

The power of charisma

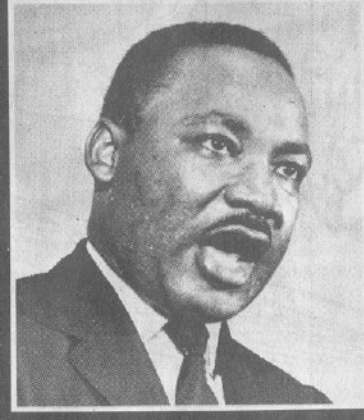
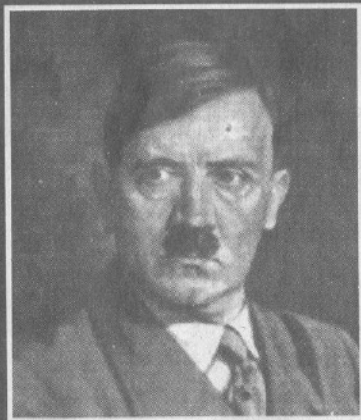
By HDS Greenway

Charisma can be a great source power, i.e. the power to persuade rather than force, but then soft power itself can be put to evil use

AS Americans struggle to choose their candidates to replace President Bush, there is no lack of argument as to what qualities a president should have. Enter Harvard University's Joseph Nye, who introduced "soft power" into the English language some 20 years ago. In his new book, "The Powers to Lead", he deconstructs just what it takes.

There are many qualities of leadership of course, which Nye examines, but what struck my eye in this political season was his discussion of "charisma". It comes from the Greek for "divine gift, or gift of grace", and those so gifted include, in Nye's eye, Mahatma Gandhi, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, Benito Mussolini, Tony Blair, Fidel Castro, Nelson Mandela, Osama bin Laden, Jack Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt, Joan of Arc, and Eva Peron.

Charisma can be a great source power, i.e. the power to persuade rather than force, but then soft power itself can be put to evil use. Hitler came to power through free elections, after all, and his speeches brought his audiences



Yet charisma for one ethnic or linguistic group can be anathema for another. Hitler's undom might not have worked on Italians. And Mussolini's operatic style would have seemed hilarious on the British. But then the British never produced a Verdi, a Donizetti, nor a Rossini. What might be boring in Burma, while Clinton might be electrifying in Beijing

to a frenzy. And bin Laden spreads his lethal mischief by persuasion rather than coercion.

"Does charisma originate in the individual, in the followers, or in the situation"? Nye asks. The answer seems to be all three. Sigmund Freud thought charismatic leaders represented the return of the primal father. The sociologist Max Weber argued that

charisma represented an ideal that is only approximated in reality, and that charisma grew out of the relationship between the leader and his or her followers. Therefore charisma lasts "only as long as it receives recognition, and is able to satisfy the follower".

Winston Churchill's charisma was not universally recognised until his country was in a desperate war. But he

had an innate gift of oratory that served him well. As John Kennedy said, Churchill took the English language and marched it off to war. Yet, when the war was nearly over, the British public voted him out of office. Worse yet, he lost to Clement Attlee, a modest man who had much to be modest about, as Churchill said, probably the least charismatic politician of his generation.

In time people can grow tired of charisma, especially if they begin to think it masks character faults. As Tory politician Michael Portillo said of Tony Blair: "What he was able to accomplish was largely due to his charisma". At one time he was the master of spin, but "by now it is hard to find anyone who believes a word he says".

Nye doesn't address the current



doubted magnetism
arious had he tried it
Who knows, Obama
ng

political debate, but in today's race it seems to be Barack Obama who drew the charisma card. Like Reagan and Kennedy he seems to come up with the words that inspire, much to the annoyance of Hillary Clinton who is forever wonkish. Her husband seems able to coast on charisma, but she seems doomed to impress rather than inspire.

As for John McCain, there can be a

kind of charisma in a candidate's record. That was true of Dwight Eisenhower, who would not otherwise have been considered charismatic. Then there are the nonverbal elements of charisma. Nye points to academic studies that show that a handsome man enjoys an edge over an ugly rival. For a woman the advantage is even greater. Focus groups could predict the winners when shown images of candidates in unfamiliar elections. Predictions became less accurate when images were accompanied by the sound of their voices.

The journalist Martha Gellhorn once wrote, in 1946, that she could tell that Indonesia's Sukarno was a great orator "by watching his hands and following his voice and the eyes and faces of the children. One could feel his power", she wrote, even though she couldn't understand a word that he said. "One remembered Hitler".

Yet charisma for one ethnic or linguistic group can be anathema for another. Hitler's undoubted magnetism might not have worked on Italians. And Mussolini's operatic style would have seemed hilarious had he tried it on the British. But then the British never produced a Verdi, a Donizetti, nor a Rossini. Who knows, Obama might be boring in Burma, while Clinton might be electrifying in Beijing. COURTESY THE BOSTON GLOBE