

## Strong centrists in the White House

Gil Troy. *Leading from the Center: Why Moderates Make the Best Presidents*. New York: Basic Books, 2008

Review By Adam Daifallah

The main argument of this book, given away in its title, is that the most successful American presidents are those who govern from what the author considers the centre of the political spectrum. McGill University historian Gil Troy, likely the finest and most important academic writing on American politics from Canadian soil, makes his point powerfully and convincingly.

Each of the presidents he singles out as being among the best — George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan — receives a full chapter of analysis. These read like mini-biographies of each man's time in office.

Writing in lucid, easy-to-understand prose, Troy lays out a case for why the presidents he defines as “muscular moderates” — centrists who solve problems sensibly and pragmatically, but aren't squishy or completely devoid of principles — have had the best records.

Predictably, these men shared several traits. All were patriotic, pragmatic and able to unite the country at critical times. Lincoln was a visionary who outlawed slavery by incremental steps, paying lip service to racists while at the same time gradually freeing blacks from bondage. Theodore Roosevelt whipped up national pride as he simultaneously took on out-of-control robber barons and championed workers' rights, all the while avoiding class warfare.

FDR dealt forcefully with the Great Depression and dragged a recalcitrant

nation into the Second World War. Reagan stormed into office promising to rebuild a faltering economy, restore national pride and jettison Jimmy Carter's tepid, vacillating foreign policy. All these men confronted the great issues of their day with resounding success, making them transformational and enduring American heroes.

That these five are among the most successful commanders-in-chief is not a subject of serious debate. What is less certain, it seems, is whether they should all be called “centrists.”

What is a centrist? What is a moderate? Do these words have meaning in today's political discourse? The media freely toss around these terms to label both John McCain and Barack Obama. Is centrism a reference to an ideological stance, or more of a style of governance? If the former, Troy's thesis is less convincing than if it is the latter. Political centrism is too often conflated with consensus building, leadership, flexibility, uniting, problem-solving and prudence. These men saw great challenges, problems and crises, created principled solutions that were in harmony with their own ideological compasses and implemented them.

Take the case of George Washington. Troy admits that it was Washington's sterling reputation that was his best asset. It was because of his attractive personality and that he was a *rassembleur*, as they say in French, that he was able to accomplish so much and left such an indelible mark. This is less

centrism than raw leadership and smart politics. Ronald Reagan leaned right and sought to shift the political centre to him. He succeeded — a point which Troy acknowledges. Reagan was likely best summed up by his friend Milton Friedman, who said, “You want a principled man, which Reagan is. But he is not a rigidly principled man, which you don't want.” Reagan and his staff were skilled in achieving what they wanted by nursing key relationships, marvellous communications and, yes, compromise. Reagan manoeuvred delicately but frankly (his first words to Mikhail Gorbachev at the 1985 Geneva Summit were “Let me tell you why it is we distrust you”) and made concessions only when necessary. He was unquestionably a philosophically conservative man, as his now-published diaries attest, but he understood that to implement the changes he sought, a pragmatic and incrementalist approach was a necessity. Is that centrism or common sense?

Troy assesses some other presidents but in less detail. Of those, Kennedy, Truman and Eisenhower are given favourable treatment, but not as glowing as the leading five. The others don't make the cut. Millard Fillmore, Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan are “party hacks.” Lyndon Johnson, the father of the Vietnam War as well as the *Civil Rights Act*? He “single-handedly polluted the American political atmosphere.” Richard Nixon, who founded the Environmental Protection Agency, normalized relations with

China but saw his second term derailed by Watergate, was “perennially self-pitying.” Jimmy Carter? His “amateurism” and “arrogance” did him in.

And what of Bill Clinton? He is the subject of his own chapter, and a very good one. Clinton is deemed a centrist, and, Troy notes, should be the hero of the book. But he is excluded from the list of greats due to his tremendous unfulfilled potential. Blame Clinton’s bloated ego, frequent policy shifts and lost time jumping from controversy to controversy. Clinton’s fanatical obsession with being loved, his over-reliance on polls and consultants and his reluctance to tackle serious issues — think al-Qaeda — tarnish his otherwise centrist record.

Fitting the zeitgeist, the harshest appraisal in Troy’s book is reserved for the current US president. George W. Bush is “inflexible, uncurious, and unapologetic” and “damaged America’s national fabric by failing to lead the country as a whole,” Troy writes. There is evidence to substanti-

ate such claims, of course, but it is far too early for any real assessment of the Bush record, particularly while the jury is still out on the Iraq situation.

Similar criticisms to those currently made against Bush were levelled against Reagan while he governed and yet, 20 years after leaving office, the Gipper is celebrated by Troy as a sensible centrist. Troy argues Bush governed early in his first term as a “conservative activist,” found the centre around 2002, lost his way around the time of the Iraq invasion and then never regrouped. In fact, it is difficult to tag Bush with any definitive ideological label, given his proclivity for expanding federal government programs like Medicare and runaway deficits. The best description of Bush 43 to date came from the late William F. Buckley Jr., who observed that while Bush is conservative, he is not a conservative. Bush will leave office next January having disappointed conservatives, Republicans and many others, but only with the benefit of hindsight will it be possible to properly evaluate his years in the White House.

A second theme is woven throughout this book’s pages that, while more subtle, is clearly important to Troy. Turning from professor to both a pundit and a concerned American, he calls for an end to the hyper-partisan tone of today’s political debate. Troy yearns for a return to the more cordial, unifying discourse of the past and appeals for renewed bipartisanship. Americans should “make amends for the hysteria of these last few decades; reflect on today’s continuing tensions; and approach tomorrow with more openness, mutuality, acceptance, respect, humility, and love — even for those who still dare to disagree with us.” This vision is unlikely to ever come to pass, but Troy’s idealism and passion are certainly admirable.

*Adam Daifallah is co-author, with Tasha Kheiriddin, of Rescuing Canada’s Right: Blueprint for a Conservative Revolution. He worked as a researcher on Conrad Black’s biographies of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Richard Nixon.*

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