

The Kerry I Know

So he's not Mr. Charisma. But he has courage, judgment, and intellect. Imagine that!

By Thomas Oliphant

The first two times I dealt with John Kerry, when he had his initial brush with notoriety many years ago, I didn't know what to make of him. It was actually a little later, after he had screwed up and taken one on the jaw, that I became intrigued by him. He lost his first political fight, and deserved to; but instead of slinking off to a privileged corner of his world, he decided on a slow climb up the public-service ladder. Not for the last time, his grit surprised me.

Now, on the threshold of his more than decent shot at the presidency, something un-chic has occurred to me: Odds are that he could be a successful, even excellent, president. No hero worship here. Knowing somebody is supposed to mean knowing him as a human being, zits and all. Part of my confidence involves the meeting of a particular kind of public figure and his times; part of it is this inner drive of his that survived the bright flash of sudden fame that burns out just as quickly and accepted the non-flashy way up the ladder so long ago.

I like Kerry a lot. I admire how he got to this place. And I think he is well-prepared to preside over the sausage making that lies ahead of him if he wins this fall. It is likely to be a tough grind—more or less the way he likes it. (His successful discussions with John Edwards about a partnership displayed a sensible pol with the confidence to reach beyond his familiar world; the fact that my genius daughter helped discover “two Americas” for Edwards and now writes for the ticket only proves again that she has figured things out faster than I have.)

In non-Bush America, a far more prevalent symbol of sentiment these days, rather than outright affection for Kerry, is the “Anybody But Bush” pin. Anybody But Bush avoids Kerry. It also contains more than a little bit of disdain and disrespect—common attitudes in a modern Democratic Party that seems able to take the concept of unity only so far. Democrats (political writers, too) love second-guessing, relentless kibitzing, pseudo-biographical psychobabble. In today's political culture, progressives tend to be neurotic, conservatives fanatical.

The best cure for this neurosis is not artificially induced adulation but a rational decision to recognize Kerry's strengths. This is a contemplative, serious person—well-grounded in progressive principles—who has the good habit of getting interested in new ideas that survive scrutiny. His work habits reveal an iron butt for grunt work, as well as considerable experience in working across party lines. A non-Bush president will have to repair considerable damage abroad and at home, complex tasks that will resist grand fixes and reward the patience and tough negotiating that are Kerry attributes. But a non-Bush president will also have to think and act big and new, and the work Kerry has already done on a range of issues should inspire confidence.

He is a sober yet imaginative person for sobering, dangerous times, but his looks and wealth conceal the steel that got him this far and often cause him to be underestimated. It was a long, strange trip, hardly befitting someone with a first-class education who married money twice.

After Kerry returned for good from Vietnam, he impulsively entered one of the era's many congressional fights in which pro-war politicians were being challenged: a weirdly gerrymandered Massachusetts district that stretched from the western Boston suburbs north toward New Hampshire. The year was 1970, and the incumbent was a go-along Senate Armed Services Committee stalwart, Phil Philbin, ripe for the plucking.

The anti-war candidates had agreed to abide by a vote at a mass gathering of the principal organization in the state, Massachusetts Political Action for Peace (MassPAX). The

overwhelming favorite was the Reverend Robert Drinan, then dean of the Boston College Law School. But during the MassPAX meeting at Concord-Carlisle High School, Kerry made a riveting speech—previewing themes of soldier betrayal and new-recruit determination the nation would hear the following year in Washington—that won high praise. Kerry still lost, but I kept his phone number and made sure I stayed in touch as he became involved in the fledgling Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

What Kerry did in the spring of 1971 still amazes me. The power and eloquence of his statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee gets most of the attention because the film survives, but what amazed me more was the quiet leadership he and a few pals showed in guiding perhaps 2,000 veterans—many severely wounded, angry, bitter, and passionate—for a week that stunned the country with its nonviolent effectiveness.

