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WANTED: A NEW TRUMAN

DOES ANYBODY IN
THE 2008 FIELD HAVE
WHAT IT TAKES?

By **Evan Thomas**

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

THE HISTORY OF
'PRESIDENTIAL COURAGE'

By **Michael Beschloss**



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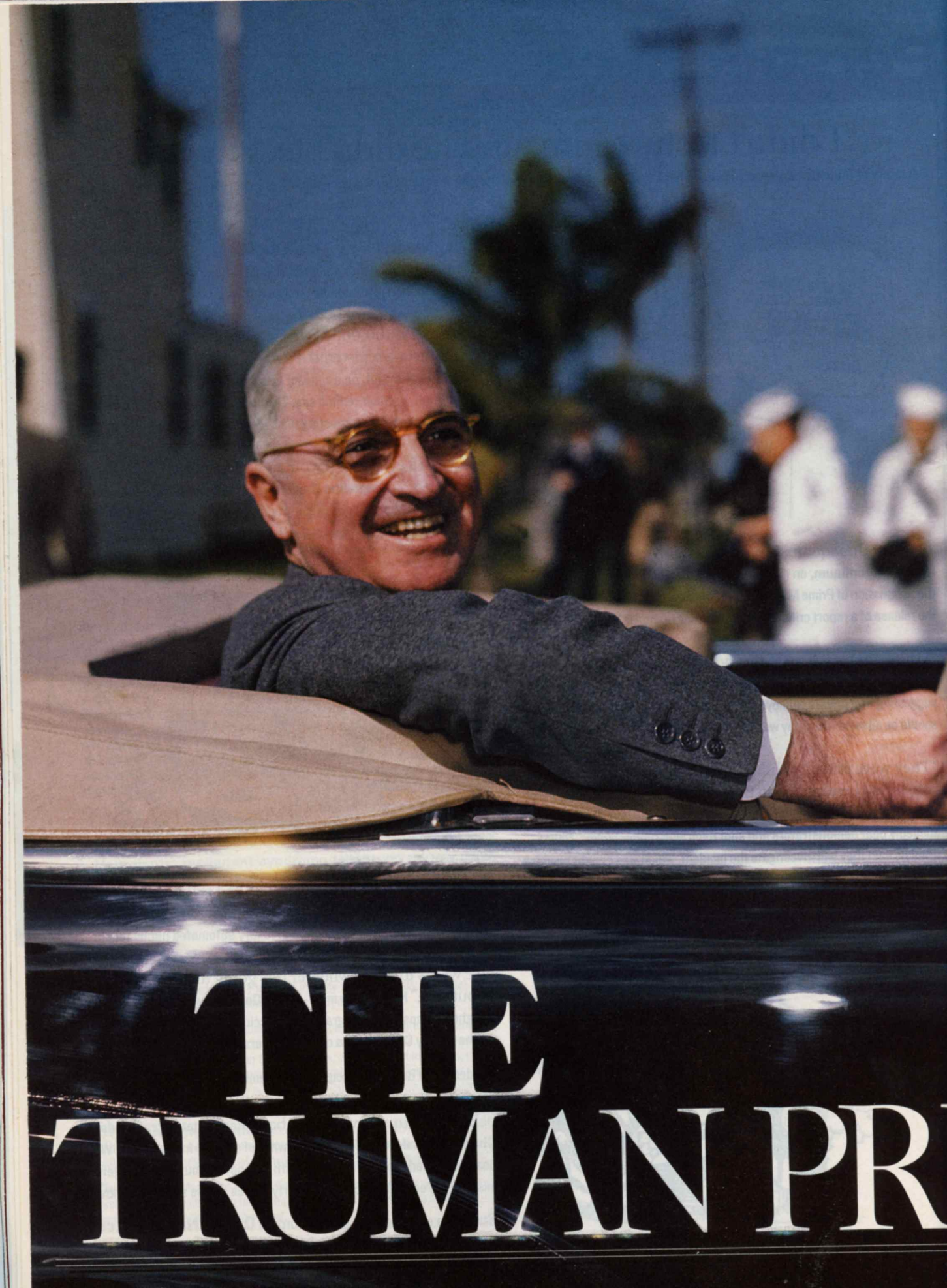
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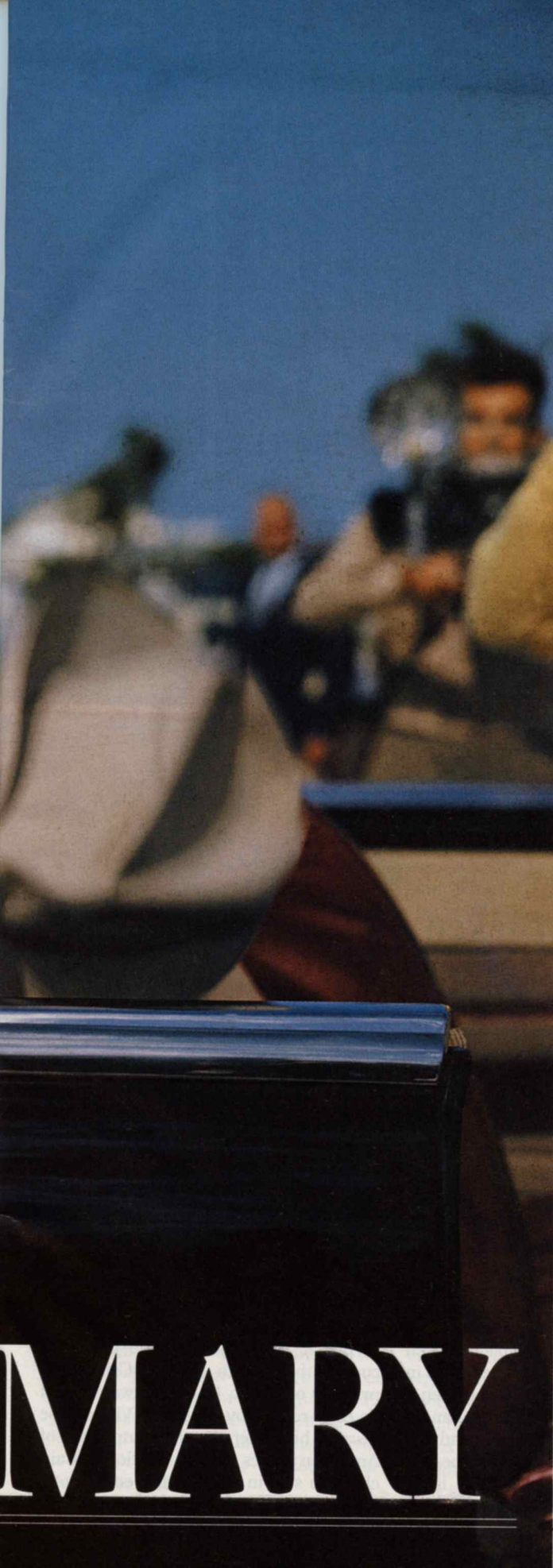
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THE TRUMAN PR



