



GREG SCHNEIDERS

When it comes to wartime comms, Bush is no Lincoln

In business and in life, we all depend on role models to help shape our decisions and behavior. Countless “how-to” business books testify to this. I was reminded of this when I heard that President Bush’s summer reading list includes two books on Abraham Lincoln.

I suspect Lincoln is Bush’s presidential role model. After all, Lincoln faced a defining moment in our history – a mortal threat to our nation’s existence. Bush sees the “global war on terror” as just that. Lincoln had a singular focus – to win the war at all costs. Ditto, Bush. When others wavered, or thought the cost of war was too great, or the outcome too uncertain, Lincoln was a rock. Just like Bush. Lincoln would not be deterred by constitutional niceties like habeas corpus. Bush remains determined to adopt “all necessary means” – Lincoln’s phrase – to win the war on terror.

To those worried about the direction of Bush’s war in Iraq, the Lincoln analogue might be reassuring. But if Bush is modeling himself on Lincoln, he seems to be doing so selectively. Particularly in terms of communication with the American people, Bush would do well to study Lincoln’s example more closely.

Lincoln understood the importance of maintaining popular support for his war effort, famously asserting that, “With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.” He also understood the importance of language in rallying the support of the nation, and no President has been more eloquent. Bush disdains eloquence, preferring to use language to convince the average American that he is one of us. Americans want their leaders to lead in words as well as in deeds, especially during wartime.

Lincoln also grasped the practical and non-ideological nature of the American people. Pressed by Abolitionist supporters to declare the Civil War one of emancipation, he refused, claiming that he would free all the slaves or none if either course would bring victory and preservation of the union. Bush insists on framing his war in Iraq as one of liberation and democracy (at least since the WMD rationale evaporated).

Lincoln’s flexibility of character helped him maintain public support throughout the Civil War. He ran through five “Generals-in-Chief” before settling on the successful Ulysses Grant. Bush, however, seems determined to stand by failed appointees in order to avoid the perceived sin of his father – vacillation. And, in contrast to Bush’s “God is on our side” view of world affairs, Lincoln said, “In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party.”

Perhaps Bush should add one more book to his list: a biography of Franklin Roosevelt. The most eloquent president since Lincoln, FDR was committed to government by trial and error – always experimenting, acknowledging mistakes, correcting them, and moving on. If Bush considers Roosevelt too liberal and flexible a model, he might consider that FDR was the preferred model for a recent and, so far, more successful conservative President – Ronald Reagan. ■

Greg Schneiders is a founding partner of Prime Group, a consultancy that specializes in helping clients understand, plan, and execute change. Greg@primegroupllc.com.