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Still Another Hidden Hand Presidency?: The Presidential Leadership Style of Abraham Lincoln and Dwight Eisenhower

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At first glance there may not appear to be many valid comparisons between the presidential leadership styles of Dwight Eisenhower and Abraham Lincoln. The two men held power almost one hundred years apart, Lincoln during one of the greatest crises that the United States has ever witnessed and Eisenhower, although presiding at the height of the Cold War, in a period of relative peace and prosperity. In addition, Eisenhower had gained worldwide fame as a victorious general in World War II, which almost inevitably caused the public to perceive him as a potential president while Lincoln, who was hardly an unknown in the Republican party, nonetheless received the nomination as very much of a "dark horse" candidate. Finally, the world itself has changed so much in the twentieth century and the powers of the president have expanded to such a degree, that one might suspect that the two had very little in common.

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However, a closer analysis of the two men reveals that there are similarities in the manner in which they approached the office. Their solution to dealing with people and problems is what Fred Greenstein labeled in his classic study of Eisenhower "The Hidden Hand Presidency." Greenstein argues that Eisenhower preferred to work behind the scenes, relying on his Cabinet members for front-line decisions, while he set broad policy. An analysis of Lincoln's approach to the process of governing reveals some basic similarities, both in personality characteristics, as well as in methods of leadership, which also led to a secretive leadership style.

Lincoln and Eisenhower were both by nature reticent and secretive often making them an enigma to those who knew them well. Fellow lawyers, his law partner William Herndon, and his good friend Judge David Davis, would all have agreed of Lincoln that he was "one of the most incomprehensible personages we have ever known." Even his wife, Mary, once said of her husband, "He was not a demonstrative man, when he felt most deeply, he expressed the least." In Eisenhower's case, speech writer Emmet Hughes summing up the contradictions in the man, including his tendency to work behind the scenes, wrote, "He was not, then, exactly a simple man."

Utilizing this mask of secrecy, both men exuded a folksy and rather humble image which hid some of their truly outstanding talents. Lincoln has become a figure of such mythical proportions, with tales of his humble beginnings, that he serves the role of the typical common man in American history. Writing to his friend and fellow Illinois politician, Jesse Fell, in 1859, in a letter which Fell had requested, Lincoln said: "There is not much of it, for the reason I suppose, that there is not much of me." On another occasion addressing the 166th Ohio Regiment, he said that his rise to the presidency showed that any mother's son might aspire to that office. He also claimed that his policy was to have no policy and that he did not direct events as much as events carried him along. The president created the impression that he drifted with the tide and that his career was due to chance and fortuitous circumstances.

In reality, while he may have begun life humbly, as most people did on the frontier, by the time of his presidency Lincoln had distanced himself from many of his fellow citizens of Springfield. He was a well known lawyer and a man of substantial wealth who also possessed major literary talent which might have propelled him into a writing career if he had been born under different circumstances. Lincoln, who is the American public's ideal of the common man, was anything but common even if he strove mightily to conceal the fact.

Eisenhower was also portrayed as coming from humble beginnings. As biographer Stephen Ambrose writes, "If
Eisenhower was not born in a log cabin, the shack in Dennison, Texas, was close enough; if his family was not poverty-stricken, it was poor enough." Ambrose further notes that until United States entry into World War II in 1941, Ike's career had been extremely ordinary. In fact, "Had he died in 1941, on the verge of retirement on his fifty-first birthday, he would not today be even a footnote in history."

Similar to Lincoln, Eisenhower's smile and folksy manner concealed much deeper intellectual abilities. His staff secretary, Andrew Goodpaster, recounted how on one occasion Eisenhower listened to several hours of presentations by foreign policy experts and then, himself, summarized the discussions in a forty-five minute discourse. George Kennan, noted diplomat, scholar, and architect of the post World War II containment policy, who was one of those present, later told Goodpaster that "in doing so Eisenhower showed his intellectual ascendency over every man in the room."

While Lincoln did not have the formal executive experience which Eisenhower did, Lincoln's caution caused him to operate in a similar manner. He, too, liked to solicit advice from various corners, in some cases even after he had made his decision. Lincoln once addressed this tendency in himself with the declaration "I am a slow walker but I never walk back."