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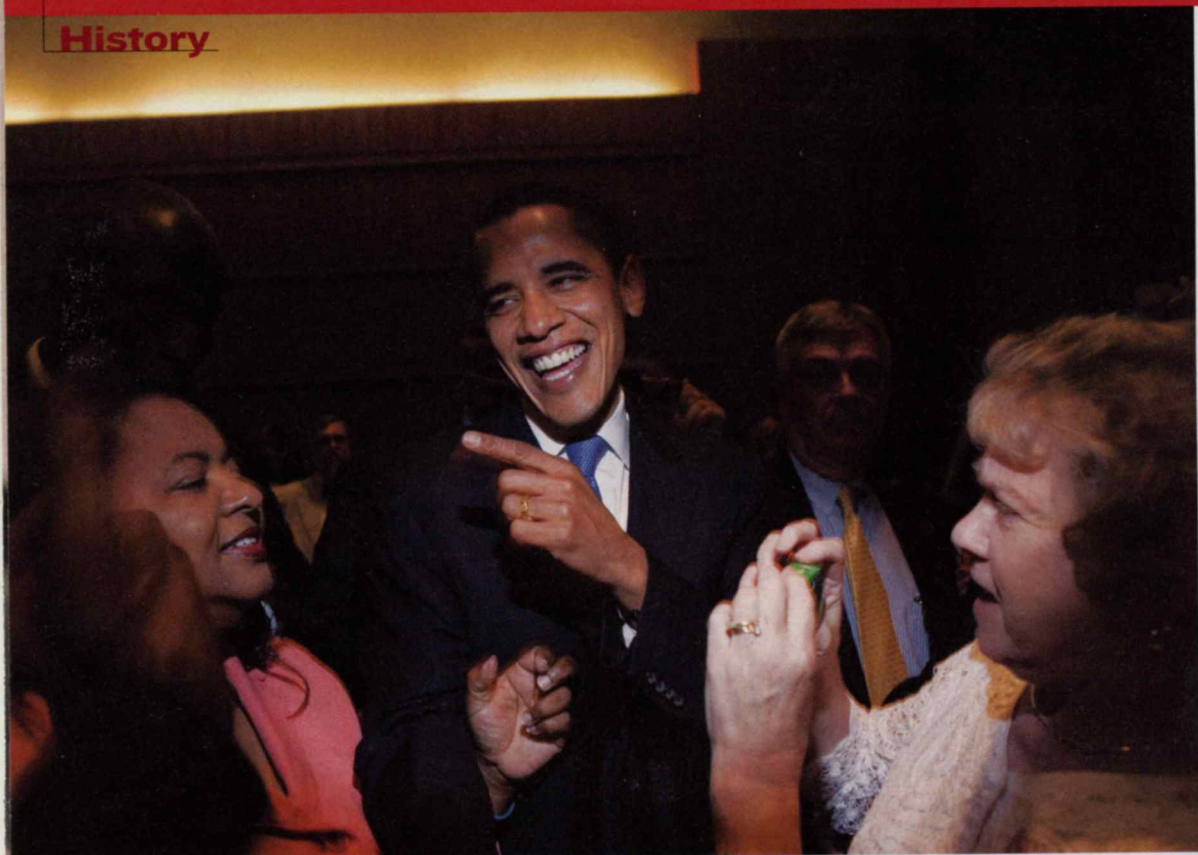
BY EVAN THOMAS

