

## Contrasts-in-chief

We Americans are big on style which is why I'm really interested to see how the *presumptive President-elect* (and by the way that's how we should be referring to Joe Biden instead of President-elect because the votes are not yet certain to award him that title) will fare as the leader of the free world after following our current, larger-than-life chief executive, Donald J. Trump.

Everybody has a unique style of their own that sets them apart from the rest of us and these two men are no exception *except* that one of them inspires and the other merely aspires. While style can certainly be learned and imitated, it seldom can be learned so well that it can appear genuine. Such is the case with many politicians where style is often the substitute for real substance. Unfortunately, in my opinion, Joseph Biden is one of those who has actually subordinated his substance and has, instead, become his style.

It's been my experience that some leaders purposely adopt a style that is understated, and they do it for a number of reasons. One of those reasons is that by assuming a serious and artificially calm facade they can mask a basic insecurity and hide an inferiority complex. One of the ways to check that style is to see how people react in different situations. In the case of Joe Biden, we have seen him depart from his usual demeanor and react to potentially threatening situations in what appears to be an uncharacteristic way. For example, during the Presidential campaign when he was asked a probing question by an ordinary person he lashed out at the questioner in anger. This happened in a townhall meeting when a male participant queried the Vice-President on his son's business dealings. Biden responded by closing the distance between himself and the questioner and challenged him to either a physical contest or to meet him later for a physical confrontation. In another incident, Biden was irritated when a construction worker dared to ask him about joblessness. Joe was visibly angered and became aggressive.

People who are insecure often become confrontational when their opinions or their character is challenged or impuned. Biden even resorted to a favored schoolyard tactic when he felt that our President needed a lesson in manners and said that he would take him 'out back' to punch his lights out (or words to that effect). This departure from the calm soft-spoken Joe Biden gave us all an important insight into Joe's real nature. He is a troubled and angry man, one who has felt by-passed in life and feels a special kind of privileged victimhood. Though he's attained an elevated status in political society I believe he still feels unloved or not respected enough by his peers. Biden's always been a number two to somebody and though he wears the face of a kindly uncle, he is nothing of the sort. He hides behind that face and that demeanor. Underneath he is yearning to be the clear number one choice of everybody he meets.

I don't pretend to know what's truly in his heart though it probably sounds like I do. I can only use my instincts and trust the experiences I've had by observing the styles of famous and powerful men I've met during my years in the world of diplomacy. Granted, that's no substitute for a PhD in psychology, but I have to believe that there's more than a grain of truth in what I say. While it's difficult to ascribe actual motives to people's actions we all do it, subconsciously. We judge leaders by their style and how they handle both the easy situations and the difficult ones. We form visceral opinions, and while those assessments may not always be accurate, they are still our own.

That's why our leaders' styles are important. They tell us things that their words don't. Take Donald Trump. His style is that of a typical, successful, alpha male whose self-confidence knows no bounds, and that is what inspires people, but it is also repulsive to many others. He is the proud 'owner' of a tough, resolute and self-absorbed style, but Donald Trump rarely loses his temper, publicly. That is not to say that he doesn't fly off the handle in private, but he is consistent in the way he approaches the public. Donald Trump also possesses something missing in Joe Biden...a sense of humor, sometimes even a self-effacing humor that helps to soften his macho image.

With Trump you know what you're getting because he's not afraid of being himself. It may be strange to say, but I worry more about Joe Biden's dual nature than I do about Donald Trump's singular one. And there's something else, too. Insecure people are oftentimes more dangerous because of the unpredictability of their dual nature. I have no doubt that Joe's façade is much more comforting to many people than is Trump's straightforwardness and that he will be more of a traditional President. That's apparently what the majority of Americans wanted when they voted last week.

He is practiced in the art of saying little and counts on his outward affability to be a counterbalance to what he lacks in substance. As he takes the world stage and begins to hobnob with foreign leaders he will surely be liked by them. What worries me is that it is precisely his likeability that will be viewed as a sign of weakness, and weakness is not a trait that a few of the more adversarial world leaders will respect.

Some of our Presidents have been capable of being strong leaders without having to exhibit unnecessary toughness. Presidents like Ronald Reagan come to mind, men who were comfortable making fun of themselves or cracking jokes like Reagan did when he was hospitalized after his assassination attempt when he said to the doctors who were operating on him, "I hope you fellas are Republicans." Then there are some who just couldn't bear to be made fun of. Their self-image and their style wouldn't permit it.

Four years is a long time to watch a President, day in and day out, especially if they're boring. If Joe B. does become our 46<sup>th</sup> President I know I will tire of his persona, very quickly. Like many other Americans my age, I don't need a father figure, nor do I desire a role model. I'm comfortable in MY own skin. I want a straight-talking leader who's not going to fill the airwaves with sanctimony or tell me that 'better days are coming if only I love my neighbor...and wear a mask.' I want an exciting President, not someone who promises to be *calmatose*.

*Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: [stephan@stephanhelgesen.com](mailto:stephan@stephanhelgesen.com)*