

Experience and the Presidency

The plain truth is that nobody really has the experience
needed to be the president of the USA

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There is much talk about the experience, or lack of it, by the candidates for president and vice president. Senator Obama, Democratic Party candidate for president, has been criticized for lacking executive and foreign policy experience, and Alaska Governor Palin, Republican Party candidate for vice president, has had but a brief experience as governor. But the plain truth is that nobody really has the experience needed to be the president of the USA.

Does anyone have the experience needed to be a benevolent emperor of the world? The answer is no, because it is too big a task in which to do well. The presidency of the USA has likewise become too big a job.

The last president to do a reasonably good job was William Howard Taft, elected in 1908, when the federal government was much smaller. What, you know nothing about Taft? That's why he was a good president. Taft avoided war, and he did not make any major blunders. Taft was followed by the much better known president Wilson, who despite much experience, made the greatest blunder in US history, the entry into World War I.

The disastrous US entry into World War I was not due to any lack of experience, but was due to arrogance and ideological error. Despite his academic learning, Wilson failed to understand military, political, and economic reality. He helped to break up the Austrian and Turkish empires, leaving Eastern Europe easy prey for the Nazis and giving away the Middle East to the British and the French, paving the way to the conflicts that plague the world to this day. The problem was that Wilson had too much experience, which made him feel like he was a god.

The problem is that the US federal government has gotten too big for any president to manage well. In foreign affairs, the USA has become not only a superpower but also a super global manager, seeking to supervise countries from Georgia to Poland to Taiwan. If the USA military had a purely defensive role, and if the US did not seek to be the boss of the world, then the Commander in Chief would not need nearly so much experience.

Today's global interventions require a military experience that only generals such as Eisenhower possessed. But even Eisenhower's great military experience did not prevent him from a blunder such as the overthrow of the elected government of Iran, which eventually made Iran the hostile regime it now is.

Nobody has the executive experience to manage the US economy. The economy is too big and too decentralized and too volatile to manage. Only a free market can manage an economy.

Why should a US president have to manage education? The US Department of Education was founded in 1979. Education had traditionally been a field for the states and the private sector. Other than schools for the military, why should the US federal government manage education? Yet the major candidates all want to be education presidents.

The US Department of Agriculture was established in 1862. Somehow, farmers managed to grow food before that year. The main purpose of that department is to give subsidies to the big farmers. The president needs

the experience of knowing which farmers will provide the most campaign money in exchange for the subsidies.

The candidates for president and vice president all talk about how they will help Americans. They will help with schooling, with medical care, with housing. They will help them raise their children and help provide financial security when they retire. Maybe Americans also need to be helped with what to eat, what to wear, what to say, and where to pray! A president would need the experience of God to micro-manage everybody's life.

If the federal government were confined to its original constitutional role, experience would no longer matter much. The details of national defense could be left to the generals, justice to the courts, and the White House administration to the chief of staff. The president would mainly need to make the big policy decisions.

What any government chief needs is not so much experience but wisdom in ethics, economics, and governance. In ethics, a government chief would understand natural moral law and honor self-ownership by individuals. In economics, the chief would understand that public revenue should come from the land rent, not from punitive taxes on labor and capital. In governance, the chief would understand and implement the concept of subsidiarity, of decentralizing governance to local agencies or leaving industries such as agriculture to the free market.

None of the candidates for president or vice president have this knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. What governing experience they have involves the use of force, in intervention into peaceful and honest human action. They have bad experience we would be better off without.

The fact that the pundits are shouting about experience rather than wisdom is sad testimony to the most fundamental lack of understanding of proper government by journalists. The fact that so many voters care mainly about whether the candidate is "one of us guys" rather than about his understanding of policy reveals a deep flaw in mass democracy.

Unfortunately even the minor party candidates, the Greens and Libertarians, do not demonstrate much wisdom either. So the hopes that people have for anew beginning will sadly end up in disillusion, just as the new beginnings of 1960, 1980, and 2000 failed to take us to the promised new era. When will they learn? Not this year, unfortunately.

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FRED E. FOLDVARY, Ph.D., (May 11, 1946 — June 5, 2021) was an economist who wrote weekly editorials for [Progress.org](#)

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Foldvary's commentaries are well respected for their currency, sound logic, wit, and consistent devotion to human freedom. He received his B.A. in economics from the University of California at Berkeley, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in economics from George Mason University. He taught economics at Virginia Tech, John F. Kennedy University, Santa Clara University, and San Jose State University.

Foldvary is the author of *The Soul of Liberty, Public Goods and Private Communities*, and *Dictionary of Free Market Economics*. He edited and contributed to *Beyond Neoclassical Economics* and, with Dan Klein, *The Half-Life of Policy Rationales*. Foldvary's areas of research included public finance, governance, ethical philosophy, and land economics.

Foldvary is notably known for going on record in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* in 1997 to predict the exact timing of the 2008 economic depression—eleven years before the event occurred. He was able to do so due to his extensive knowledge of the real-estate cycle.

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