parts of the NCR website through the day for news. Distinctly Catholic will be busy reading.

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