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SIMPLE TRUTHS OF LEADERSHIP AND POLITICS

— RITCH EICH, THOUSAND OAKS, CA, USA

Being a truthful politician should never be an oxymoron, but here we are.

Real leaders—including public servants—don't lie. Ever. Real leaders don't need to.

It's sad that we even need to have a discussion on this subject, but more than six months after a hotly-contested presidential election and more than four months after an insurrection on the Capitol, many people still believe the "Big Lie" that Joseph R. Biden didn't win the US presidential election. It's sad that many of our elected officials have chosen to exacerbate this propaganda instead of undertaking the work required to help get the country out from under after a pandemic that has killed more than 600,000 friends, family, and coworkers. It's time to face the truth, not fight it.

Franklin Roosevelt said, "Repetition does not transform a lie into a truth." As Representative Liz Cheney stated the day before she was removed from her senior leadership position within the House GOP, "Remaining silent and ignoring the lie emboldens the liar." Who would have ever thought Roosevelt and Cheney could be held up as defenders of truth in the same paragraph? It's unfortunate most of our so-called leaders not only believe it's acceptable to lie, they take it a step further: if you don't like the truth, just invent a story that cancels it out. Repeat the lie until it becomes reality. This is a standard technique of dictators and fascist regimes.

By definition, all of our elected officials are politicians, but too few are statesmen and women, real leaders. It's rare to find one who is able or willing to put the interests of the country first, for fear of being ostracized from their political coalitions and party bosses, and the campaign funds that would ordinarily flow to their reelection bids. The lie is that these elected officials care about their constituents—the truth is that they don't.

Not that long ago, bipartisanship was not only possible, it was expected and even welcomed. Working together to solve problems wasn't taboo; it was encouraged. Elected officials remembered they were there to serve their constituents, regardless for whom those constituents voted. Character was considered a strength, not a weakness. Truth was something to be respected, not an inconvenience to be swept aside.

Whether leading in sports, business, politics, the military, or any other profession, nothing is as sacred or as fragile as your character. Character defines who you are, what values you hold dear, where your moral compass lands, and how you respond to the test of resolving

conflicting ethical principles. Whether you agree with her positions or not, Liz Cheney refused to bend to the whims of a party being torn apart by an individual who demands fealty and takes pride in belittling and berating those who don't toe that party's line. Instead, she demonstrated true leadership.

Character dictates that you do the right thing whether or not someone is watching, and truth is the foundation that supports it. When we can no longer count on our representatives and senators to act responsibly and truthfully, we are in danger of disintegrating into chaos, or worse, as a nation. And, don't think for a minute that China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other adversaries aren't watching closely.

True leaders surround themselves with people who are comfortable in their own skin and are willing to speak truth to power. When a culture begins to reward yes-men and yes-women, it becomes toxic. It cannot survive indefinitely—at some point, it will disintegrate. It really is that simple. Leaders must always tell the truth, as painful as that truth may be. And they must surround themselves with people who do the same.

If your elected official misrepresents the truth and promotes conspiracy theories they know to be false in order to stay in power, do you think they or their staffs can be trusted? Do you think they are looking out for your best interests?

Character can reign over corruption. But often a price must be paid. Mitt Romney has been harassed while waiting to board a plane and booed at his state's GOP convention. Peter Meijer, who holds Jerry Ford's old seat in Michigan's 3rd congressional district, has received death threats. John Kasich has been belittled and Liz Cheney ostracized—all of them paying for truth-telling with their jobs and reputations. To quote Adam Kinzinger, "It's leaders' job to tell the truth even if that's uncomfortable, and that's not what we're doing." Cindy McCain, after being formally censored by the Arizona Republican Party, described it as an honor to be included among those who served so faithfully (including her late husband).

You don't need to go back too far in history to see that character, truth, and standing for one's principles can coexist. Olympia Snowe, who retired in 1984, was well known as a staunch defender of the truth, her party, and her constituents. She didn't consider it a weakness to reach across the aisle to get things done—instead, she took pride in it. Senator Snowe served

I believe history will show that Gerald R. (Jerry) Ford was one of the best leaders who ever graced the public square. A man of deep faith, courageous, humble, decidedly honest, a good listener, and a molder of consensus, Ford didn't seek to become Vice President or President of the United States. An Eagle Scout, a summer Yellowstone Park Ranger (the only president to have served as such), and an All-American starting center on the back-to-back NCAA National Championship football teams at the University of Michigan, Ford would have joined the select company of Teddy Roosevelt in wildlife preservation annals had the Democrat-controlled Congress not twice rejected his multi-billion-dollar plan to improve all the national parks in his Bicentennial Land Heritage Act. Ford's bill resulted, in part, from a spirited Oval Office visit with the persuasive, famed landscape photographer and stellar environmentalist, Ansel Adams, whom Ford greatly admired.



President Gerald R. Ford (center) and Ansel Adams – American photographer talking with conservationist William Turnage (27 January 1975). Courtesy, Wikimedia Commons

eight terms in the House and three terms in the Senate. She was unabashedly bipartisan, and her constituents rewarded her many times over for her efforts. When announcing her retirement, she foreshadowed the future when she said, “I do not realistically expect the partisanship of recent years in the Senate to change over the short term.”

If our elected officials really want to lead, they need to stop spreading lies and start facing the truth—and speaking it. They need to create solutions instead of wasting time inventing problems that don’t exist. Our elected leaders need to act like adults instead of spoiled children throwing temper tantrums when they don’t get their way.

On *Washington Post Live*, Robert Gates, a staunch Republican who served eight U.S. presidents of both parties and is the only Secretary of Defense to remain in office under a newly-elected president, said, “I often get asked... what is the greatest danger to America today, and I say it is not a foreign threat. It is our paralysis and our polarization at home.”



Landmark for Peace sculpture of RFK and MLK, Jr.’s outstretched hands (artist Greg Perry, 1994), Indianapolis, IN.
Photo courtesy of Joan Eich

Like Gates, I believe leaders need to have vision, challenge the status quo, take thoughtful risks, and show an ability to compromise while also recognizing that consensus is not always possible. They must be willing to be held accountable and have the strength to hold those around them accountable as well. I also believe that you praise in public and counsel in private—you never criticize someone in the public square. I was given this wise counsel by Congressman Meijer’s grandfather, grocery magnate Fred Meijer of Greenville, Michigan, who was an esteemed trustee of a hospital I served.

And you never lie. Ever.

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