

# THE TEST TRUMP FAILED

*James Fallows*

American presidents run for office with a set of promises, visions, and ideas of what they'd like to do if they win. For John Kennedy, it was to "get America moving again." For (my one-time employer) Jimmy Carter, it was creating "a government as good as its people." For Ronald Reagan, it was (no joke) "let's make America great again." For Bill Clinton, it was the economy, stupid. For Barack Obama, hope.<sup>1</sup>

Then life intervenes. And while campaign promises and concepts have some bearing on what a president actually does, events that campaign strategists never anticipated often play a larger role in how effective a president can be, and in history's assessment of him. Kennedy didn't know that he'd be responsible for the Bay of Pigs invasion three months after taking office, or the Cuban Missile Crisis 18 months later. Lyndon Johnson didn't know that he'd end up as president a year after that, nor Ronald Reagan that he'd be shot, nor George W. Bush about the events that began on September 11, 2001, nor any other president about the surprises, usually bad, that the world's unplannable variety suddenly presents them with.

A disproportionate amount of what we *remember* about presidents has to do with how they respond to the unforeseen—either instinctively, as with Reagan's jauntily joking as doctors tried to save him from John Hinckley's attempted assassination, or with thought-out deliberation, as with Johnson's (positive) decision to use the tumult of the mid-1960s as propulsion for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, or his (negative) step-by-step immersion into the disaster of the Vietnam war.

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The best testament to Kennedy's intelligence and character came during the period of greatest danger: the nearly two weeks of the Cuban Missile Crisis, during which Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev jointly prevented their nations from destroying each other, and the world.

This is a long build-up for saying: Donald Trump had such a challenge, and moment, and responsibility, and opportunity after the neo-Nazi violence [...] in Charlottesville, Virginia. And he failed, abysmally.

Presidents have a particular burden, and responsibility, when the nation as a whole has suffered a shock, wound, or shame. Franklin Roosevelt responded to one such emergency in 1941, with his "date which will live in infamy" address after the Pearl Harbor attacks. Reagan did so with an address from the Oval Office soon after the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded in 1986. One of the finest moments of George W. Bush's presidency (and I say that as someone who doesn't think there were a lot of fine moments) was his address to Congress nine days after the 9/11 attacks, which was strong on national resolve and free of build-up for an impending invasion of Iraq. ("This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.") Barack Obama rose to this challenge with his "Amazing Grace" address in Charleston, after the racist murder of church-goers there.

The specific duty of a president in these moments is to: *reflect awareness* of the grief, shock, fear, uncertainty that people of the country may be feeling on a wide scale; to *emphasize the values* that the country as a whole is supposed to represent; to *define, express, and channel* the country's desire to understand *why* a tragedy or challenge has occurred—including when that is unknowable, as Reagan did after the *Challenger* explosion:

And I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle's takeoff. I know it is hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen. It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons. The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave.

And, finally, it is the responsibility of a leader in time of crisis to give an indication of what people should *do*: Hold their heads up; be brave rather than afraid; support their neighbors; live the example they would like others to follow.

Many state, local, and national figures, from both parties, fulfilled their parts of this duty. Those with the most serious burden, the president and vice president, did not.

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The words in Mike Pence's official vice-presidential tweet on Charlottesville—"thoughts & prayers w/ families"—are so cheapened by overuse to be in a way worse than saying nothing at all. The first million or so times that public officials offered their "thoughts and prayers" after a tragedy, the words might have conveyed an actual meaning. Now they're just word-noise, the equivalent of saying "have a nice day." Here's a test: think of any sentiment you *really* want to convey, whether of grief, of support, of condemnation, or of anything else. Then imagine whether you'd say "Thoughts and prayers." You wouldn't. That's filler for when you're signaling, "I should say something here, but I'm not going to do anything."

Donald Trump's comments were of course worse. He mildly criticized extremism and violence "from many sides."

Are we to lament "violence from many sides" when reflecting upon Emmett Till's lynching in 1955—or the burial under an earthen dam of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney in 1964? Or the "violence from many sides" witnessed at My Lai in 1968, at the Birmingham church bombings in 1963, or the Tulsa race riots of 1921, or other "who can explain?" outbreaks of unfortunate violence.

*The Daily Stormer*, modern voice of the Nazis, understood exactly what Trump's "on many sides" meant:

Trump comments were good. He didn't attack us. He just said the nation should come together.

Nothing specific against us.

He said that we need to study why people are so angry, and implied that there was hate... on both sides!

So he implied the antifa are haters.

There was virtually no counter-signaling of us at all.

He said he loves us all.

Also refused to answer a question about White Nationalists supporting him.

No condemnation at all.

When asked to condemn, he just walked out of the room.

Really, really good.

God bless him.

God bless us, one and all.

But there is no blessing for the way our national leader behaved. One phrase never to use, in a public statement you hope will be taken seriously: “We send our thoughts and prayers.” Another: “we lament violence ‘from many sides.’”

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Fair or unfair, one of the burdens on modern leaders is the expectation that they will give a shape to the arc of distressing events, or *at least will try to*. Come to think of it, it’s not an unreasonable expectation to place on them, for the enormous power they can wield at their whim.

Donald Trump had an opportunity to show that he was more than the ignorant, impulsive, reckless opportunist he appeared to be during the campaign and election. To show, that is, that the burdens and responsibilities of unmatched international power had in fact sobered him, and made him aware of his obligations to the nation as a whole.

Of course, he failed.

And those who stand with him, *now*, cannot claim the slightest illusion about what they are embracing.

## NOTES

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