

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 14
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2021*

Article 12

January 2021

Book Review: The Commander in Chief: The Qualities Needed of Leaders of Freedom-Loving Nations in the 21st Century

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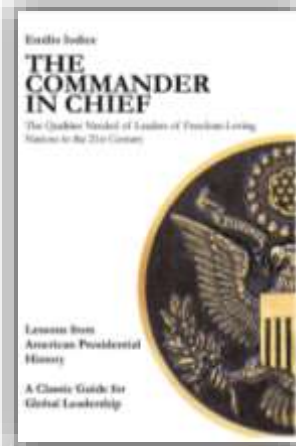
Recommended Citation

Gingerich, Elizabeth (2021) "Book Review: The Commander in Chief: The Qualities Needed of Leaders of Freedom-Loving Nations in the 21st Century," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol14/iss1/12>

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The Commander in Chief: *The Qualities Needed of Leaders of Freedom-Loving Nations in the 21st Century*



Author: Emilio Iodice
Reviewer: Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor-in-Chief
Publisher: Cranberry Press, LLC (November 17, 2020)
Language: English
Hardcover: 379 pages
ISBN-10: 173455858X
ISBN-13: 978-1734558586

https://www.amazon.com/Commander-Chief-Qualities-Leaders-Freedom-Loving/dp/173455858X?pd_rd_w=1kg6K&pf_rd_p=a92e0124-cfa8-4f1e-82b5-a4a348d97008&pf_rd_r=B135ZQEJKD7SJQJDDWFG&pd_rd_r=dad30171-de92-487f-b3f7-ec57c99e909f&pd_rd_wg=uPOLk&pd_rd_i=1734558586X&ref=pd_bap_dp_1_i

In a year where the world began battling a devastating pandemic, suffering seemingly irrevocable economic harm, and experiencing declining morale, so many of us have turned to people in positions of authority to give direction and hope. In a timely fashion, author Emilio Iodice has provided a manual to aid in these efforts – one which gives a thorough accounting of which leadership qualities have succeeded in the person of the American President in the past – and which should be wholly avoided for repetition.

Worldwide Impact

Iodice proclaims from the outset that when America has failed to provide strength and integrity – as history has shown time and time – the entire world fails as well. But with its many problems and weaknesses, the U.S. remains an example of democracy and of working pluralism. These are points made by the author although he does hesitate to say unreservedly whether this is still America’s current stance and description. With a system of three branches of government and a regimen of checks and balances, the powers associated with the Office of the President have grown disproportionately, especially with regard to global affairs and in the issuance of executive orders. With that in mind, the tone set by the President dictates the position of America in the view of the world.

Iodice insists that transparency and accountability must be the primary measures used to identify the salient and desired characteristics of a U.S. President. The author notes that this assumption is one of global importance, and can mean the difference between life and death. The President, as an intricate part of the three branches of government, is the top administrator and leader of his or her political party. As its Commander-in-Chief, the American President reigns over an executive cabinet which presupposes the appointment of knowledgeable, experienced, and competent individuals. Any deficiencies in this decision-making process can – and has frequently in the past led – to disaster, ultimately dividing the populace, fomenting distrust in democratic institutions, and manifesting in acts of corruption

and racism at the highest level. Examples given by the author on this point include Warren G. Harding's Teapot Dome scandal, Andrew Jackson's Trail of Tears, and Richard Nixon's Watergate. At the other end of the spectrum were other notable examples: the vision of Abraham Lincoln which led the way to the adoption of the 13th Amendment ending slavery, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal legislation which constructively addressed the travails precipitated by the Great Depression, John F. Kennedy's commitment to space exploration, and Lydon B. Johnson's monumental civil rights legislation expanding voting rights and worker protections.

Asserting Moral Character

Iodice emphasizes the importance of moral character and labels it as the underlying component of sound leadership. He asserts that it was Lincoln's moral character which led to the execution of the Emancipation Proclamation – an executive order which bore out Lincoln's driving belief that a house divided itself could not stand and that certain remedial actions had to be undertaken. Also highlighted are the qualities of fairness and reform as exemplified by FDR's New Deal legislation. In this light, this reviewer cannot help but to also consider President-Elect Joe Biden's discussion of a Green New Deal which would be configured similarly but this time tackle the problems of planetary degradation, racial unrest, crumbling infrastructure, and the growing disparity of wealth. FDR's administrative policies showed unshakeable commitment to government reform and the pursuit of equity and justice. Theodore Roosevelt, a predecessor and distant relative, also displayed similar courage, especially as the administration disputed the growing dominance of monopolistic companies during the Industrial Revolution.

