

# "The Only Rock of Our Safety"

## Presidential leadership and the 2000 elections

By James A. Barnes

As a recent CBS News/*New York Times* poll reminds us, Americans regard leadership as the most important attribute for their president to have. Even in the wake of President Clinton's deceit about his affair with a White House intern, people placed "strong qualities of leadership" (51%), above being "very honest and fair" (41%). Favoring "policies you think are good" was seen as the most important trait by a scant 7% of those surveyed.

Leadership in the Oval Office, or its absence, is easy to recognize but hard to foresee in would-be presidents. Candidates can raise a convention hall audience to its feet or take a controversial stand, but they have to be elected before they can really demonstrate leadership. Few pundits predicted that Harry S Truman would provide historic direction for the post-World War II democracies.

In a time of economic prosperity and peace, it's even harder to determine what kind of presidential leadership Americans are looking for in the next century. There's no familiar problem out of which the country needs to be led as there were during the Cold War, when foreign policy and defense issues were played out against the backdrop of looming nuclear confrontation.

There are some constants in how voters view presidential leadership, though. "They want someone who they can feel a sense of pride in," says Republican pollster Robert M. Teeter. "There has always been a degree of respect for the presidency that is nonpartisan. That's why people take their kids to airports to see presidents."

In Teeter's opinion, the Clinton scandals have increased the appreciation voters have for integrity in the Oval Office. And in the television age, presidents may best convey that quality in ways that aren't inspirational, at least not in the traditional political sense of rousing a crowd or leading a crusade.

Although the last seven years have made Vice President Al Gore the candidate best prepared to step into the Oval Office, he also may be facing a bigger leadership challenge than any of his well-known rivals, particularly Texas Republican Governor George W. Bush, the frontrunner for the 2000 GOP presidential nomination. But any weakness in this area may be artificial, a perception based on the public's initial suspicions about the grit of any vice president, and on his overall political standing.

A June 4-5 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll probed how people size up Bush and Gore on a range of personal characteristics.

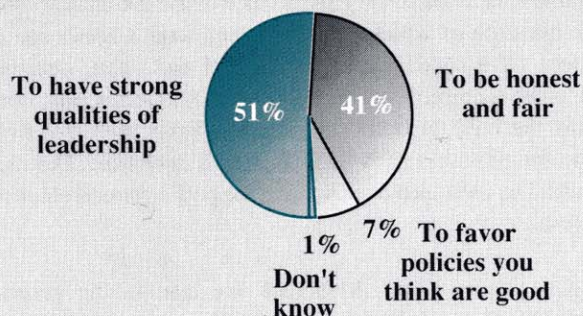
On being a "strong and decisive leader," 59% of those surveyed said that attribute applied "more to Bush," while only 30% gave the Vice President the advantage. Similarly, in a June 9-10 survey conducted by Yankelovich Partners for CNN and *Time* magazine, 53% said the description "strong and decisive leader" applied more to Bush, and only 27% attributed it to Gore.

"There is no question that Al Gore suffers a lack in that area, through no fault of his own, but as a fault of being vice president," says a Democratic strategist who advises the Gore camp and requested anonymity. This and other Gore advisers say that as the campaign gets underway and the Vice President steps out from the shadow of the Clinton administration and begins to lay out his own agenda, the doubts about his leadership qualities will fade. Once Gore starts winning primaries and then the Democratic nomination, says the Democratic strategist, "you will see him transformed from someone who isn't a strong leader to someone who is."

There seems to be some precedent for this notion. Twelve years ago, the public had similar doubts about the caliber of then-Vice President George Bush's leadership. (Remember the famous October 1987 *Newsweek* cover of Bush at the wheel of his speedboat in the Maine surf with the headline, "Fighting the 'wimp factor.'") But over the course of the 1988 campaign, opinions about this dimension of his character tended to correlate more with his overall political standing. Early adverse assessments about Bush's leadership dimension didn't turn out to be an inherent weakness for his campaign.

Figure 1

**Question:** Here are three qualities that people tell us are important for a president to have in these times. Which do you think is most important for a president—to be honest and fair, to favor policies you think are good, or to have strong qualities of leadership?



Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, June 5-6, 1999.



**W**hen George Bush began his quest for the White House in earnest, he was not seen as strong leader. In a January 1987 *Time* poll, only 35% of those surveyed characterized Bush as a strong and decisive leader. A majority, 53%, said that description did not apply to him. But after he had been campaigning for a year, those numbers were essentially reversed: 56% of respondents to a January 1998 *Time* poll described Bush as a strong and decisive leader, while only 33% said he was not.

Bush wrapped up the 1988 GOP nomination fairly quickly, but his overall political standing slumped in the spring and early summer. General election trial heat polls showed him struggling, and in some cases losing by a wide margin to the eventual Democratic presidential nominee, then-Massachusetts Governor Michael S. Dukakis.

By late April of that year the voters were almost evenly split on the question of Bush as a strong and decisive leader: 47% told *Time* pollsters he was and 44% said he wasn't. But after the Republican convention, when Bush overtook Dukakis in the polls, his leadership quotient recovered. A late September *Time* poll reported that 55% of those surveyed viewed Bush as strong and decisive. (Bush may have gotten some help in this area on September 13 that year when Dukakis visited a General Dynamics plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan, that built M-1 tanks, and decided to take one out for a spin. The pictures of that event ridiculed the notion of Dukakis as commander in chief.)

Other surveys generally confirm the leadership cycle of the '88 campaign. In an April 1987 Harris poll, 39% of the respondents said Bush had "the personality and leadership qualities a President should have," while 55% said he did not. By the following January, 50% said Bush did have those qualities; 47% said he didn't. Bush's leadership rating dipped a few points in early June, but by September it had rebounded: a Harris poll found 56% agreed he had the necessary personality and leadership qualities to be president, while only 39% believed he didn't.

