Name________________________

Date________________________

Why Great Men Are Not Chosen President

Directions: Read the following selections, and answer the questions. Be prepared for class discussion.

From *The American Commonwealth*

Europeans often ask, and Americans do not always explain, how it happens that this great office, the greatest in the world, unless we except the papacy, to which any one can rise by his own merits, is not more frequently filled by great and striking men. In America, which is beyond all other countries the country of a "career open to talents," a country, moreover, in which political life is unusually keen and political ambition widely diffused, it might be expected that the highest place would always be won by a man of brilliant gifts. But from the time when the heroes of the Revolution died out with Jefferson and Adams and Madison, no person except General Grant, had, down till the end of the last century, reached the chair whose name would have been remembered had he not been president, and no president except Abraham Lincoln had displayed rare or striking qualities in the chair. Who now knows or cares to know anything about the personality of James K. Polk or Franklin Pierce? The only thing remarkable about them is that being so commonplace they should have climbed so high.

Several reasons may be suggested for the fact, which Americans are themselves the first to admit.

One is that the proportion of first-rate ability drawn into politics is smaller in America than in most European countries. This is a phenomenon whose causes must be elucidated later: in the meantime it is enough to say that in France, where the half-revolutionary conditions that lasted for some time after 1870 made public life exciting and accessible; in Germany, where an admirably organized civil service cultivates and develops statecraft with unusual success; in England, where many persons of wealth and leisure seek to enter the political arena, while burning questions touch the interests of all classes and make men eager observers of the combatants, the total quantity of talent devoted to parliamentary or administrative work has been larger, relatively to the population, than in America, where much of the best ability, both for thought and for action, for planning and for executing, rushes into a field which is comparatively narrow in Europe, the business of developing the material resources of the country.

Another is that the methods and habits of Congress, and indeed of political life generally, give fewer opportunities for personal distinction, fewer modes in which a man may commend himself to his countrymen by eminent capacity in thought, in speech, or in administration, than is the case in the free countries of Europe. . . .

A third reason is that eminent men make more enemies, and give those enemies more assailable points, than obscure men do. They are therefore in so far less desirable candidates. It is true that the eminent man has also made more friends, that his name is more widely known, and may be greeted with louder cheers. Other things being equal, the famous man is preferable. But other things never are equal. The famous man has probably attacked some leaders in his own party, has supplanted others, has expressed his dislike to the crochet of some active section, has perhaps committed errors which are capable of being magnified into offenses. No man stands long before the public and bears a part in great affairs without giving openings to censorious criticism. Fiercer far than the light which beats upon a throne is the light which beats upon a presidential candidate, searching out all the recesses of his past life. Hence, when the choice lies

Name________________________

Date________________________

between a brilliant man and a safe man, the safe man is preferred. Party feeling, strong enough to carry in on its back a man without conspicuous positive merits, is not always strong enough to procure forgiveness for a man with positive faults.

A European finds that this phenomenon needs in its turn to be explained, for in the free countries of Europe brilliancy, be it eloquence in speech, or some striking achievement in war or administration, or the power through whatever means of somehow impressing the popular imagination, is what makes a leader triumphant. Why should it be otherwise in America? Because in America party loyalty and party organization have been hitherto so perfect that anyone put forward by the party will get the full party vote if his character is good and his "record," as they call it, unstained. The safe candidate may not draw in quite so many votes from the moderate men of the other side as the brilliant one would, but he will not lose nearly so many from his own ranks. Even those who admit his mediocrity will vote straight when the moment for voting comes. Besides, the ordinary American voter does not object to mediocrity. He has a lower conception of the qualities requisite to make a statesman than those who direct public opinion in Europe have. He likes his candidate to be sensible, vigorous, and, above all, what he calls "magnetic," and does not value, because he sees no need for, originality or profundity, a fine culture or a wide knowledge. Candidates are selected to be run for nomination by knots of persons who, however expert as party tacticians, are usually commonplace men; and the choice between those selected for nomination is made by a very large body, an assembly of nearly a thousand delegates from the local party organizations over the country, who are certainly no better than ordinary citizens. . . .

It must also be remembered that the merits of a president are one thing and those of a candidate another thing. An eminent American is reported to have said to friends who wished to put him forward, "Gentlemen, let there be no mistake. I should make a good president, but a very bad candidate." Now to a party it is more important that its nominee should be a good candidate than that he should turn out a good president. A nearer danger is a greater danger. As Saladin says in *The Talisman*, "A wild cat in a chamber is more dangerous than a lion in a distant desert." It will be a misfortune to the party, as well as to the country, if the candidate elected should prove a bad president. But it is a greater misfortune to the party that it should be beaten in the impending election, for the evil of losing national patronage will have come four years sooner. "B" (so reason the leaders), "who is one of our possible candidates, may be an abler man than A, who is the other. But we have a better chance of winning with A than with B, while X, the candidate of our opponents, is anyhow no better than A. We must therefore run A." This reasoning is all the more forcible because the previous career of the possible candidates has generally made it easier to say who will succeed as a candidate than who will succeed as a president; and because the wire-pullers with whom the choice rests are better judges of the former question than of the latter.

