

10-16-2003

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DAVID BOWEN

Could the next president ease national divide?



Columnist

Most U.S. presidents are both loved and hated at the same time.

Franklin Roosevelt was loved by most Americans but reviled as a "traitor to his class" by many

on the right.

Harry Truman was hated by many in this region for his civil rights initiatives but is seen today as a common-sense moderate.

Dwight Eisenhower was a likable, even lovable, father figure, hated by very few.

John Kennedy was loved more for his personal style and charm than for his issues.

Lyndon Johnson was a hard man to love because of his arrogance, but his legislative legacy was admired by many, while his Vietnam war role bred hostility in others.

Hatred enters politics

A continuing debate over the Johnson era is about America's social revolution: flower children, the growth of moral relativism, an aggressive new role for minorities, all leading to the culture wars that are still with us.

Nixon was distant and defensive, hard to love, moderate on the issues scale, but Watergate earned him the obloquy of a nation.

Jerry Ford was a nice guy who bumped his head too often and neither outraged nor excited many people.

Jimmy Carter was despised by most on the right but never really loved by the left, which produced a one-term presidency.

Ronald Reagan was loved and respected, even by many who disagreed with him, and stands as a model of how charm and articulate ideas can trump long naps and a modest knowledge of the minutiae of government.

George H.W. Bush was and is an eminently likable man, neither loved nor hated, who went from being one of America's most popular presidents after his Iraqi victory to defeat by Bill Clinton.

Clinton, however, and George W. Bush, both generate as much hatred as any presidents, partly because we now live in an age when those who disagree are no longer just people with different perspectives but evildoers who want to destroy America.

Clinton, however, and George W. Bush, both generate as much hatred as any presidents, partly because we now live in an age when those who disagree are no longer just people with different perspectives but evildoers who want to destroy America.

Clinton, or, more accurately, "Bill and Hillary," are despised by the right as much for their social values as for Monicagate. Like Nixon, Clinton was more of a middle-of-the-roader than he gets credit for. Loved by black Americans more than others, he was one of our most articulate and brainy presidents, sufficient for re-election.

President George W. Bush has problems which could bring about his downfall. His personal style is often perceived as pseudo-cowboy-arrogant and pious, both in foreign and domestic affairs, but without being either knowledgeable or articulate and without the leavening of humility.

Can malevolence end?

Add to that a growing disenchantment with the Iraqi war, in part because of what now appears to be dishonesty by members of the administration in their zeal to make the case for weapons of mass destruction and a link between Iraq and the events of 9-11.

It is puzzling that a president can surrender the high personal popularity and worldwide affection for America following 9-11, but a mismanaged postwar Iraq and an almost deliberate effort to alienate the rest of the world, along with domestic economic troubles, have caused Bush's political stock to fall.

This has helped generate "Bush hatred" on the left to match "Clinton hatred" on the right. Whether anyone can bring America together in this malevolent climate — or whether anyone will even try — will be determined in next year's presidential campaign.



David Bowen of Jackson is a former member of Congress and a regular contributing columnist to *The Clarion-Ledger*.