THEY ALL WANT TO BE Harry Truman. Hillary Clinton invokes his iconic sign (THE BUCK STOPS HERE) to call for better treatment of wounded veterans. Barack Obama reminds us that Truman was the first politician bold enough to call for universal health care. Rudy Giuliani notes that Truman was unpopular in his day, but if he hadn't stood up to the Soviets in the late 1940s, asks Giuliani, "Who knows how much longer the cold war would have gone on?"

ABOUT-FACE: Truman, widely viewed as a machine pol and a hack, proved to be a pillar of integrity once he took office

There are some eternal verities about politics—chiefly, that most politicians are (surprise, surprise) carefully calculating and keenly attuned to what is possible. There are some eternal truths about history, too. History has a habit of changing its mind. The case of the now sainted Truman, the Platonic presidential ideal of 2008, is an example of just this phenomenon. In 1953, when Truman left Washington for Independence, Mo., few were unhappy to see him go. His administration was accused of corruption and the Korean War was stalemated. Yet as the years passed, his stature grew. His candor stood in welcome contrast to the obfuscations of Vietnam- and

MARY



Watergate-era Washington; the policy of containment stood the test of time, and his sense of responsibility—he really did believe the buck stopped with him—loomed large in an age of buck-passing. Love him or hate him, he made the tough calls, often courageously, and history has rewarded him for it.

Buffeted by war, unhappy with President Bush, many Americans—Democratic, Republican, independent—seem hungry for a Trumanesque figure, a truth-telling, bare-knuckled president who will give it to us straight. The question now is whether anybody in the 2008 field can measure up.

Americans say they want to see courage from their politicians. As the historian Michael Beschloss illustrates in his new book, "Presidential Courage," the greatest presidents were willing to risk their political careers to do the right thing for the country. Being courageous is usually hard to fake; voters, even apathetic ones, have a way of spotting phonies. But it is difficult to tell whether a candidate will make the hard choices until he or she actually becomes president—by which time, it's too late.

Still, voters can find hints and clues. Though the most successful politicians tend to be cautious, poll-driven and consultant-coached, they have to make choices that test their moral fortitude. All the front runners have taken risks—if not in the political arena, then in their personal lives. None of these contenders can be dismissed as purely