At the time, Kerry told me that he assumed his actions had precluded a political career, a sentiment experience had taught me to share. I was surprised, therefore, to hear of his intention to run for Congress in the McGovern year of 1972 in a Massachusetts district centered on the blue-collar city of Lowell. Not surprisingly to me, the rookie made a mess of his race. Anti-war fervor in the Democratic Party had propelled George McGovern past Edmund Muskie, and Kerry's congressional campaign was at first almost entirely based on Vietnam. But a changing economy had made the area around Lowell, always a redoubt of lunch-pail economics anyway, unusually interested in what a new Congress would do for ordinary people. By the time Kerry realized his message was way off-key, it was too late; 1972 was a McGovern year in the spring, but it was a Nixon year in the fall.

I was more pleasantly surprised somewhat later when Kerry told me he had decided to enter Drinan's onetime haunt at Boston College Law School. I sensed he still wanted a public life, but now he was going to do it the hard, and better, way.

A young guy who had been a decorated Naval officer was among the most effective spokesmen against the war he fought in; a rather typical liberal then became a pretty good, ambitious local prosecutor in the most important suburban county in the state. His rise up the ladder was now conventional, methodical. It has always impressed me that he won his intraparty fight for the lieutenant-governor nomination in 1982 and the one for the Senate in 1984 much differently than he lost his race for Congress in 1972. The younger Kerry had been an upscale, one-issue candidate; this older guy was much less the darling of Beacon Hill, the Back Bay, and the nicer suburbs and much more the favorite of the older suburbs and tougher cities. The first thing an observer noticed was the veterans' connection that would become such a visible element years later in his presidential campaign. On top of that, Kerry grafted ideas and messages that were much more Democratic than merely liberal. His majorities in the primary victories of 1982 and 1984 were from Lawrence and Fall River and Framingham more than Cambridge and Brookline.

From the beginning of his 20 years in the Senate, Kerry was able to deal maturely—as his pricklier, outspoken predecessor, the late Paul Tsongas, often did not—with the overwhelming fact of his junior status to Ted Kennedy. Kerry's legislation list is relatively sparse. Big deal. What he did, though, was take what was there: foreign policy, high-profile investigations into shady international businesses, crime and drugs, and terrorism. He became a true expert on affordable housing, a passionate and authoritative advocate for the public financing of federal elections, and gradually emerged, with Al Gore, as a leading spokesman on energy and the environment.

In our meetings and meals during his first term, though, it was occasionally obvious that a painful separation and divorce had left his life unsettled and not all that happy. I remember dinners during that first Senate term when I would drop him off at a dump of an apartment in Foggy Bottom, almost always putting a damper on an otherwise lively evening of argument and reminiscence. After his re-election in 1990, his first stab at national politics—a poor attempt at positioning to get on Bill Clinton's vice-presidential

short list—showed a person not ready for the game yet. Eight years later—remarried, happy, and grounded—he had the maturity to take a brief look at doing what Bill Bradley tried to do against Gore and wisely take a pass. Instead, he worked like a dog as a Gore surrogate in New Hampshire, and this time around was a natural finalist for vice president.

And, finally, to the present, and his own race. When Kennedy took Kerry around eastern Iowa (largely working class and Catholic) shortly after intervening to turn the latter's sagging, r ésum é-based presidential campaign around, the senior senator regularly used a story that captures the best of Kerry's last two decades. As Kennedy told it, accurately, there was nothing to be gained and much possibly to be lost when Kerry and John McCain set out in the 1980s to bind up the country's wounds from the Vietnam War. For months on end, there was not a syllable of press coverage as they painstakingly put old prisoner and missing-in-action myths to rest and began assembling the case for establishing relations with Hanoi. Inch by inch, they brought the country along with them. From a master of hard political work like Kennedy, it was deserved praise, and a genuine sign of what Kerry is capable of.

After nine times around the track, I'm convinced that the presidency is something that requires more fate than ambition. Sometime Jupiter aligns with Mars, sometimes it doesn't. And when Kerry started campaigning in earnest in early 2003, he—not for the first time in his career—came out of the blocks miserably. Since 1982, every one of his fights has required a second wind. What I think is most relevant to a possible Kerry presidency is that he has, up until now, always listened to criticism when he has been screwing up, and he has responded forcefully.

