

as parting points, when some countries hopped on the train to modernity and others stayed at the station. But economists Diego Comin of Harvard University, William Easterly of New York University, and Erick Gong of the University of California, Berkeley, contend that inklings of future development patterns can be discerned as far back as the time of King David.

Comin and colleagues assembled “snapshots” of development for the predecessors of 100 modern nations at three points in history. For 1000 BC and “AD 0,” they looked at whether a society had technologies such as writing, pottery, and bronze or iron weapons, and whether it had begun to use pack or draft animals for transportation. For 1500, the relevant advances included firearms, ships

capable of crossing oceans, magnetic compasses, movable-block printing, steel, and plows. The authors found that the level of technology adoption in 1000 BC explained differences in technological prowess 2,500 years later—in 1500, just before colonization—and that the technological differences in 1500 strongly predicted wealth variations today.

To put a number on it, with the data adjusted to account for migrations (thus counting America today as primarily European, not Native American), the countries that were the most technologically advanced in 1500 have populations earning 26 times more per capita than those that live in countries that were behind 500 years ago.

The major trends reinforce the authors’ belief that “technology adop-

tion dynamics”—the inverse relationship between the cost of adopting new technology and a country’s level of development—play a major role in determining the wealth of nations today. Well-known historical puzzles, such as China’s failure to capitalize on its ancient technological achievements and the stagnation in the countries of the Islamic empire after their early progress, are not numerous enough to overturn the worldwide correlations.

The authors say that although their results help explain historical patterns, they do not predict the future. Today, technology is developed and spreads much more rapidly than in the past. It’s not a sure thing that the dynamics that shaped the last 3,000 years of development will persist in the centuries to come.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Throw Away the Political Resumés

THE SOURCE: “Ready to Lead on Day One: Predicting Presidential Greatness From Political Experience” by John Balz, in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, July 2010.

DURING THE BATTLE FOR THE 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton made sure to let everyone know how much more experience she had than Barack Obama. “Ready to lead on day one,” she intoned. No one seemed to question her basic premise: More years of political experience would make for

better leadership. But history says otherwise, according to University of Chicago political science doctoral candidate John Balz.

For the most part, political experience seems to have no bearing on a person’s ability to be a good, or even great, president. Balz looked for links between White House occupants’ resumés and how their tenures ranked in scholars’ assessments. Certain kinds of experience—serving in Congress, in particular—actually produced worse presidents. For every two years spent

in Congress, a president’s ranking fell more than one spot. More often than not, former mayors made bad presidents, but since only three have served in the White House (Andrew Johnson, Grover Cleveland, and Calvin Coolidge), it’s impossible to know how strong the correlation is.

Experience as a governor, state-level legislator, state administrator, or general seems to be slightly beneficial, but the effect was too small to say for certain. (And the president with the most experience as a general, Zachary Taylor, was one of the nation’s worst chief executives.) Years spent in the private sector also raised presidents’ rankings a bit, a correlation perhaps boosted by one of the greatest there ever was: Abraham Lincoln, who had a long career as a private lawyer before he headed to Washington.

It's impossible to flip the methodology around and try to predict whether a given set of experiences will produce a successful president. Divining how a president will fare based on his resumé is essentially a crapshoot. This is not to say some things aren't predictable: Andrew Johnson's resumé included 17 years of congressional service and three years as mayor of Greenville, Tennessee, a "perfect storm for lousy presidential performance." Johnson was impeached by the House of Representatives in 1868.

The ability to steer the country on a path of greatness can't be gained by time in the statehouse or on the floor of Congress. But candidates will campaign on their resúmes nevertheless—in the end, it's really all they have.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Liberalism's Two Camps

THE SOURCE: "Burke, Paine, and the Great Law of Change" by Yuval Levin, in *The Point*, Fall 2010.

IN A RIP-ROARING DEBATE IN the early 1790s, Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke fleshed out two distinct strains of liberalism whose differences continue to animate our political life today. Paine was the archetypal progressive liberal. Burke, though often considered simply a conservative, is better understood as representing a conservative interpretation of liberalism. At the heart of their disagreement, which on its surface was about the revolutions taking place in America and France, lay a



Thomas Paine (left) accused Edmund Burke of protecting the rich and powerful. Burke believed Paine's predilection for revolution could lead to barbarism. Their ideas continue to shape our own.

"not-so-obvious fact: That where we stand on many of the great questions at the heart of liberal democratic politics often depends decisively upon our view of the relationship between the present and the past," writes *National Affairs* editor Yuval Levin.

Paine, a political writer and activist who lived in England, America, and France over the course of his life, believed that the Enlightenment should usher in an era of revolutions. With the newfound tools of reason and political science, leaders should seek to transform society to make it more just and more sensitive to human equality and rights. Paine wrote that for every child born, "the world is as new to him as it was to the first man that existed, and his natural right in it is of the same kind." He should not be bound by the past, but should choose anew society's design. Choice was central to Paine's philosophy. He agreed with his friend Thomas Jefferson that it would be a good idea for every law to come with an expiration date so that it would not be imposed upon future generations without their active consent.

Burke, a member of the British

parliament for 30 years, thought Paine put too much stock in reason. Do not wise men disagree? Reinventing society, as Paine would have it, would run the risk of collapse. Instead, Burke favored incremental improvements to our governing systems, which he believed were themselves a good starting point because they embody, in Levin's words, "the collective wisdom of the ages as expressed in the form of long-standing precedents, institutions, and patterns of practice." Though society's institutions may not be just at present, over time they will evolve to at least imitate justice. Burke dismissed Paine's adulation of choice, believing that people enter into society not by choice but by birth, and that the society they enter is a partnership "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."

Paine rejected Burke's philosophy, finding it to be "thoroughly misguided, if not just a cynical defense of privilege and power," Levin explains. Paine wrote, "Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living."