Numerous Eisenhower advisors have verified his desire to set broad policy goals and make big decisions while he avoided becoming bogged down in the minutiae of details. Attorney General Herbert Brownell learned this the hard way when he brought some pardons to Eisenhower who said: "Say, listen this is your job. You're not supposed to put all that burden on me. I'm going to rely on you. What are your recommendations?" Brownell added on another occasion, "If they did not bring to his attention matters that required it, he was severe. But if they 'passed the buck' to the president for front-line decisions, he equally disapproved."

Compare this with New York Times editor Henry Raymond's description of Lincoln's procedure: "He always maintained that the proper duty of each Secretary was to direct the details of everything done within his own department, and to tender such suggestion, information, and advice to the President, as he might solicit at his hands. But the duty and responsibility of deciding what line of policy should be pursued, or what steps should be taken in any specific case, in his judgment belonged exclusively to the President; and he was always willing and ready to assume it."

Both presidents had learned the lesson that the head of a vast bureaucracy such as the U. S. government will soon lose his effectiveness and his administration will come to a screeching halt if he becomes immersed in the details of every department. It was only when the cabinet member could not handle the job that intervention occurred, as in the case of Lincoln's War Secretary Simon Cameron or Eisenhower's Defense Secretary Charles Wilson.

Lincoln and Eisenhower apparently saw their advisors as sounding boards to get all points of view before coming to a decision. Andrew Goodpaster delighted in repeating Eisenhower's quote about the use of his cabinet: "You know I get the best advisors I can get. I get the most brilliant people I can assemble. I listen to their advice and I even take their advice. But goddammit, I don't have to like it."

Once again, the portrait drawn by Lincoln friend and newspaperman Noah Brooks is striking: It was a peculiar trait of Lincoln that, in order to preclude all possibility of doubt in his own mind concerning the expediency of any contemplated act, he would state to those with whom he came in contact many doubts and objections not his own, but those of others, for the express purpose of being confirmed and fixed in his own judgment.

Such tactics can lead to the perception that the president is not in charge of his administration. This will be particularly true if there are dominant individuals in the cabinet who may appear to manipulate the vacillating chief executive, and, of course, Eisenhower had such advisors in Sherman Adams and John Foster Dulles while Lincoln had Edwin Stanton and Salmon Chase.

When the record is examined it becomes apparent that both Adams and Dulles subordinated themselves to Eisenhower. In his memoirs the president wrote of his dealings with the Secretary of State, "He would not deliver an important speech or statement until I had read, edited, and approved it; he guarded constantly against the possibility that any misunderstanding could arise between us."

Similarly, Chief of Staff Sherman Adams verified that the legend of his sending important decision papers to the president with the initials "OK SA" was not true. He explained the role which the president had given him in the following manner: "Eisenhower simply expected me to manage a staff that would simplify and expedite the urgent business that had to be brought to his personal attention and to keep as much work of secondary importance as possible off his desk." The papers that Adams did initial usually involved minor patronage positions with which the president had no desire to be involved and which he approved in a routine manner. With Adams making the patronage decisions, the president realized that the disappointed office seeker would vent his anger at the Chief of Staff.

Eisenhower also used his Press Secretary Jim Hagerty as a lightning rod as recounted humorously by Hagerty, himself: "President Eisenhower would say, "Do it this way. I would say, "If I go to that press conference and say what you want me to say, I would get hell." With that he would smile, get up and walk around the desk, pat me on the back and say, "My boy, better you than me."

In a very similar fashion, both contemporaries and some later historians have seen animosity between Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton, despite the fact the two men were actually on very intimate terms. While some twentieth century authors have raised preposterous charges that Stanton hated Lincoln so much that he engineered his death, during the last two summers of the war the two shared
adjoining cottages on the grounds of the Soldier’s Home. Here they enjoyed relaxing and playing with each other’s children, with one of Stanton’s son’s most vivid memories being of the president and his father, dressed in formal clothing, climbing a tree to rescue some pet peacocks that had become entangled.