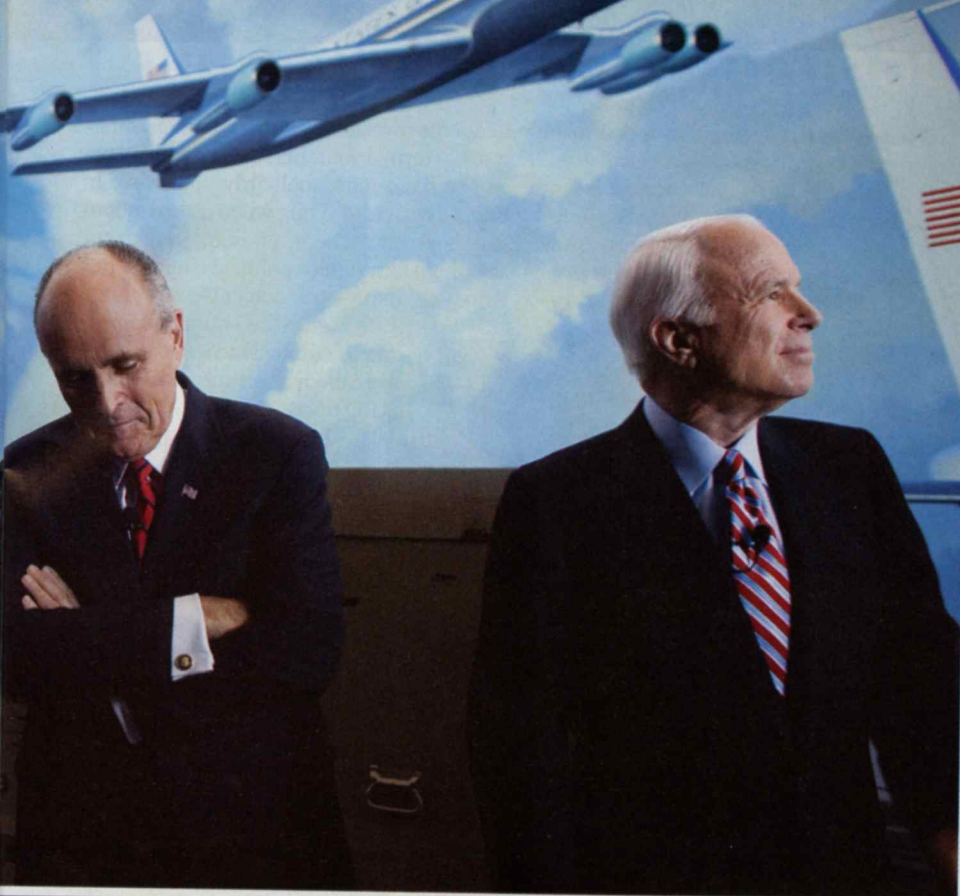
TRUMANESQUE? (Clockwise from top left) Obama surrounded by supporters, Giuliani and McCain prepare to debate last week, Clinton meets and greets

All the front runners have taken risks, if not in the political arena, then in their personal lives. None of them can be dismissed as purely expedient and opportunistic.

expedient and opportunistic. It is worth remembering that Truman, the plain-spoken pillar of integrity described by Beschloss in the excerpt that follows, was widely seen—perhaps unfairly—as a machine pol and a hack before he became president. And it is worth considering that history shines on the brave presidents who were lucky enough to win—not the ones, like Lyndon



Johnson, who dared greatly but lost. By far the most dramatic profile in courage belongs to John McCain. As a prisoner of war in Hanoi, he was offered an early release by the North Vietnamese because his father was the commander of American forces in the Pacific. McCain chose to stay in prison—and endure torture and privation for another five years.



Running for president in 2000, McCain was a refreshing and rare politician who was willing to talk on the record for hours to reporters riding the “Straight Talk Express.” Because McCain himself has suffered and endured for his country, he has more moral standing to ask for sacrifice than other politicians.

But for many months, McCain has ap-

peared to cater to the Republican establishment, hoping to inherit the Bush fundraising apparatus and placate conservatives who do not trust him on issues of taxes and immigration. His efforts have not paid off: he is not the front runner in fund-raising or in national polls. And he has seemed strangely dispirited along the way, more petulant than determined in last week’s first Republican debate. That may be because he senses that his unflagging support for a highly unpopular war in Iraq could end his political career, but it may be because he is not, at heart, a politician. He is a warrior.

The lawmaker most often credited with courage by voters in the latest NEWSWEEK Poll is Giuliani, cited by 48 percent (42 percent named McCain, 43 percent cited Hillary Clinton). Giuliani rarely misses a chance to remind voters that he was the hero of 9/11, calming New Yorkers as well as the rest of the country with his steady resolve. He was also a tough-minded mayor who reduced crime in the city. But as a presidential candidate he has played to old passions by suggesting that it was a matter of states’ rights to fly the Confederate flag over the Alabama capitol. (Six years ago McCain called a similar pander to Old Dixie in South Carolina the lowest moment in his political life.)

