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Posted: 2:00 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 6, 2012

Are today's politicians ready for the challenges and opportunities of our time?

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By Jeremi Suri

These stories are the first in an occasional series in Insight & Books on issues relating to the November elections.

Leaders are not taught. They are made. None of the most successful presidents in our country's history ever took a course in leadership. Few of our best CEOs, scientists, and scholars studied leadership systematically. They all emerged from a set of historical circumstances that encouraged particular kinds of thought and action. They all brought accumulated wisdom to problems in new ways. Leadership is less vision than application, more adjustment than consistency.

Personality and character matter. Observation and reflection matter even more. The men and women who change history, it based on how accurately they understand the world around them. Leaders frankly assess challenges and courageously turn them into opportunities for achievements. They neither accept the fate of their circumstances nor ignore the real constraints on their action. Leaders look for points of leverage where they can make a positive difference. They do not "reinvent" the world; they nudge it into a new and productive orbit.

This is what made figures like Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt so special. They lived in times of acute difficulty, times when the future of American society was truly imperiled. They did not pretend that they had clear "solutions" to the immorality of slavery, the suffering of the Great Depression, or the threat of Fascism. The United States did not possess ready-made capabilities for dealing with any of these challenges, and the nation's history did not offer useful precedents.

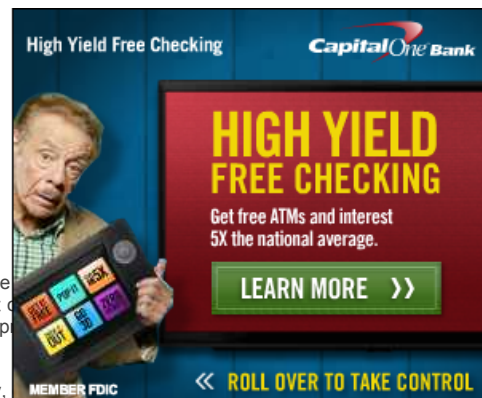
Lincoln and Roosevelt spoke forthrightly to their citizens about the difficulties they confronted. That was the source of their enduring eloquence. Lincoln and Roosevelt moved deliberately to gain leverage over their monumental challenges by addressing the focused problems they could solve: preventing Southern secession, putting unemployed citizens back to work, and denying Fascist enemies the means of attacking the United States again after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. These responses, as difficult as they were, served as opportunities to mobilize citizens and turn the tide of suffering and despair. These responses provided early progress and they fueled momentum for larger undertakings.

Only later, after these great leaders restored American confidence and capabilities, would they focus on the bigger goals: emancipating all slaves, maintaining economic growth, and making the world safe for democracy. Circumstances pushed Lincoln and Roosevelt in directions that they did not choose, but they acted strategically to convert necessity into long-term strength, growth, and security. Lincoln and Roosevelt understood their historical context, capabilities, and goals. Most of all, they were great leaders because they brought these elements together in their words and actions.

Great leaders are synthesizers who re-make and re-apply the established ideas of others. They emulate and they experiment for a cause. We will need our president, congressional representatives, and other national leaders to do similar things in the next four years. So far, we have reason to believe that they are not prepared for leadership of this kind on either side of the political aisle. Our popular culture emphasizes simple slogans over complex analysis. Speeches, advertisements, and debates showcase ideological platitudes over detailed mastery of process. In a time of twenty-four hour news cycles and ubiquitous sound bites, the long-standing tendency to favor show over substance has greatly magnified. This means that it is easier to look like a powerful national leader than to act as one.

Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama were both part of this dynamic. They ran campaigns that emphasized "strength," "compassion," "integrity," and "change." We have every reason to believe that they meant what they said. Nonetheless, in office they proved unable to gain lasting leverage over the biggest challenges to American society. They did not succeed in bringing ideas and policies together to restore public confidence that the wealthiest and most powerful government in the world could turn the difficulties of this era into new opportunities for growth and security. Public opinion polls in 2008 and 2012 show that even loyal voters recognized an absence of effective leadership in the White House. Dissatisfied voters in 2012 appear to have yet lower expectations for presidential candidate Mitt Romney. His vacuous policy statements have shown that he has little sense of how to turn current conditions to the advantage of American citizens as a whole.

What are the circumstances that our leaders are failing to address? What are the challenges that they are failing to convert into



useful opportunities? Where are they consistently missing the mark?

Each historical era is defined by one big issue, and ours is clear: the proliferation of international competitors for America's continued prosperity and security. Since the end of the Second World War American power and productivity insured ever-higher standards of living for citizens and ever-greater insulation from the ravages of war. Although poverty remains evident in parts of our country and many men and women serve bravely in our all-volunteer armed forces, the vast majority of educated citizens today live much better lives than their parents and grandparents. They consume more, they reside in bigger houses, and few will serve in battle. This experience of unprecedented prosperity and security was possible because the United States has been so dominant on every dimension of power and productivity.

America's twentieth century dominance is far less clear in the twenty-first century. We continue to have the best armed forces, universities, and innovative organizations in the world, but our lead is now much less commanding. Small and highly organized insurgencies have proven that they can attack us, and they can force us to defend ourselves in ways that jeopardize our freedoms and break our budgets. The cost of security to the United States has become a major drag on our society.

Government-supported laboratories in China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and even North Korea have shown that they can now master some of the most complex technologies pioneered in the United States. Americans can no longer assume that new technologies will provide greater value to us than our civilian and military competitors. Formerly "under-developed" societies are now rapidly developing products to challenge what our best companies produce. They are developing weapons to undermine the security provided by our vast military arsenal. The pace of economic and technological change no longer favors the United States, as it has in past decades.