While a policy was under discussion, Stanton felt free to dissent vigorously, but once an issue was decided, he would always yield to the president. On numerous pieces of correspondence there appears the notation, “I yield to whatever the President may think best for the service.”

Stanton took the same sort of heat for Lincoln as Eisenhower’s advisors did for him with the two men having a working relationship which complemented their personalities. Stanton tended to be the harsher of the two, although there were times when he could be persuaded that some kind deed, such as the release of a prisoner should be accomplished, but that he could not do so without weakening discipline and setting an unwise precedent. In those cases Stanton was quick to send the petitioners to Lincoln, who would pardon the offending individual, thus keeping Stanton’s reputation as a tyrant intact, and enhancing the president’s kindly image. Conversely, when Lincoln saw that he could not take some kindly action, he would dispatch the petitioners to Stanton, who would uphold the harsh action that Lincoln wished taken. In each case, Stanton appeared to be the monster and Lincoln the kindly father figure. Stanton gladly deflected the anger away from Lincoln as Adams or Dulles did with Eisenhower.

While a brief study cannot deal with all policy areas, the manner in which the presidents handled certain major issues is instructive. One of the urgent problems faced by Eisenhower was the demagogic senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy charged that the government was riddled with Communists and he particularly criticized former Secretary of State George C. Marshall, who, he said, had lost China to the Communists. Since Marshall had been Eisenhower’s mentor and role model, he chafed at this criticism, yet, rather than attacking McCarthy in a direct manner, as Harry Truman would certainly have done, Eisenhower proceeded simply to ignore him.

While there has been some controversy over the president’s tactics, several intimates believed they had been effective.

Speech writer Bryce Harlow wrote, “Truman attacked him (McCarthy) personally by name. Thereby he created a monster. Eisenhower killed him and he did it by ignoring him.” William Ewald, who aided the president with his memoirs, said the Eisenhower approach in most cases of political attack amounted to “...don’t see, don’t feel, don’t admit, and don’t answer; just ignore your attacker and keep smiling.”

This approach had been developed in his youth on advice from his mother, “Eventually, out of my mother’s talk, grew my habit of not mentioning in public anybody’s name with whose actions or words I took violent exception.” He also revealed an interesting device which he used to try to disperse pent-up anger toward someone who had offended him:

I used to follow a practice—somewhat contrived I admit—to write the man’s name on a piece of scrap paper, drop it into the lowest drawer of my desk, and say to myself: “That finishes the incident, and so far as I’m concerned, that fellow.”

Parenthetically, Lincoln also wrote irate letters, one of the most famous being to General Meade after he let Lee get away after Gettysburg. After his anger had cooled, however, he did not forward it to the general. It was annotated “To Gen. Meade, never sent, or signed.”

Lincoln and Eisenhower did use letter writing to good effect on a variety of issues. This was a more normal means of communication for Lincoln in the nineteenth century but is more unique in the case of Eisenhower, who actually disliked using the telephone, which is, of course, a more direct and confrontational means of communication than a letter. On one occasion, Ike actually sent letters to more than four hundred businessmen friends to solicit their support for his plan to reorganize the Department of Defense.

One of Lincoln’s major letter writing campaigns involved his Reconstruction policies in Louisiana. Rather than confront the issue of voting rights for blacks directly, he worked behind the scenes, writing letters to Governor Michael Hahn and other officials suggesting that intelligent blacks and black soldiers should be allowed to vote. The impact of a letter from the president of the United States upon the recipient can hardly be underestimated.

Another similarity is the two presidents’ use of language. While both men could be precise when they wanted to be, they also used language to conceal their policies when it suited their purposes. At press conferences, Eisenhower, who had actually written speeches for General McArthur, was a master of using fractured syntax to confuse an issue. Before a press conference on the Formosa Resolution he told Press Secretary Jim Hagerty, “Don’t worry, Jim, if that question comes up, I’ll just confuse them.” Years later he would still chuckle about how hard it must have been for the Russian and Chinese intelligence agencies to explain to the heads of their respective governments exactly what the president had meant.
While Lincoln’s use of evasive language may not be as readily apparent, after all, he was the author of the Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural, two of the greatest addresses in the English language, he could also tailor his writing when it suited his purposes. One example is the Emancipation Proclamation, which contains none of the soaring rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address, causing historian Richard Hofstadter to write that it had “all the grandeur of a bill of lading.” The reason for this, however, according to more recent historians, was that in a matter so controversial, Lincoln purposely did not attempt to arouse the public.