Likewise, in June 1988, an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll found Americans evenly divided between Bush and Dukakis on the question of which candidate they would rather see as president "if a sudden crisis developed and swift, decisive action were required." After the successful Democratic convention, the NBC/*WSJ* survey found Dukakis preferred over Bush in this situation, 50% to 39%. At the same time, Dukakis held a 51% to 34% lead over Bush in the poll's general election question.

But, once again, when Bush took the lead in the general election trial heat following the GOP convention, a mid-September NBC/*WSJ* poll found 51% saying they'd rather see

Bush as president in a crisis situation, while only 41% preferred Dukakis.

**T**he sense that Al Gore lacks leadership qualities, particularly compared to George W. Bush, may be affecting perceptions of the Vice President's ability to handle the uniquely presidential tasks of commander in chief and foreign policy leader. It's an issue that Gore addressed not so subtly when he formally declared his intention to make a second run for the White House on June 16. The official announcement couldn't have been better timed. With the apparent success of United States and NATO forces in the Balkans, Gore was able to burnish his leadership credentials as ready from day one to handle national security issues.

"Foreign policy is no game, nor is it the proper arena for partisan politics or easy sound bites," said Gore. "You deserve a leader who has been tested in it, who knows how to protect America and secure the peace."

Indeed, the Vice President did play a behind-the-scenes role in the Kosovo settlement, working with his long-time Russian confrere, former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, and getting the ball rolling for him to broker the Serbian withdrawal with help from Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari.

According to *Time* magazine, Gore's "secret passion" as Vice President has been international relations. According to recent polls, though, this area could also be a liability in his campaign to succeed Bill Clinton.

Two recent media surveys point to Gore's potential weakness in foreign affairs. A May 23-24 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll found little enthusiasm for the Vice President as foreign policy leader. Asked how Gore would handle a variety of issues as President, only 37% of those surveyed said he would do "a good job" on foreign affairs, while 53% said "not a good job." Republican respondents were naturally Gore's harshest judges, with 77% making a negative assessment; but so did 54% of the self-identified independents, as well as 28% of Democrats.

Conversely, the poll's respondents gave the Vice President net positive marks in how he would handle the economy, education and the environment. On taxes, Gore scored poorly, but not as poorly as he did on foreign affairs.

**E**ven more startling were the results from an NBC News/*WSJ* survey conducted April 17 and 19, which asked how much confidence people would have in various White House contenders if they were commander in chief during the Kosovo engagement.

For the Vice President, the response was the polling equivalent of a Bronx cheer. Only 11% of those surveyed said they would



have “a great deal of confidence,” and another 10% said “quite a bit of confidence.” A whopping 40% said they would have “very little confidence,” while 32% replied “just some confidence.”

On the other hand, the one-and-a-quarter term governor of Texas got a reaction that seemed more appropriate for his father, who presided over the allied victory in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Nineteen percent of the survey respondents said they would have “a great deal of confidence” in Bush as commander in chief, and 24% replied “quite a bit.” Only 16% said “very little confidence,” while 29% said “just some.”

And this poll was conducted after Bush had stumbled through a few news cycles before articulating his position supporting the US involvement in Kosovo, a stand which the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page dubbed “Clintonian.”

Bush wasn't the only White House contender who scored better than the Vice President on this question—so did Republicans former Red Cross President Elizabeth Dole and Arizona Senator John McCain, as well as Gore's Democratic nomination rival, Bill Bradley. Only former GOP Vice President Dan Quayle inspired less confidence as the potential commander in chief.

“I'm surprised that the Vice President has such a high negative,” says Bush pollster Fred Steeper. Steeper suggests there might be two factors—one personal and one partisan—to account for the disparity: people remember and generally approve of Bush's father's stewardship of national security and assume that Governor Bush will have similar instincts if he's elected president; and people tend to give Republicans higher marks than Democrats on foreign affairs.

“Whether it's coming from perceptions of Bush and Gore, or it's a partisan reaction, that's a serious liability that Gore has if national security issues are more important in 2000 than the last two presidential elections,” says Steeper. “It's no accident,” he notes, that in the last two presidential elections when national security was a major issue in the campaign—1968 and 1980—a Republican prevailed. “We'd love national security to be in play again.”

This has to be a bit frustrating for Gore, as the tone of his announcement remarks suggests. After all, as he pointed out in his speech, he served in Vietnam. During that conflict, Bush served in the Texas Air National Guard. When he was a Senator in the 1980s, Gore became an expert on arms control issues. Meanwhile, Bush was struggling not to lose money in the oil business in Texas. And for the last six-and-a-half years,

Gore has been a key player in the national security councils of the Clinton White House, while the biggest foreign policy issue that Bush has had to deal with in Austin is immigration. At least the Vice President can take some comfort that campaigns have a way of exposing the records and experiences of candidates.

Moreover, Gore's defenders point out, these negative poll readings on national security were taken as the public was growing more skeptical about

the Kosovo campaign, which probably exaggerated the Vice President's vulnerability on national security issues. At the same time, though, as independent pollster Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, notes in his reading of the polls, while Clinton's overall ratings dipped as the Kosovo conflict wore on, Gore's didn't.

“I don't think there's a Kosovo effect here,” says Kohut. “There is no reason for people to think that Bush is more capable than Gore in this area, so it has to do with the general impressions of these guys and their parties.”

The dilemma Gore has on national security is that voters tend to associate competence on that issue with their overall perceptions of a candidate's leadership qualities. That is already a big problem for Gore, but, as George Bush proved in 1988, negative perceptions of leadership are ones that vice presidents have been known to turn around.

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