After all, too, a president need not be a man of brilliant intellectual gifts. His main duties are to be prompt and firm in securing the due execution of the laws and maintaining the public peace, careful and upright in the choice of the executive officials of the country. Eloquence, whose value is apt to be overrated in all free countries, imagination, profundity of thought or extent of knowledge, are all in so far a gain to him that they make him "a bigger man," and help him to gain a greater influence over the nation,

Name____________________

Date____________________

an influence which, if he be a true patriot, he may use for its good. But they are not necessary for the due discharge in ordinary times of the duties of his post. Four-fifths of his work is the same in kind as that which devolves on the chairman of a commercial company or the manager of a railway, the work of choosing good subordinates, seeing that they attend to their business, and taking a sound practical view of such administrative questions as require his decision. Firmness, common sense, and most of all, honesty, an honesty above all suspicion of personal interest, are the qualities which the country chiefly needs in its first magistrate.

So far we have been considering personal merits. But in the selection of a candidate many considerations have to be regarded besides the personal merits, whether of a candidate, or of a possible president. The chief of these considerations is the amount of support which can be secured from different states or from different "sections" of the Union, a term by which the Americans denote groups of states with a broad community of interest. State feeling and sectional feeling are powerful factors in a presidential election. The Middle West and Northwest, including the states from Ohio to Montana, is now the most populous section of the Union, and therefore counts for most in an election. It naturally conceives that its interests will be best protected by one who knows them from birth and residence. Hence *prima facie* a man from that section makes the best candidate. A large state casts a heavier vote in the election; and every state is of course more likely to be carried by one of its own children than by a stranger, because his fellow citizens, while they feel honored by the choice, gain also a substantial advantage, having a better prospect of such favors as the administration can bestow. Hence, *caeteris paribus*, a man from a large state is preferable as a candidate. The problem is further complicated by the fact that some states are already safe for one or other party, while others are doubtful. The Northwestern and New England states have usually tended to go Republican; while nearly all of the Southern states have, since 1877, been pretty certain to go Democratic. *Caeteris paribus*, a candidate from a doubtful state, such as New York and Indiana have usually been, is to be preferred.

Other minor disqualifying circumstances require less explanation. A Roman Catholic, or an avowed disbeliever in Christianity, would be an undesirable candidate. For many years after the Civil War, any one who had fought, especially if he fought with distinction, in the Northern army, enjoyed great advantages for the soldiers of that army rallied to his name. The two elections of General Grant, who knew nothing of politics, and the fact that his influence survived the faults of his administration, are evidence of the weight of this consideration. . . .

These secondary considerations do not always prevail. Intellectual ability and strength of character must influence the choice of a candidate. When a man has once impressed himself on the nation by force, courage, and rectitude, the influence of these qualities may be decisive. They naturally count for most when times are critical. Reformers declare that their weight will go on increasing as the disgust of good citizens with the methods of professional politicians increases. . . .

We may now answer the question from which we started. Great men have not often been chosen presidents, first because great men are rare in politics; secondly, because the method of choice may not bring them to the top; thirdly, because they are not, in quiet times, absolutely needed. Let us close by observing that the presidents, regarded historically, fall

Name________________________

Date________________________

into three periods, the second inferior to the first, the third rather better than the second.

Down till the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828, all the presidents had been statesmen in the European sense of the word, men of education, of administrative experience, of a certain largeness of view and dignity of character. All except the first two had served in the great office of secretary of state; all were known to the nation from the part they had played. In the second period, from Jackson till the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the presidents were either mere politicians, such as Van Buren, Polk, or Buchanan, or else successful soldiers, such as Harrison or Taylor, whom their party found useful as figureheads. They were intellectual pigmies beside the real leaders of that generation—Clay, Calhoun, and Webster. A new series begins with Lincoln in 1861. He and General Grant, his successor, who cover sixteen years between them, belong to the history of the world. The other less distinguished presidents of this period contrast favorably with the Polks and Pierces of the days before the war, if they are not, like the early presidents, the first men of the country. If we compare the twenty presidents who were elected to office between 1789 and 1900 with the twenty English prime ministers of the same period, there are but six of the latter, and at least eight of the former whom history calls personally insignificant, while only Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Grant can claim to belong to a front rank represented in the English list by seven or possibly eight names. It would seem that the natural selection of the English parliamentary system, even as modified by the aristocratic habits of that country, had more tendency to bring the highest gifts to the highest place than the more artificial selection of America.[1]

---

[1] Lord James Bryce, "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents," in *The American Commonwealth*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1995), 69–75.

