

A Presidential Skill Set: Ten Rules for Success

Traditional rankings of presidential performance break the job into professional components: administrative skills, economic management, party and legislative leadership, etc. All of which remain valid in 2021. But I'd like to apply some admittedly unconventional criteria – some combination of leadership skills and personal attributes which foster success in the world's most demanding job.

1. *Character counts* – without it, all other rules become inoperative. George Washington possessed it as if by divine right, Jefferson earned it through his pen, Lincoln through his mystical theology of Union.
2. Great presidents are great politicians. That applies to every likeness carved into Mount Rushmore. (Yes, Virginia, even George Washington.) By contrast, the most conspicuously miserable chief executives – Taft and Hoover come to mind – made no secret of their loathing for the political game.
3. Successful presidents combine vision with pragmatism. Theodore Roosevelt said it best: “Keep your feet on the ground and your eyes on the stars.”
4. It sounds counterintuitive, but presidential gamechangers are capable of putting the national interest above their own convictions. Think of Jefferson discarding his strict constructionist principles to purchase Louisiana. Or Richard Nixon, transcending his anti-Communist history to visit “Red” China in 1972.
5. Presidential judgment is greatly enhanced by three kinds of perspective:
 - a. A sense of history
 - b. A sense of humor.
 - c. A sense of humility.
6. Harry Truman declared the chief business of a president to be persuasion. He had a point. Twitter may have replaced the televised Oval Office address as the subject of water cooler

communication – but a 21st century president must have the skills to communicate his priorities and drive the national conversation.

7. Successful presidents advance American interests *and* American ideals. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the United States has been a global power, with an arsenal of values to match its more conventional weapons. Woodrow Wilson said he didn't mind being called an idealist. "That's how I know I'm an American."
8. Great presidents bring us closer to fulfilling the promises we made, to ourselves and our posterity, as the first republic in modern times to entrust government to the governed. They remind us that America is a work in progress, and that in a democracy there can be no authority without moral authority.
9. More than crisis managers, great presidents live up to Lincoln's wartime formula: "The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion."
10. History rewards the risktakers. Put another way, great presidents spend themselves in causes greater than themselves. One does not get to Mount Rushmore by traveling the path of least resistance. Just ask James Buchanan.