Serving the Constituency by Acknowledging Imperfections

The election process is critical as so much rides with the Office of the President as the ruler of a diverse populace and the nominator of cabinet and major regulatory agency heads. With so much at stake, "a nation risks electing leaders who are not fit for office and only reflect specific interests in lobbies that are by no means for the public good." To honor the sanctity of this process, leaders must be held accountable whenever they break the law or betray the public trust. They must demonstrate a heightened sense of responsibility, dedicate him or herself to ongoing learning and professional growth, work to inspire others, avoid revenge, seek credentialed officials, and substitute personal ambition for what is necessary to serve the public good. The latter objective is increasingly defined by protests of young people in their demand for more fairness, racial equality, rejection of bias, and preservation of the planet. More and more, especially after the summer of 2020, historical icons, references, and past heroes are being shown for their dark sides as well, including Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Jefferson, whose certain practices and sayings actually deepened racial splintering.

As an imperfect human, the American President must allow his or her imperfections to be noted and critiqued and must continuously strive for sound reasoning and enhanced moral character. That assessment must survive campaigns and out-of-Oval-Office interactions like George H. W. Bush's announcement of "no new taxes" made during his political campaign. The author uses statements given by other public leaders like former New York Governor Mario Cuomo and former Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson whose actions demonstrated a history of moral commitment and dedication to responsible and truthful government.

Innovator-in-Chief

As an ongoing learner, the American President can be one of the greatest forces supporting technology and creativity, as well as championing diversity, tolerance, and entrepreneurship. S/he can also highlight the importance of the arts and show how meaningful education and environmental stewardship are to the life and health of the planet. To exemplify this, the author borrows relevant sayings from such diverse writers and figureheads like Louisa May Alcott and Pope Francis to show how such a leader must sometimes change course from usual policies and practices in order to stimulate economic growth, and pursue fairness and equality.

The author emphasizes how genuine presidential leaders must embrace reform, in addressing the pressing needs of the times. In the early 2000s, for example, attention was recalibrated towards campaign reform changes as heralded by former Senator Harry Reid; he and his supporters viewed this call to change the system if, in their view, democracy was to survive in America. The author also expresses the need for presidents to stand for something meaningful: to embrace a movement that might not always have popular support or be safe in terms of ongoing public support and re-election efforts.

Experience Matters

Iodice stresses that experience can be a predictor of the success or failure of an administration. He cautions, however, that experience in and of itself is not necessarily a guarantor of success in the presidency, but often works beneficially for the country when the president has had prior business experience, congressional or other political interactions, and/or developed ties to working with business people and government leaders abroad. He equates business experience with the skills acquired from the farmland, from running a very large corporation, or from managing a workforce. One outlier in this regard was Warren G. Harding. Although he had considerable newspaper business, that did not preclude his involvement in corrupt practices – nor did Herbert Hoover’s mining and engineering business experience shield the country from the fall of Wall Street and the advancement of the Great Depression.

Harry Truman’s experience in the military as well as George H Bush’s oil company operational activities and Jimmy Carter’s running of the family’s peanut farm developed an acumen of sorts of managerial skills. But the author also discusses the concept of "unfiltered leaders" – a concept which shows that business in one sector does not necessarily guarantee success in another.

Communicative Prowess and Collaborative Tendencies

Another significant trait ascribed to a genuine presidential leader is the ability to communicate with constituencies, emphasizing that words do indeed have consequences and may motivate and encourage true change – or alternatively, stir up the masses in an insidious manner. Iodice recognizes that the President must stay engaged with her/his constituents. Such active communication was displayed through FDR’s Fireside Chats and his interaction abroad with the troops. The author compares the synergy of these chats, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, JFK’s “do for your country” imperative, and Ronald Reagan’s Great Communicator status with the social media tweets of outgoing President Donald Trump. All forms of communication connected with different groups within the larger populace. It is indisputable that Trump indeed brought social media into the discussion of impactful communication techniques,

leaving a legacy which will shape subsequent national elections. Another example of effective communicators, as this reviewer remembers, was Barack Obama who was ascribed the role as “Comforter-in-Chief” to the nation during a time of unspeakable horror with the mass killing of first graders in Newtown, Connecticut.