Name____________________

Date____________________

From *The Presidential Campaign*

On October 22, 1888, as voters were getting ready to decide whether Grover Cleveland should continue to reside in the White House or should be evicted in favor of Benjamin Harrison, the future Lord Bryce . . . signed off on what was to be the first edition of *The American Commonwealth*. . . . [T]oday it is recalled largely because of the name of its eighth chapter: "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents." . . .

Bryce was fascinated by the presidential selection process, which he considered largely controlled by party organizations that determined nominations and preferred mediocre candidates. . . .

. . . Yet to have made his case for the debasing influence of parties, he would have had to prove that the parties pushed aside more distinguished figures. This was not necessarily what happened. Should the Republicans have preferred John Sherman to Hayes? Would the Democrats have chosen Thomas Bayard over Cleveland? There are times that seem to lack great men. . . .

If Bryce's evaluation of the American system is tinged by a parliamentarian's preference for the way prime ministers are selected, however, his critique cannot be dismissed as mere chauvinism. He argued that in the America he had observed, great men were less drawn to politics than to "the business of developing the material resources of the country"; that compared with European countries, American political life offered "fewer opportunities for personal distinction"; that "eminent men make more enemies"; and that the American voter did "not object to mediocrity." But the heart of his argument was that great men were not chosen president because of the party system. Political bosses, he observed, gauged the strength of local organizations and the loyalty of voters and then calculated which candidate would add the right demographics to ensure victory. The objective was winning, not governing. . . .

The paradox of revisiting Lord Bryce one hundred years after he said great men were not chosen presidents because of political parties is that political parties are in decline, . . . and there is still no certainty that great men will be chosen president. . . .

Although some experts see new life in the old parties, the way presidential candidates get nominated has irrevocably changed since Bryce's day. In 1901 Florida enacted the first presidential primary law, an invention designed to take nominations out of the hands of the party regulars. By 1980, primaries selected 71 percent of the delegates to the Democratic national convention. . . . Accompanied by much greater voter independence and major technological changes, notably the coming of television, the new system was expected to produce a different type of presidential nominee. . . .

. . . [D]o changes in process really result in different kinds of persons seeking the presidency? Following the 1968 and 1972 Democratic conventions, party commissions imposed major changes on the demographic mix and selection of delegates. To abide by the new rules, many states established primary elections. Moving from a caucus to a primary system meant that the media would play a much more important role in candidates' strategies. Changes in finance rules also changed candidates' strategies. But analyses suggesting that the nominees chosen under the new rules were different in kind because of these changes may simply be placing too much emphasis on too few cases. After all, there have been

Name____________________

Date____________________

only eight nominations since 1972, and four of them were already sitting presidents. For every obscure senator from a small state who has been nominated in recent times (George McGovern of South Dakota), one can find an earlier obscure senator from a small state (Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire, for example). An obscure governor (Jimmy Carter of Georgia) can be juxtaposed against an earlier obscure governor (Alfred M. Landon of Kansas). . . .

One consequence of the new system, some say, is that successful candidates are more extreme in their views, in part because activists on specific issues are overrepresented among primary voters. . . . Richard Rovere compared contenders' activities with a game of musical chairs in which each chair represents an ideological position (liberal through conservative); if a chair is occupied when the music stops, the player is forced to seek a different chair. . . . In terms of Rovere's formulation, when Hubert Humphrey, a lifelong liberal, entered the race in 1968, he discovered Robert Kennedy already sitting in the liberal chair and had to find another place to sit. This does not mean that Humphrey or Kennedy . . . as president would respond to similar pressures in dissimilar ways. Quite the contrary: professional politicians are likely to have similar responses. They are not clones, . . . but they tend to weigh opportunities and constraints on the same scale. Hence some of the claims that today's candidates are markedly more ideological than those in the past may be simply taking too literally the images that contestants have drawn of themselves (and of their opponents) during recent intraparty disputes. . . .

Following his defeat in 1984, Walter Mondale publicly worried that because of the voters' growing reliance on television, future presidential candidates would have to be masters of the "twenty-second snip, the angle, the shtick, whatever it is." . . . Politicians will adapt the technology at hand to their needs. What is most surprising about the television age is that besides Reagan and John Kennedy, the others who have won presidential nominations . . . are no more telegenic than any cross section of middle-aged white males. . . . All of which suggests how little things change as the nation moves from party democracy to media democracy.