A former conservative Republican governing in liberal Massachusetts, Mitt Romney showed his independence by wielding vetoes. “I’ve done it hundreds of times,”

Romney boasted in the debate. “I can’t wait to get my hands on Washington’s budget.” But as a presidential candidate, he’s been accused of flip-flopping on social issues—abandoning a pro-choice, pro-gay-rights stance in Massachusetts to attack abortion and gay marriage. (At last week’s debate, Romney pointed out that Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush had also switched their stances on abortion.)

All the candidates will use their life stories to show a sense of moral purpose. After partying at Stanford, Romney says, he found purpose on a Mormon mission to France and came back to finish college at Brigham Young. At Harvard Business School, Romney says he “didn’t hang out much” with his schoolmate George W. Bush. “I was married at the time with two or three children,” he told NEWSWEEK. Bush was a single guy in his “‘young and irresponsible’ period ... I longed for the chance to get at the books and study and learn.”

Hillary Clinton had a stark moral choice: whether to stay with her husband when President Clinton’s philandering with Monica Lewinsky was exposed. Her decision to stand by him could not have been easy. But it’s not the sort of moment that her campaign will want to feature in ads. Her aides have defended her refusal to apologize for her pro-war vote in the Senate in the fall of 2002 as a matter of principle. But it may be that she is reaching out to Red State voters who question the Democrats’ toughness on foreign policy. (Ever calibrating her stand, last week she demanded that Congress reauthorize the war as of Oct. 11, the fifth anniversary of the original vote.)

Barack Obama was an early opponent of the war at a time when most Democrats were still with Bush. Favorably compared to Bobby Kennedy, Obama does have an air of authenticity—he writes his own books and seems to speak from the heart. Giving up a corporate job in Manhattan, he went to work in Chicago as a low-paid community organizer. He will take on liberal bloggers who criticize him as too centrist. But there is a something of the raging moderate about Obama: he never sticks his neck so far out that he can’t pull it back in.

John Edwards has staked out the clearest position on the left. He has taken a political risk by vowing to raise taxes on the rich to help pay for universal health coverage. On the campaign trail, he flaunts a stand-up style. “You may not always agree with me,” he says, “but you’ll know where I stand.” Edwards also has a personal story of facing adversity: the death of his teenage son, Wade, in a car crash in 1996 and the recent cancer recurrence of his wife, Elizabeth. But Edwards strikes some as a little

slick, even (or especially) when he is talking about his family trials. As for his political courage, he is making a bet that old-style soak-the-rich populism can be a winner in this election cycle—though the recent flap over his \$400 haircuts has not helped his common-man pitch.

What looks like courage in a politician may just be posturing or cold calculation. But at the same time, real courage is not worth much if it is unaccompanied by judgment and realism. George W. Bush may have thought he was following in the footsteps of Winston Churchill when he or-

dered the invasion of Iraq. But when things quickly turned sour, his show of resolve began to seem more foolhardy than wise. In the NEWSWEEK Poll, when asked about Bush's recent actions in Iraq, 30 percent saw them as a sign of political courage. But twice as many—62 percent—interpreted Bush's stay-the-course plan in Iraq as stubbornness. Courage is also about learning from—and facing up to—your mistakes.

With JONATHAN DARMAN, ARIAN CAMPO-FLORES, HOLLY BAILEY and RICHARD WOLFFE



STAGE RIGHT:
The GOP candidates gather before last week's debate

THE CONTENDERS

They hope to be in position to make the tough choices required by a president. A glimpse into who'd provide their inspiration.

AN ADMIRING CROWD

Asks by NEWSWEEK to pick presidents who displayed uncommon courage, the 2008 contenders gave many of the same names. Eight of 16 selected Lincoln; seven mentioned Truman, and seven, all Republicans, chose Reagan. Hillary Clinton cited Lyndon B. Johnson's signing the Civil Rights Act, Truman's desegregating the armed forces—and Bill Clinton's "taking on the NRA to pass the Brady bill and assault-weapon ban." Some of the candidates' most revealing selections, in their own words:

JOHN EDWARDS: Lyndon B. Johnson supported the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts with full knowledge that doing so would mean long-term political damage to his party, especially in his native region. He used his position to raise awareness of the plight of men, women and

children living in poverty. His personal sacrifice said that we have a moral obligation to ensure that no family in the richest nation in the world should live in poverty or be excluded from our political process.