Their styles and personalities also marked something of what might be considered the dark side of both men. Eisenhower could use explosive profanity, a trait perhaps not uncommon in career military men, and he could often erupt in anger. When speech writer Bryce Harlow went in to recommend that the president should invite Harry Truman to the White House he told secretary Ann Whitman: “You leave that door open so that when I skid I won’t hit the wall....I’m going to do something to him that’s going to infuriate him, and I just want not to hit the wall when I come out skidding.”

Lincoln did use milder language than Eisenhower but was also known when annoyed to occasionally use profanity. Francis Carpenter, who spent six months at the White House and produced a painting of Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation surrounded by his cabinet, described an officer who had been cashiered from the service visiting the White House and having the temerity to say that Lincoln would not do him justice. Lincoln bolted from his chair and grabbing the man by the collar exploded: “Sir, I give you fair warning never to show yourself in this room again.” Historian Michael Burlingame devotes a long chapter in his recent book, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, to what he calls “Lincoln’s Anger and Cruelty.”

Each man, while being tolerant of the indiscretions of those advisors who were still useful to them, could also be ruthless in dismissing those same loyal advisors when they had become a liability. When Sherman Adams became enmeshed in a scandal over accepting gifts, Eisenhower finally decided that Adams had to be fired. He did not even tell Adams directly but tasked Republican National Chairman Meade Alcorn to wield the ax. Alcorn was disturbed that he had to be the messenger and since the firing was done indirectly Adams seemed to feel that his demise came at the hands of vice-president Nixon and not the president himself.

Lincoln, who had long tolerated Treasury Secretary Chase, also dismissed him abruptly in the summer of 1864, when the two clashed over an appointment to the New York Custom House. Lincoln notified his Treasury Secretary that “relations had reached a point of mutual embarrassment” and Chase, who had offered to resign several times before, was now somewhat surprised to discover that Lincoln had accepted.

While sometimes being a bit devious may be a trait that is admired in a chief executive, or at least tolerated as a necessary evil, a less generous interpretation can be placed on the actions of Eisenhower and Lincoln. One of the first of the revisionist writers on Eisenhower, Murray Kempton, portrayed Ike as devious as did Richard Nixon when he wrote, “He was a far more complex and devious man than most people realized, and in the best sense of those words.” Lincoln’s law partner, William Herndon, who admired him greatly, nonetheless wrote, “He was always calculating, always planning ahead. His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.”

There is also no suggestion that this style was unique to these two chief executives. Thomas Jefferson is often seen as a practitioner of the same style and a more recent candidate would certainly be Ronald Reagan. Further research would undoubtedly verify that there are other presidents who would fit into this category as well.

It should also be obvious that there might be drawbacks to such a leadership approach. Political Scientist, Richard Neustadt has argued that a president’s success is directly dependent on those he wishes to influence being aware of his policies and the potential punishments that might come from not supporting them. Therefore, if the president’s hand is too hidden, this can at times cause the very appearance of drift and division within the administration which the chief executive is trying to avoid. While behind the scenes he may have a firm hand on the helm, the perception of indecision frustrates the achievement of policy objectives.

Even historians who praise Lincoln and Eisenhower as leaders admit that it is not always a style they admire in more recent practitioners. Indeed, the hidden hand style does not guarantee success and there is probably no one leadership style which is appropriate for all situations. Nonetheless, it was a style rooted in the personalities and upbringing of Lincoln and Eisenhower, which has caused Lincoln to be regarded as our best chief executive and Eisenhower as far above average. However, this secretive style has made it much more difficult for both contemporaries and future generations of scholars to decipher their true policies.