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Beyond the debates

The people are looking for a president who understands the secret of America

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We heard a lot of promises Monday night, when Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton at last took the measure of each other face to face. Both the Donald and the gentle lady from the Clinton counting house were trying to show us how they would lead the nation, dispatch the nation's enemies and bestow all the free stuff that voters have come to expect as their due. It happens every four years, and it's all drearily familiar, and the Founding Fathers might have tarred and feathered both of them for celebrating their outsized view of a president. Indeed, they would not have recognized the president both the Donald and Hillary are trying to be.

In an earlier age, presidents understood the role set out in the Constitution, and it wasn't until Woodrow Wilson, a college professor who had damned the work of the Founders, ushered in the progressive era that would eventually transform the president into an American version of "The Great Leader."

Gene Healy, a scholar at the Cato Institute, observed a few years ago that we "expect the commander in chief to heal the sick, save us from hurricanes, and provide balm for our itchy souls." Pundits, many of them innocent of the details of American history, demand candidates who bloviate about the "vision" of candidates and expect such candidates to give us the details of how the world can be changed. Barack Obama, lest we forget, was largely elected on his promise to "halt the rise of the seas." Alas, the tides still rise and fall, and the globe continues to warm and cool as the globe, not man, wishes.

There's rarely any serious mention of the role of Congress in the debates, or even recognition of the once-familiar fact that a president is expected to protect those who elect him (or her) from foreign aggressors and domestic troublemakers and rioters, and to resist the temptation that comes with power to tell the rest of us how to live our lives, and above all to give up our money and our freedoms to government wise men who are smarter than we are — just ask them — and are better qualified to make the decisions that those who came before us taught us to make for ourselves.

Americans want strong leaders, and the restraint and self-discipline that comes with strength, leaders strong enough to resist using the power in their hands simply because they can. Leaders of both parties have succumbed to the malignant notion that if presidents gather really smart people to help them make their "vision" a reality all will be well. That's how Barack Obama imposed a health-care vision that is collapsing before everyone's very eyes. It's the legacy he didn't want, but what he will be chiefly remembered for. The wonkery of the overeducated classes is dangerous, and the good presidents of the past understood the natural limitations on the dearest of dreams.

Calvin Coolidge, a successful and restrained chief executive, observed after the U.S. economy collapsed into the Great Depression that his successor was a man of energy and intellect who had more ideas than almost anyone else. The problem, Silent Cal said, was that “all of them were wrong.”

Ronald Reagan understood that he brought to Washington no unique understanding of the arcane details of foreign policy, or how to micromanage the implementation of programs put together by panels of experts. The people understood that, too, and he was elected because the public understood that he shared their values, their common sense, and he wouldn't try to “fundamentally transform” what was already “the exceptional nation.”

The people wanted a president who would preserve and protect the nation they inherited. The people want that still, and the candidate who understands that is the candidate most likely to succeed in November.