

Mr. Cool

by Susan_Estrich

He might be nervous and insecure. After all, he's got the biggest, hardest job in the world. It's not like he's been preparing for it all his life; nine years ago he was commuting between Chicago and Springfield, Ill. It's not like he inherited peace and prosperity; he inherited recession, misery and war. It's not like there are any easy victories; getting us out of the various messes we find ourselves in will, at best, be a long, painful and uneven journey.

New presidents almost always make mistakes, some big " Bay of Pigs " some just embarrassing " the White House Travel Office. This president has already made a few, like Jay Leno's show, the delayed reaction on the AIG bonuses and, if you ask me, all the back and forth with Rush Limbaugh. But he hardly seems fazed by it.

Maybe the most impressive thing about this president, who is, of course, very smart, articulate and well-spoken, is just how cool he is.

I don't mean cool in the teenage sense of fist bumps or style or whatever. I mean cool in the grownup sense of being disciplined and projecting confidence. I mean cool in the sense of a person who is challenged but not overwhelmed, who looks bigger in the big job, not shrunken by it. President Barack Obama is in charge.

A president's job is to come up with policies, make decisions and get legislation passed. That part of the job obviously depends on things like ideology, judgment and competence. I don't know if Obama's budget is too big or not. I don't know if the CEO of GM was the problem. I don't know if raising taxes on the rich will help or hurt the economy.

The president has views on all of these things and has expressed them clearly and strongly. Whether he's right or not may matter less than the clarity and strength part.

A country that is scared needs a president who isn't. A country that is unsure of the future needs a president who sees it clearly. A country that is fighting insecurity on every front " economic and personal, domestic and international " needs a president whose battles with insecurity seem to have ended decades ago.

Confidence and competence do not necessarily go hand in hand. There are, we all know, many people whose confidence exceeds their abilities, and probably even more who are far better at what they do than they themselves believe. For leaders, however, competence without confidence, or the ability to inspire confidence, doesn't get you very far. Knowing the right answer is not the hard part; getting others to believe it, act on it, put their faith in it, matters more.

Watching Michelle and Barack Obama getting off the plane on their first First Trip to Europe, the most striking thing about these two young people “ and they are young and new to their roles “ is just how comfortable they seem. Do they look around Air Force One and pinch each other? Do they drive up to the White House and ever wonder whether someone made a wrong turn? Do they realize how improbable and unlikely it is that any person, and certainly an African-American former state legislator who entered national politics eight years ago, would make it to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue so fast?

Maybe.

But in their new roles, they don't show it “ to us or to the world. They're cool. Seeing them is almost enough to make you believe that soon the rest of us will be, as well. And how cool would that be?

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