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A class of 300 million

A president who wants to be a leader must first be a teacher.

By Susan Jacoby

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Who will be ready for the presidency on Day One? Who is best qualified to be commander in chief? Who is tough enough, charismatic enough and competent enough to do the job?

These are all important questions, of course, but they ignore a crucial element of presidential leadership -- the ability to educate the public about the preeminent issues of the day.

Our greatest presidents, in the judgment of historians and in popular memory -- including Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt -- would never have succeeded as commanders in chief had they not first succeeded as teachers in chief. And two of the most conspicuous presidential failures in recent history -- Bill Clinton's healthcare reform plan and George W. Bush's open-ended war in Iraq -- can be traced, in part, to the inability or unwillingness of both men to educate the public about complex, long-term issues.

The duty of the president as public educator is not only more important than ever but, paradoxically, more difficult to carry out today than it was at a time when the attention of Americans was not fragmented by continuous access to infotainment. No 21st century president can count on what Roosevelt could -- an audience of at least three-quarters of the American public every time he took to the radio for one of his "fireside chats." And none of the 2008 presidential candidates is equipped with the experience of educating the public that Lincoln acquired during the famous debates he conducted about slavery with Stephen Douglas in the 1858 Illinois senatorial campaign.

Lincoln's debates (he lost the senatorial battle to Douglas) prefigured all of the major issues of the 1860 presidential campaign and the Civil War. Each of the seven debates lasted more than three hours and was attended not only by Illinois residents but by thousands of voters from neighboring states. Needless to say, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, in which each man spoke directly and at length to the other's arguments, bore no resemblance to our modern choreographed-for-television pseudo-debates, in which candidates are often forbidden to speak to each other directly and rarely give more than 90-second answers to questions. After the Lincoln-Douglas debates, millions of Americans eventually read the full text in their local newspapers or in a collection edited by Lincoln himself.

One result of Lincoln's debate experience was his heightened awareness of the controversial nature of immediate emancipation -- even in the North. His delay in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation until September 1862 may well have bought him time to convince a significant number of ambivalent Northerners that the war must free slaves as well as preserve the Union.

Roosevelt faced an equally formidable task of public education when the Nazis stormed into Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. At the time, an overwhelming majority of Americans opposed any U.S. involvement in the European conflict. FDR began his efforts with a fireside chat two days after the invasion.

Sixteen months later, with most of his countrymen still opposed to entering the war, Roosevelt delivered what was arguably his most powerful educational message. On Dec. 29, 1940, in what would become known as the "arsenal of democracy" speech, the president launched a successful campaign for lend-lease military aid to Britain.

FDR did not say, "I'm the decider." Instead, he offered Americans information about the world and persuaded them of the need to chart a different course. Given that Congress renewed the Selective Service Act by only a one-vote margin in the summer of 1941, it is sobering to reflect on how unprepared the U.S. would have been when it was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, had Roosevelt said and done nothing to bring the international peril home to his fellow citizens during the preceding two years.

It is beside the point that today's voters could, if they wished, peruse much longer texts than the Lincoln-Douglas debates on the Web -- or that they could follow the course of a foreign war on a Google-enhanced map. The reality is that when we read online, most of us are trolling for quickie chunks of information. The same is true when we watch the news on TV. So it is not surprising that our presidents have fallen into the habit of appearing occasionally, and relatively briefly, to announce *faits accomplis* without taking the trouble to make their case over a period of months, much less years, to their fellow citizens.

There is a difference between propaganda and education. Bush, who belongs to the "decide first, explain later" (or not at all) school of presidential decision-making, originally sold the Iraq war to the public on grounds of nonexistent Iraqi WMD -- and on the expectation of quick victory. This can work when a policy is as popular as Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq was in 2003. But deciding without educating does not work when a policy is unpopular in the first place or when things turn sour. FDR, for example, had little to offer but bad news during the first year of the war in the Pacific -- but he had already talked enough about the geography and strategic realities of far-flung battles to keep popular support.

In domestic as well as foreign policy, the time for presidents to start acting as teachers in chief is before, not after, a problem turns into a crisis. The conventional wisdom about the collapse of the Clinton administration's healthcare initiative in 1994 is that both Bill

and Hillary Clinton failed to bring all of the major interest groups, especially the insurance industry, to the table.

But the president's more fundamental mistake was his failure to prepare Americans for change. The Clinton plan, presented to Congress on Sept. 23, 1993, was hammered out by 30 closed-door task forces that did not share their discussions with the larger public until the final unveiling in Washington.

The health insurance industry then jumped in with its famous "Harry and Louise" commercials, which emphasized what well-insured Americans might stand to lose -- and ordinary citizens had no countervailing information about what they stood to gain. Today, everyone remembers Harry and Louise, and almost no one (including the Republican candidates who are still inveighing against "Hillarycare") remembers the details of the Clinton proposal.

If I were a presidential candidate who considered universal healthcare a top priority, I would already be sitting down on the campaign trail with doctors, nurses and patients in unscripted give-and-take sessions throughout the country. I would listen as well as explain my ideas: Education is a two-way street.

Precisely because a president can no longer count on the longer public attention span that prevailed in the eras of Lincoln and Roosevelt, he or she must use multiple pulpits to function effectively and creatively as teacher in chief. Why not hold a news conference or two in the early evening and give the network executives heartburn by preempting a reality TV show slot instead of delivering one-way speeches at 9 p.m.? How about following up the television appearances with a live Internet discussion led by the president of the United States -- not by lobbyists?

To qualify for the post of teacher in chief, a candidate must demonstrate the ability and the desire to transcend the culture of distraction and deliver the most important message that any political leader can deliver to an intellectually lazy public: "Pay attention."

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