Other qualities of the Commander-in-Chief relate to intelligence and the understanding of meaningful collaboration. Statements are borrowed from such diverse sources as Michael Jordan to Neville Chamberlain to Thomas Friedman on this topic. It is this intelligence factor that establishes a credentialed and caring cabinet who will work closely alongside the President and reflect multifaceted political, economic, and social skills. Gender discrimination did not obfuscate the call to appoint the best and the brightest when FDR named Frances Perkins as the first female installed in a presidential cabinet as his Secretary of Labor. It was also FDR who forged an alliance between industry, labor, and agriculture in the fervent attempt to end the ravages of the Great Depression. The reviewer notes that these traits appear to be evident in President-Elect Joseph Biden who, at the time of this writing, has also named diverse individuals with exceptional talents to form his cabinet.

Iodice also emphasizes the challenges which have confronted heads of government in the past. The collaborative and mindful efforts of Lincoln and his cabinet were necessary to overcome the insidious forces of racism and secessionism. Another case in point was President George H.W. Bush, who, when facing the challenge of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, successfully forged an international coalition to engage in the ensuing Gulf War. This collaborative trait must also be exercised in working with Congress. This was achieved by LBJ who engaged in social legislation to address the ills of the time, working with members of Congress who also shared similar political philosophies and direction. The Great Depression led to collaborative New Deal legislation and LBJ’s Great Society. Unfortunately, collaborative efforts do not always insulate an administration from the perils of poor decision-making. For example, FDR was responsible for the operation of Japanese-American internment camps at the onset of WWII and was inattentive to the suffering and mass killings of Jews in the German concentration camps. LBJ’s shortsightedness led to the long and destructive years of the Vietnam War period. These examples once again mark the imperfections of both the administration – as well as its primary administrator.

Other essential, intrinsic qualities of the President as identified by the author include character, integrity, ethical behavior, trustworthiness, and perseverance. The legacy a president leaves comes down to the forging of a reliable reputation and the steady exhibition of personal self-control. This was evident in the Theodore Roosevelt Administration – who even withstood the lodging of a bullet to continue a speech to his constituents – as well as with William McKinley who was known for his character and amiable consideration for those he served. The author further emphasizes that it is largely due to the social background and personal history of these leaders which produce an even temperament and the ability to withstand challenges while in office. Calvin Coolidge is put forward as yet another example of one who displayed a lifelong pattern of reliable character as was Gerald Ford, a politician known for a reputation of honesty and character. By contrast was former Vice-President Spiro Agnew who resigned from office after years of corruption while serving as Governor of Maryland were fully revealed.

Self-Control, Passion of Purpose

When reading the author's description of presidencies which exhibited passion of purpose guided by measured temperament, this reviewer reflected immediately on the selfless character of Barack Obama who earned the nickname of "No Drama Obama." It was this control which was needed to deal with the 2007-2008 Economic Recession, the bankruptcy of General Motors, and the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden. This combination of measured temperament and passion of purpose did not always converge in presidential leaders. For instance, while Bill Clinton managed to balance the budget, he could not control his own personal life. Teddy Roosevelt aligned his vision with his actions, culminating in the creation of the Square Deal. Roosevelt witnessed the ravages of massive industrialism and sought to temper unregulated capitalism by protecting the rights of workers and championing the historically marginalized. He sought economic progress with the construction of the Panama Canal and preservation of the environment with the installation of national parks. Ensuring self-control entails the art of self-awareness and the recognition of the tempestuousness and unpredictability of personal emotions, moods, and drives.

Lincoln is portrayed in this discussion as one who was guided by an unequivocal moral compass, complemented by the unflinching resolve to assume responsibility. He is ascribed with the patience of listening to both sides and welcoming disagreement. His decisions were made confidently, but aided by the advice and input of others.

Humility and Humanity

Successful American Presidents must exude confidence yet remain humble. For without humility, comes disregard of humanity. Presidents must forego the lure of self-aggrandizement and commit unequivocally to public service in respectful deference to all members of society. In this vein, Abraham Lincoln transformed humility and human kindness into leadership strength to effect massive societal change. Iodice instructs that such interaction of humility and humanity are the fundamental components of any effort to positively change the world. Such amalgamation of all of the qualities Iodice describes will inevitably be necessary to address a divided populace which faces the challenges of environmental catastrophe, inequality in income, undetermined globalism, and threats of pandemics and terrorism. Hopefully, the incoming President will deliver accordingly.

— Elizabeth F.R. Gingerich, Editor-in-Chief, JVBL