The initial year of his presidential campaign was almost fatal because of two rookie mistakes influenced by hubris: Kerry bought into front-runner-ism via fund-raising yardsticks, and, worse, he bought into a presentation based mostly on himself, his war record, and his r ésum é. What was missing from the calculus was a Democratic electorate in Iowa and New Hampshire (and nationally) that was more interested in how national policy might improve its members lives, not just in Iraq or even in the much-celebrated “anger.”

What I still find arresting is that Kerry not only listened and responded to the simple message that he was tanking, a regular occurrence in the political career of someone who mostly understands that campaigning doesn't come naturally to him; he also took his new campaign manager and communications director straight from the top of Kennedy's Senate staff, more at his senior colleague's insistence than recommendation. Not only that, Kerry had the guts to walk away from the reason (the importance of neighboring New Hampshire's primary) that there have been so many New England presidential candidates over the last four decades (John F. Kennedy, Muskie, Ted Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, George Bush Senior, Michael Dukakis, and Tsongas).

People come up with shrewd and brilliant ideas in presidential politics all the time, but the tactic of Kerry's will be studied for ages. Based on the diagnosis that he was sinking like a stone in New Hampshire, the recommended cure was to leave the state after mid-December and try to use Iowa (where he was also plummeting) as a slingshot to propel him back into contention in the Granite State. Put yourself in Kerry's shoes as he decided he had to give up on neighboring New Hampshire and head west; it took balls. It also took discipline to talk, town after rural town, much more about kitchen-table economics and less about foreign affairs and *much* less about himself. Kerry's comeback was a lot of things, but it was not out of character. Once again, it was the more difficult path to success.

It's also helpful to know that his comeback was political and personal, but—quite contrary to the “flip-flop” label the Bush team has sought to stick on him—it did not involve a single change in his approach to the big questions of our day. Normally, positions on issues don't work well for me as clues to a presidency, or as stand-alone

reasons to be for someone. In Kerry's case, however, he has made three contributions—in health care, on energy, and in foreign policy—to the national discussion over the past year that are vintage Kerry and powerful evidence of how his political mind works. They are not derivative, and, in each instance, the contributions were formulated not by the pollsters or the advisers but by Kerry himself.

On health care, as Kerry grappled with the mess of today's nonsystem, he made a critical conceptual breakthrough in his analysis of why the great attempt in 1993—94 under Bill and Hillary Clinton flopped. In his mind, and he's correct, the problem was that universal-coverage schemes tend to focus on the roughly 15 percent of the public that lacks insurance at any given moment, instead of the 85 percent who have what could be charitably called coverage (many of whom despise it almost to apoplexy).

Kerry's second conceptual contribution was his determination to find and use savings from inside the wasteful status quo to finance health care's reform and expansion, focusing on the third of all health-care costs that are not clinical. His third was to invest in and use new technology and other qualitative strides in medicine to accumulate still more savings. His fourth was to build toward universality using the existing mix of private and public delivery systems, not to jerry-rig a new one, the best example being his endorsement of tax credits to assist individuals who want to buy into the choice-laden federal employees' health-insurance plan.

Finally, to deal with viciously escalating insurance costs, Kerry went for the idea of federalizing catastrophic costs, above \$50,000 for a condition or illness. After careful vetting (a version of this had been on the table as far back as the Nixon administration; more recently, it has attracted considerable business support), he was able to claim that this would reduce insurance costs an average of \$1,000 per beneficiary. This is vintage Kerry: part traditional progressive (meaning Ted Kennedy), part new thinking, and designed politically for swing voters in Congress.

His conceptual contribution on energy was similar in its focus on using the existing energy business system, as opposed to new taxes or general revenues, to produce a revenue stream for investments in new technologies for old fuels like coal and natural gas, as well as renewables. The idea is to use royalty payments from oil and gas exploration to finance a trust fund for conservation and renewable investments that could, over a decade, reduce imports by 2 million barrels per day—about what comes from the Persian Gulf currently. It is an investment both in lower energy costs and in economic growth in new industries. It is also a plan designed to avoid many of the regional and special-interest political fights that have bedeviled presidents for 30 years.

