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Columns and OpEds

# Gene Healy: It's time America had a fat president

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By: [Gene Healy](#)  
Examiner Columnist  
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Last week, President Obama strolled the beaches for a photo op with Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, a self-described "fat redneck." Our beanpole president made quite a contrast to the chubby gov, who, as the New York Times noted Sunday, resembles "an adult version of Spanky from the Little Rascals."

Newsweek calls Barbour "the anti-Obama," but the Times downplayed his presidential prospects. Apparently, Haley needs to slim down if he's serious.

Is corpulence really a disqualification for the presidency in the land of supersized fries? If so, that's a shame.

America might do better with a fat president. After all, some of our best have been big fellows, and lately the trim and ambitious types haven't served us so well.

"Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look; he thinks too much. Such men are dangerous," Shakespeare's Julius Caesar comments to Marc Antony. "Let me have men about me that are fat ... such as sleep o' nights."

There's valuable insight there. Keeping fit is fine, but it's hard to trust someone who has spent decades counting carbs so he can stay light enough to leap for the brass ring.

A few years back, Slate examined the relationship between flab and presidential performance. What it found suggests that if you want New Frontiers and crusades for democracy, then vote for the skinny striver. If you'd prefer someone who leaves well enough alone -- who's content to preside over peace and prosperity -- pick the porker.

Per Slate, our four chubbiest chief executives were Presidents Taft, McKinley, Cleveland and Taylor. McKinley, a high-tariff Republican who took us into an unnecessary war, was no prize, but the rest lived large and governed lightly.

I once joked that my favorite president was a chunky, draft-dodging, scandal-plagued Democrat elected in '92 ... (wait for it) ... Grover Cleveland. (The Big-Mac-gobbling Bill Clinton was pretty flabby himself, and lately he looks ever better compared to his successors.)

Like a giant, implacable Buddha, the Great Cleveland set his bulk against Big Government, wielding the veto pen more than any president before. Even \$10,000 to relieve Texas farmers during the 1887 drought was too profligate: "I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution."

Our 27th president, William Howard Taft, didn't start any major wars or federal programs, so he's now best known for weighing in at 355 and installing a plus-sized White House bathtub. But Taft fought hard against Teddy Roosevelt's grandiose visions of presidential power, insisting that "the president cannot make clouds to rain, cannot make the corn to grow" -- and that Roosevelt's notion of the chief executive as national savior would lead to an imperial presidency.

America's best governor today is New Jersey's Chris Christie, who took office despite his opponent's juvenile "check out the fat guy" campaign ads. Since then, Christie's faced down Jersey teachers' unions and made major budget cuts -- showing the kind of gumption America could use in the fiscal crisis to come. Yet most discussions of Christie's political future end with the observation that he's just "too fat" to be president.

Celebrity culture has infected American politics. Since the advent of television, we've reliably opted for the taller candidate -- those with receding hairlines need not apply. We seem to have forgotten the purpose of the office. We're not casting a chick flick here -- we're picking a constitutional chief executive.

The Framers never saw the president as a glamorous tribune of the people. They wanted someone solid enough to stand firm when Congress and the public demanded things they shouldn't have.

Let's give fat guys a chance. We could hardly do worse.

*Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency".*

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