JOHN MCCAIN: Theodore Roosevelt took on special interests with a ferocity shown by no president since. As America's natural resources were being exploited by Wall Street financiers and "robber baron" industrialists, Roosevelt declared that America's ability to protect its environment was vital to sustaining economic growth and strengthening the quality of our life.

BARACK OBAMA: During the Cuban missile crisis, facing intense pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and congressional leaders to bomb and invade Cuba, John F. Kennedy stood firm. With his determined leadership, and his calm, rational judg-

ment, he forged a strong path to peace that used aggressive diplomacy backed by military force, and helped bring the world back from the brink of war.

RUDY GIULIANI: Many people believed that America could not win the cold war—and that capitalism was the moral equivalent of communism. In the face of major criticisms, Ronald Reagan walked out of the Reykjavik conference, and within months Gorbachev conceded to his position. He called on Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin wall—and a few years later the wall came down.

MITT ROMNEY: George H.W. Bush volunteered to serve his nation as a Navy pilot in World War II. His tale of survival after being shot down is known to many. Even though he courageously served his nation, he is also humble and would rather focus on the sacrifice of those

serving in harm's way today. **JOE BIDEN:** I'm thinking of Jimmy Carter at Camp David, Ronald Reagan at Reykjavik and Bill Clinton at Dayton. Each put his prestige on the line. This president must look to the actions of predecessors and find the strength to demonstrate this same kind of leadership now. If he doesn't, instead of trying to build stability in Iraq, we will be forced to try to contain chaos.

DENNIS KUCINICH: I'd say Jimmy Carter—not for something that happened during his presidency, but for his demonstration of character and courage in his post-White House years. He has shown a capacity of humility and humanity, and an ability to be a builder not just of houses but a builder of peace. **BILL RICHARDSON:** When you look at FDR's presidency, there are so many heroic actions to choose from, but his leadership during World War II remains his most courageous act. America had to become a global leader in the fight against fascism. This meant more than leading the military charge; it meant working with other countries to bring about lasting change.

DUNCAN HUNTER: George W. Bush vetoed the Democrat-drawn supplemental that would have straitjacketed U.S. forces in Iraq and marched them unceremoniously toward the exit sign against an enormous backdrop of public pressure. His popularity is at an all-time low, yet Bush, the president who does not veto bills, exercised leadership at the most critical time in the war against terrorists.



HIGH ROAD: The writing of the Emancipation Proclamation (here, in an image meant to evoke Lincoln's White House informality) was unpopular with many Americans, like John Wilkes Booth (below)

A PRESIDENT'S ULTIMATE TEST



BY MICHAEL BESCHLOSS

WHEN FRIENDS HEARD I WAS WRITING A BOOK ON PRESIDENTIAL COURAGE, SOME of them turned snarky: "Was there ever such a thing?" they would ask. They presumed all of our presidents have been versions of what seems to be the modern politician—obsessed by polls, focus groups and fund-raising, chasing the holy grail of popularity. But in fact, if you explore American history you will find that at crucial moments we have been startlingly dependent on having a chief executive who demonstrates what I call presidential courage—the bravery and wisdom to risk his popularity, even his life, for a vital, larger cause.

In tranquil times we have survived presidents like Warren G. Harding, whose supreme ambition was to stay popular. But these times aren't tranquil. Our soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. We face the specter of a nuclear North Korea and Iran and worldwide terrorists. During the next president's term, there may be one blinding moment when we desperately need a president to make the same kind of self-sacrificing deci-

sion that courageous predecessors did.

America would be a very different place without presidential courage. If Andrew Jackson had not halted the increasingly powerful, corrupt Bank of the United States and its vengeful chief, Nicholas Biddle, in 1832, we might be governed today not from Washington but by an omnipotent, unelected Philadelphia banker.

