An Egghead for the Oval Office

By Eugene Robinson
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Al Gore has been in town launching his new book, "The Assault on Reason," and you could have predicted the buzz: Is he about to jump into the race? What you probably wouldn't have predicted is the counter-buzz that Gore, poor fellow, is just too ostentatiously smart to be elected president.

In the book, you see, Gore betrays familiarity with history, economics, even science. He uses big words, often several in the same sentence. And in public appearances he doesn't even try to disguise his erudition. These supposedly are glaring shortcomings that should keep Gore on the sidelines, rereading Gibbon and exchanging ideas about the structure of the cosmos with Stephen Hawking.

Leave aside the question of whether Gore is even thinking about another presidential run, or how he would stack up against the other candidates. I'm making a more general point: One thing that should be clear to anyone who's been paying attention these past few years is that we need to go out and get ourselves the smartest president we can find. We need a brainiac president, a regular Mister or Miss Smarty-Pants. We need to elect the kid you hated in high school, the teacher's pet with perfect grades.

When I look at what the next president will have to deal with, I don't see much that can be solved with just a winning smile, a firm handshake and a ton of resolve. I see conundrums, dilemmas, quandaries, impasses, gnarly thickets of fateful possibility with no obvious way out. Iraq is the obvious place he or she will have to start; I want a president smart enough to figure out how to minimize the damage.

I want a president who reads newspapers, who reads books other than those that confirm his worldview, who bones up on Persian history before deciding how to deal with Iran's ambitious dreams of glory. I want a president who understands the relationship between energy policy at home and U.S. interests in the Middle East -- and who's smart enough to form his or her own opinions, not just rely on what old friends in the oil business say.

I want a president who looks forward to policy meetings on health care and has ideas to throw into the mix.

I want a president who believes in empirical fact, whose understanding of spirituality is complete enough to know that faith is "the evidence of things not seen" and who knows that for things that can be seen, the relevant evidence is fact, not belief. I want a president -- and it's amazing that I even have to put this on my wish list -- smart enough to know that Darwin was right.

Actually, I want a president smart enough to know a good deal about science. He or she doesn't have to be able to do the math, but I want a president who knows that the great theories underpinning our understanding of the universe -- general relativity and quantum mechanics -- have stood for nearly a century
and proved stunningly accurate, even though they describe a world that is more shimmer than substance. I want him or her to know that there's a lot we still don't know.

I want the next president to be intellectually curious -- and also intellectually honest. I want him or her to understand the details, not just the big picture. I won't complain if the next president occasionally uses a word I have to look up.

The conventional wisdom says that voters are turned off when candidates put on showy displays of highfalutin brilliance. I hope that's wrong. I hope people understand how complicated and difficult the next president's job will be, and how much of a difference some real candlepower would make.

I don't want the candidates to pretend to be average people, because why would we choose an ordinary person for such an extraordinary job? I want to see what they've got -- how much they know, how readily they absorb new information, how effectively they analyze problems and evaluate solutions. If the next president is almost always the smartest person in the room, I won't mind a bit. After all, we're not in high school anymore.

*eugenerobinson@washpost.com*

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