

The rough guide for politicians choosing a vacation

In one respect at least, George W. Bush will improve on the record of Ronald Reagan. By the end of next week, Mr Bush will have spent 430 days of his seven-year presidency on vacation at his estate in Crawford, Texas – almost a fifth of his tenure.

The famously laid-back Mr Reagan clocked up a 436-day modern record, mostly at his ranch in Santa Barbara, California. But that took eight years. Mr Reagan liked to spend a lot of his time on a horse: "There is nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse," he suggested.

Arguably though, the tally understates Mr Bush's sojourning, since it excludes the many weekends snatched at Camp David – the presidential retreat in Maryland – and at George Bush senior's holiday home in Kennebunkport, Maine, which also served as a bolt-hole when he was president.

White House aides remind the media that Mr Bush only takes "working vacations". In addition to cutting cedar trees, clearing brush and going mountain biking in the 110 degree heat (sometimes with beleaguered foreign leaders in tow), Mr Bush can call upon the counsel of a mini-White House entourage that travels with him.

None of which appears to dent the American public's view of Mr Bush as a chronic shirker. "The White House is calling it a 'working vacation'," observed David Letterman, the late night comic host. "And I am thinking, well that pretty much describes the entire presidency, doesn't it?"

Yet Mr Bush's defenders have a point. People often excuse the lengthy holidays leaders would take before the modern era – think of Harold Macmillan's six-week hunting and fishing breaks in Scotland during his tenure as UK prime minister from 1957 to 1963. Life was slower then, they argue. Events did not happen so often.

But Macmillan lacked precisely the technology that would have enabled

him to respond immediately to a genuine crisis should it have struck (the Profumo scandal, which unfolded when Macmillan was in Scotland, does not qualify).

The humble BlackBerry that accompanies many of us on holiday nowadays – and robs the break of much of its pleasure – is a thousand times more powerful and instantaneous than anything available to Macmillan. And it is not a patch on the satellite networks and high-definition video-conferencing facilities in Crawford that enable Mr Bush to link up daily with Dick Cheney, the vice-president, at his retreat in Wyoming when he is not shooting duck or family friends.

Nor should time spent away be the measure of the leader. The fact that Gordon Brown, Britain's new prime minister, has taken only four days off this summer is in favourable contrast to Tony Blair's frequent holidaying. But Mr Blair's problem was the company he chose, not the amount of time that he spent with them.

If, as the saying goes, you can judge a person by their friends, then surely Sir Cliff Richard, Silvio Berlusconi and Robin Gibb (of the Bee Gees) is enough to put Mr Blair away for life. And that is without having weighed the fact that they were all freebies.

Vladimir Putin, who was photographed on vacation this week fishing bare-chested in Siberia, has displayed a similar yen for celebrity – Prince Albert of Monaco was his guest.

Contrast this with Harold Wilson, another British premier, who spent every summer at his beloved vacation home on the obscure Scilly Isles off the coast of Cornwall in the south-west of England. Margaret Thatcher was equally modest, tolerating the occasional short break in Constantine Bay, also in Cornwall, so that her husband Denis could play golf at the nearby course.

Yet workaholicism is not much of a

guide to successful statesmanship either. America's record-holder is Jimmy Carter, who spent just 79 days on vacation during his four years in office. Mr Carter was one of the most unpopular presidents of the modern era.

Bill Clinton was more highly rated, and enough of an opportunist to allow his vacations to be made into vote-winners. He twice allowed his consultant, Dick Morris, to replace the Clintons' frantically social annual visit to Martha's Vineyard with a more electorate-friendly break in Jackson Hole. One suspects a similar public relations motive behind Gordon Brown's decision to junk his regular summer visit to Cape Cod. Likewise, Nicolas Sarkozy is surely the first French national to volunteer for a summer holiday in New Hampshire.

"Will you speak to him in French?" a reporter asked Mr Bush last weekend before meeting his French counterpart at Kennebunkport.

"Hell, I can barely speak English," replied the president.

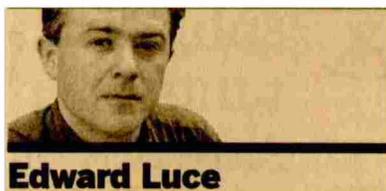
Even Mr Bush is susceptible to the PR holiday, if not in choice of destination then in length. This year he is spending less than two weeks in Crawford. Memories of 2005, when the president completed his five-week break in Texas even after Hurricane Katrina unleashed itself on Louisiana, or the month he spent there in 2001 prior to the September 11 attacks, cut too close to the bone.

But my favourite holidaying statesman is Winston Churchill, who spent weeks on end painting watercolours at his family retreat in Chartwell in south-east England.

"When I get to heaven, I mean to spend a considerable portion of my first million years in painting, and so get to the bottom of the subject," Churchill once said. They had a different sense of time in those days.

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Edward Luce