Kerry sought from the beginning to plan big on the energy front, both to find a grand, worthy national effort along the lines of the space program in the 1960s and to serve a larger foreign-policy purpose. A national policy to gradually end the addiction to imports from the Persian Gulf is likely to do far more to “transform the Middle East,” to borrow the silly Bush phraseology, than invading Iraq almost unilaterally with no workable plan for the aftermath. Kerry would back it up with a reactivation of the Middle East peace process, with an activist United States at the center again and allies and moderate Arab states enlisted to provide aid to—and put pressure on—the Palestinian Authority. A long period of tacit and not so tacit acquiescence in Ariel Sharon's postures and actions would cease. Vigorous diplomacy—in his conviction that it really works, Kerry is very much his foreign-service-officer father's son—would define him in large part, not merely in the Middle East but also in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea; with trade agreements; the Kyoto Protocol process; and the various nonproliferation regimes. My pal Mark Shields once observed that, more often than not, each president is the stylistic antithesis of his predecessor. Kerry is a worker as well as a thinker.

Kerry has also shrewdly insisted—from the beginning of his campaign—on a requirement, as economic policy, that the budget deficit be halved within four years in order to keep the business recovery from hitting a wall of higher interest rates. It is often noted,

accurately, that Kerry seeks a return to the basic ideas Bob Rubin followed for Bill Clinton in the '90s. What the observation misses, however, is the fact that Clinton got all the way through his first campaign in 1992 decrying the economy's stagnation and advocating stimulus. Kerry, by contrast, has stuck his neck out on fiscal sanity almost from the moment he declared. Kerry is a real Democrat in his commitment to significant new expenditures on priorities like health care, education, energy independence, child care, and additional tax breaks for the middle class and working poor. However, he is also a New Democrat in his belief that the overall context must be anti-deficit for the sake of long-term economic growth.

Kerry is not by instinct a visionary, which is both a statement of fact and a legitimate criticism. He will have to work hard on coherent statements of purpose. Beginning in Iowa, however, I noticed two constant themes that got through to the caucus-goers and then to the primary voters in New Hampshire who made his nomination inevitable: that encouraging and rewarding work as a government priority should dwarf rewarding wealth, and that combating international terrorism and promoting America's interests in a dangerous world are tasks that require allies.

Kerry's other, overarching political thought is that the election of a Democratic president this year would liberate an unknowable number of governance-minded Republicans from the iron grip of the GOP's congressional leadership, no matter who is in the majority. In the House of Representatives especially, the party discipline Tom DeLay can invoke on President Bush's behalf would almost by definition be less powerful under a President Kerry. On any given domestic issue, there would be 20 or more Republicans available with the proper enticements and atmosphere. For those to the left of center who recall that JFK's belief in 1960 was that the country could do better, not that it could be revolutionized, Kerry is the kind of person and politician I believe to be worth trusting for this grubby, central task of coalition building.

In his remarkably thorough book on Kerry's formative youth, Douglas Brinkley tells a story about the two of us in the moments just before Kerry began his statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1971. We had walked from the Vietnam veterans' encampment on the National Mall together, taking a detour while he defused a potentially volatile demonstration outside the Supreme Court. When we entered the Dirksen Senate Office Building and raced up the stairs a few minutes before he was due to speak, we were struck by the absence of people in the stairwell and in the long corridor approaching the hearing room. It felt like a Sunday.

But when we reached the door and opened it a crack, Kerry drew back suddenly, stunned at the sight of a completely packed room. I nudged him forward again and attempted to cut the tension by saying, "Go ahead. Be famous. See if I care."

It never occurred to me or to him where that moment might one day lead. I think it's important that the presidency looms on his horizon not as a codicil in some trust fund, a virtual entitlement by virtue of lucky birth. Instead, it looms at the end of a long climb up the ladder from assistant county prosecutor.

John Kerry is a good, tough man. He is curious, grounded after a public and personal life that has not always been pleasant, a fan of ideas whose practical side has usually kept him from policy wonkery, a natural progressive with the added fixation on what works that made FDR and JFK so interesting. I know it is chic to be disdainful, but the modern Democratic neurosis gets in the way of a solid case for affection. Without embarrassment, and after a very long journey, I really like this guy. As one of his top campaign officials, himself a convert since the primaries ended, told me recently, this is pure Merle Haggard. It's not love, but it's not bad.

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