Most of all, factories drawing on easy access to information and cheap labor around the world have displayed how they can move dynamic innovation, production, and job-creation far from the United States. Educated American workers can no longer assume that they are positioned for lucrative jobs and a long-term share of the benefits from the most successful businesses. The outsourcing of production also means the outsourcing of opportunity, wealth, and family security. A globalized economy challenges the national image of middle-class family life.

American society remains second to none in overall power, but that status buys less of an advantage in prosperity and security than ever before. The high unemployment and declining incomes of the last five years reflect this global transition. For young, educated Americans entering the work force, life is harder than it has been in many decades. I see this every day in the attitudes and emotions of my students at the University of Texas at Austin. They are serious and they are scared. They do not believe that they will be able to maintain the high living standards that they now enjoy. They do not believe that the American dream of increased prosperity and security, guaranteed by the best and most powerful government, will be available to them.

The next president faces Lincoln and Roosevelt-like challenges in restoring faith in the American dream. As in the times of the Civil War and the Great Depression, our citizens confront competitive (now global) circumstances that they have trouble understanding. Many citizens, including my students, feel powerless to respond. They are looking up for leadership, and they generally see plastic smiles, superficial speeches, and empty suits. Struggling citizens are getting very little help from those positioned to explain and to inspire.

George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Mitt Romney all recognize the importance of leadership. They have all tried in their own ways. The problem is that they do not understand how to lead. They are looking for the "decisive action," the "right idea," or the "correct policy" that will take us out of our troubles. That was the point of the "Global War on Terror," as prosecuted by Bush, but it did not work and it does not inspire. That was the hope of Obama's economic stimulus and health care reform legislation, but they also did not work and they do not inspire. Candidate Romney has followed a similar pattern, promising tax cuts and spending reductions that will, somehow, restore American prosperity and security. Hardly anyone believes this, including the most prominent conservative writers in the United States today.

Bush, Obama, and Romney have missed the mark as leaders because they are searching for solutions not processes. They are trying to "think big," without building from present circumstances and finding points of leverage where they can put the country on a new path. They are not speaking with the candor necessary about the depth of our challenges, and the opportunities that exist if we are willing to act and think in new ways. This is not about bipartisanship. It is really about post-partisanship.

What would effective leadership look like? It would begin with a clear statement that the American dream is alive, but it will look different in the twenty-first century from the century before. The same was true for citizens in the 1930s looking back to the 1860s. The content of American prosperity and security must change with the times. Leaders must acknowledge and embrace the flow of history. They cannot deny it.

Great leaders understand changing historical dynamics and they find ways to nudge them in new, beneficial directions. We cannot continue to consume more with every generation of citizens. A great leader must articulate a more sustainable model of comfortable living for all Americans. We cannot continue to expect that we will throw our weight around the globe with little cost. A great leader must define a more modest and secure framework for American foreign policy. Above all, we cannot assume that our young people will benefit from easily available opportunities to build their lives. A great leader must construct paths for a new generation to contribute in meaningful ways to the continued growth of our society. As always, inspiration and efficacy in the White House are about forward-looking adjustment, not dreams of a world receding before our eyes. A historically informed leader must recognize that you cannot turn back the clock.

Leadership is difficult, especially in times of increased competition. Very few men and women have the wisdom to lead a nation. Most of our politicians today are indeed deficient. The opportunity, however, is evident in the need for our society to turn the circumstances of our time to the long-term advantage of our citizens. Great leadership will not offer easy answers. It will inspire Americans to reinvent themselves as they have with stunning success in prior eras. That is the promising opportunity before us today.

The men and women likely to offer the leadership we need are not running for office today. They are sitting in my classes. They are the young people serving in our armed forces, starting their families, and struggling to pay for college. The difficult circumstances that we confront will give these citizens the insights and the humility to open new paths through our present circumstances. Leadership is, again, made from circumstances and experiences, not abstract ideas. Our best policy at present should be to encourage the fastest and fullest involvement of young people in the political process. The next generation will produce the leaders to secure our future prosperity and security. The present generation of politicians is part of the past.

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- Posted by whatmittromneysaid at 12:10 p.m. Oct. 6, 2012
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I've learned what its like to sign the front of the paycheck, not just the back of the paycheck and to know how frightening it is to see whether you can make payroll at the end of the week. These are experiences that many of you, that many of you, know. I know what it's like to worry whether you're going to get fired. There were a couple of times I wondered whether I was going to get a pink slip.

[Editor's note: To which Texas Gov. Rick Perry responded, " Now I have no doubt that Mitt Romney was worried about pink slips — whether he was going to have enough of them to hand out because his company Bain Capital with all the jobs that they killed, I'm sure he was worried that he'd run out of pink slips. There is something inherently wrong when getting rich off failure and sticking it to someone else is how you do your business and I happen to think that's indefensible. If you're a victim of Bain Capital's downsizing, it's the ultimate insult for Mitt Romney to come to South Carolina and tell you he feels your pain, because he caused it." Despite policy differences, former Al Gore State Chairman Rick Perry wants President Obama reelected because it gives Perry another shot at the presidency in 2016.]



- Posted by BellaBonnie at 1:27 p.m. Oct. 7, 2012
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This is, by far, the wisest opinion I've heard this entire election cycle. Suri is spot on! We need leaders who are willing to forego partisanship and work for all Americans. We need true forward-thinking leaders who are willing to sit in conflict and stay there long enough to create real answers. Who's in? I am.....fiesty and ready to re-invent, to build a better America for all of us, not just an elite few.

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