In August 1864, Abraham Lincoln's campaign managers told him he had no chance

to win a second term that November. Many Northern voters were willing to keep fighting the Civil War to bring the South back into the Union—but not to free the slaves. Lincoln was grimly advised to renounce his 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Though briefly tempted to weasel away from the proclamation, Lincoln looked into his soul



Watch Jon Meacham interview
Beschloss at xtra.Newsweek.com

and decided, in the words of his old Kentucky hero Henry Clay, that "I'd rather be right than be president." As it happened, with an assist from Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's well-timed conquest of Atlanta in September, Lincoln won his second term. He got to be both right—and president. But he could not escape assassination by someone who hated him for liberating the slaves.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 prepared to ask Americans for a stronger defense against the danger of Adolf Hitler, his handlers reminded him that the country was isolationist and such boldness would jeopardize his third-term campaign. Roosevelt overrode that advice. He presided over American history's first peacetime draft call—a week before the 1940 election. His isolationist ambassador to London, Joseph Kennedy, bluntly told him, "You will go down either as the greatest in history—greater than Washington or Lincoln—or the greatest horse's ass." FDR replied that there was "a third alternative": if he didn't strengthen America's defenses, Roosevelt said, Hitler could rule the world and "I may go down as the president of an unimportant country."

For his first two and a half years in the Oval Office, John F. Kennedy was afraid to send a major civil-rights bill to Congress. But by May 1963, as riots engulfed Birmingham, Ala., Attorney General Robert Kennedy flatly warned his brother that other American cities—especially in the North—would burn unless he acted soon. JFK responded by sending Congress the greatest civil-rights bill in a century. That instantly cost him the backing of millions of white Southern voters who had narrowly elected him in 1960. JFK told Bobby he might "lose the next election because of this," but maintained, "If we're going to go down, let's go down on a matter of principle."

None of these presidents was a saint. The leaders I've written about were all anxious, self-protective, tormented politicians who tried to avoid walking through fire. But without Lincoln's brand of presidential courage, it might have been the end for the United States of America; without FDR's, the country might not have survived the perils of Hitler and imperial Japan, and minus Kennedy's, the civil-rights revolution could have torn the country asunder.

For America's first century and a half, presidents were buffered from



'MATTER OF PRINCIPLE': With Birmingham, Ala., engulfed in race riots, JFK (above, right) pushed for a civil-rights bill. He knew it could cost him in '64.



political pressures by the absence of instant polling, cable TV, e-mail and the need to raise oceans of money. Presidential nominations were granted by party leaders who could attest, usually from decade-long relationships, that their nominees had the character not to be ruled by what was popular.

In today's front-loaded, sound-bite-oriented nominating process, the burden is more than ever on voters to decide whether a candidate, if elected, will be likely to face down political pressures at a critical moment in the way these earlier, brave presidents did. How can we tell? You can't predict for certain how a human being might behave once elected president. But one clue is whether there are aspects to a candidate's



A NEW DAY: Working with Gorbachev (below) angered Reagan's hard-line supporters, but it also hastened the fall of the Berlin wall



life that are more important than holding on to the presidency at almost any cost.

Family could be one of them. On Election Day 1904, while biting his nails over the outcome, Theodore Roosevelt told his wife: "It makes no difference how it goes. I have had a vision ... and it was of you and the children. Nothing matters as long as we are well and content with each other." (Roosevelt won.)

Another indicator is whether the candidate has some deeply held faith that is larger than politics. That faith might be religious. Jackson grounded himself by reading his Bible every night, often weeping. Lincoln relentlessly tried to discover "God's purpose." In a note found in his desk after his death, he marveled that if God actually backed either the North or

South in the Civil War, "he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds." Or it might be faith in the wisdom gleaned from predecessors. Harry Truman said he could never have functioned had he not read his eyes out about leaders who came before him.

Strongly held philosophies are also telling. FDR loved being president, but he loved protecting freedom more. Ronald Reagan long insisted he would bargain with any Soviet leader who really wanted to end the cold war. When he vouched for Mikhail Gorbachev as a genuine seeker of peace, he was perfectly content to infuriate his most hard-line supporters, who denounced their ex-hero as a sentimental "idiot."

The way we choose presidents now can penalize the courageous. As early as 1955, Sen. John F. Kennedy complained that politics had become "so expensive, so mechanized and so dominated by professional politicians and public-relations men" that "any unpopular or unorthodox course arouses a storm of protests." This was long before presidential candidates were compelled to show their seriousness by raising \$50 million or \$100 million each. It is hard to imagine Andrew Jackson going after Bidle's bank if Jackson had to raise that kind of money to become president.

For a leader's decision to meet the standard of presidential courage, most Americans 20 or 30 years later must agree, with hindsight, that the decision was not only daring but historically wise. When Richard Nixon expanded the Vietnam War into Cambodia in 1970, he boasted that he had overruled the doubts of his top