Throughout American history those picked to be major party presidential candidates, above all else, have been professional politicians. . . . The twenty-nine men nominated by the major parties since 1900 have a selective record of office holding that includes service as governors (thirteen), senators (nine), members of the House of Representatives (nine), vice presidents (eight), judges (three), and cabinet members (two). . . .

The idea of a political career ladder based on ambition was masterfully presented by Joseph A. Schlesinger. "Ambition lies at the heart of politics," he wrote in 1966 [in *Ambition and Politics*]. "Politics thrive on the hope of preferment and the drive for office." . . . [T]he only common denominator I have observed for those politicians who would be president is the depth of their ambition. What distinguishes the candidates seeking their parties' 1988 presidential nominations from other high officeholders of their generation? Not their intelligence, accomplishments, style, or the reality of their prospects. What distinguishes them is *presidential ambition*, the ultimate in progressive ambition. . . .

This formulation does not assume that all persons with presidential ambition will run for president, merely that persons without presidential ambition will not run for president and all persons who run for president have presidential ambition. Likewise, all professional politicians do not

Name____________________

Date____________________

run for president, but all serious candidates for president are professional politicians—at least until the nation produces Ike-like heroes again.

In our eternal search for the structural fix . . . there are modest ways to expand the pool of presidential contenders in a particular presidential generation, such as by repealing the Twenty-second Amendment, revising gubernatorial election schedules, and revoking the constitutional ban against naturalized citizens serving as president. . . . Another means of encouraging more candidacies, some contend, would be to lower the cost of running for president. Contemplating the next nomination fight, Edward J. Rollins, who headed President Reagan's 1984 campaign, said, "Anyone who isn't able to raise between $6 million and $8 million in 1987 is not going to be a player." . . .

If fine-tuners wish to alter the type of persons who seek the presidency, the best place to tinker is the vice presidential selection process. For who gets the nod for vice president is the single most important predictor of future nominees for president. (Thirty percent of the men who have been major-party candidates for president since 1900 previously had been vice presidents or vice presidential candidates, fifty percent since 1960.) The presidential nominee's choice for vice president is usually a governor, senator, or House member—that is, another professional politician. . . . When voters decide who will be the next president, the attributes (or lack thereof) of the vice presidential candidates are a very modest influence, suggesting that presidential conventions can afford to be a lot more daring if they desire to bring new blood into the political system, that is, if Americans prefer to have their leaders come from outside the ranks of professional politicians.

. . . The matter of process has consequences for the presidential selection system, and the rapidity of change since 1968 has seemingly created a series of near-laboratory experiments. By changing the composition of the national convention can a party increase its chance of electoral success? In what proportions should parties use delegate slots to reward the faithful or encourage converts? Will an altered convention produce a different sort of platform? Which changes fuel ideology and which changes tamp it. Will presidents differently chosen become beholden to different groups and individuals? What changes increase voter participation? Has a decade of changes invigorated the parties or made them even less important in our society? All questions worth asking—and answering.

And yet, in the paramount purpose of the parties' process—choosing the nominees to be president of the United States—which narrows the voters' choice from any native-born American of thirty-five years or older to two finalists, changes in the system since Lord Bryce's time do not limit the field of serious candidates or alter the character of the winners. While there are a few contenders who would not have previously emerged, such as Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, they have not yet been successful. . . . But in broad outline then and now, and with rare exceptions, these contenders for the nomination are professional politicians, people of extraordinary ambition who cannot be discouraged by changes in the rules of the game. This ambition determines the number who seek the presidency at any one time. . . . those possessed by presidential ambition will participate regardless of whether selection occurs through a national primary, a series of regional primaries, a combination of state primaries and caucuses, or any permutation of the above.

Name____________________

Date____________________

> Any democratic system is likely to produce the same range of contenders: in this regard, process does not determine outcome. A change in process may have some effect on which contender wins a specific nomination, and some presidential attributes are tested by the process. But regrettably for voters, journalists, social scientists, and students, the process will neither predict nor determine the chances of the winners' turning out to be great presidents.[2]

1. What is the main thesis of the reading by Lord Bryce?

2. What reasons and/or evidence does Bryce cite?

3. What is the main thesis of the reading by Stephen Hess?

4. What reasons and/or evidence does Hess cite?

5. List the process changes cited by Hess.

6. Research one of these changes, and write a paragraph citing when the change was made, why it was made, and the effects of the change on the selection of presidential candidates.

---

[2] Stephen Hess, "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents," in *The Presidential Campaign* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1988), 96–118.