

Qualities of Leadership

Institute of World Culture

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2 – 5 pm

1. I would like to begin by quoting from Emerson's essay on "Uses of Great Men":

"It is natural to believe in great men. If the companions of our childhood should turn out to be heroes, and their condition regal, it would not surprise us. All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic; that is, their genius is paramount.The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome."

2. Emerson's elegant tribute to great men seems most apt when applied to Abraham Lincoln, a political leader who tried his utmost to marry moral principle to responsible political action in the most trying of national times – the American Civil War.
3. The Greek poet Pindar said that the noblest and most arduous undertaking in life is the attainment of *arête*, of skilful action, of excellence. Excellence in any sphere of human activity is rare, said the Greeks, and rarely attempted. It is rarely attempted in any serious and sustained way because it is so exacting in its discipline. The goddess of excellence and virtue does not yield to any but the dedicated and the courageous. For this reason, we admire greatly those few who seem to exemplify it and reveal to us its glory and its splendor.
4. True excellence as we often lament is scarce in the public realm; and especially so in American democratic politics -- that raucous public arena of competing ideologies, entrenched interests and shifting loyalties. Is it any surprise then, that in discussing the qualities, excellences or virtues of leadership that we should turn to Abraham Lincoln for a moment? Not, really. We turn to Abraham Lincoln not because he had no flaws and not because he was entirely free of the lesser ambitions and loyalties of most politicians. We turn to him because, despite his self-admitted imperfections, he was continually able to rise above the common weaknesses of men and politicians when it most mattered, when it most counted and, in so doing, altered the course of American history and gave America the opportunity to become a true Republic of Conscience, an inspiration to struggling peoples everywhere and a haven for the multitude of immigrants who actively sought to benefit from its welcoming shores.
5. It is important to point out that when we speak of "excellences", of golden qualities and of truly admiring someone who embodies them, that we are not just saluting the extraordinary action of a moment. When we speak of excellence in leadership we are

honoring a cultivated quality; a quality or character trait that has been germinated and carefully tended to throughout the vagaries of fortune and the challenges of social circumstances. I say this because we all know that extreme necessity and dire circumstances can make heroes of us all. Spontaneous acts of unusual courage are rightly celebrated and can of themselves inspire us to begin the long, arduous journey to excellence. But, cultivate excellence, calls for us to consciously summon it on a relatively continuous basis. This means that we exemplify a desirable quality or cherished principle even when we know in advance the terrible costs of our commitment to it. In this regard I am reminded of a statement made by the quintessential cowboy, John Wayne. The "Duke" once said: "Courage is being scared to death -- but saddling up anyway." The quality of courageous leadership is most admirable when there is the most reason for us to be afraid.

6. Returning to Lincoln, what qualities or excellences of his are most relevant to the political world of today? Lincoln exemplified throughout his life the reciprocal virtues of political responsibility and personal self-transcendence to a very high degree. Lincoln felt strongly about his oath of public office, about his commitment to the integrity of the Constitution and about scrupulously performing his elected duties. He was also a moral realist as many conscientious politicians are. Believing as he did that every human action is a mixture of good and evil, he examined significant political acts from the standpoint of maximizing the collective good and minimizing the potential evil. He had a keen eye set on the potential and likely consequences of every policy for the nation and for future generations. This was not that unusual. There were other politicians who felt that they shared these same concerns. But Lincoln went further than the norm – especially for a politician from the mid-west. He believed that all public servants must, at times, see "consequences" in more comprehensive terms, to see effects beyond mere party ideology and the prospects for elections. Lincoln was often far more concerned with the ethos and moral character of his country than with the future of any political party – including his own Whig party. In other words, there were times when a stand on a humane principle was necessary and foremost.
7. So, in addition to the virtue of political responsibility, of adherence to duty and of calculating the good and evil of various political decisions and responses, Lincoln exemplified the parapolitical virtue of self-transcendence – of invoking and acting on the basis of a universal principle. That is, when America most needed a citizen-politician to restore its moral compass, to point it toward the Universal Vision expressed in its Declaration of Independence, Lincoln was the one that stepped forward and took an unwavering stand on principle, not on mere ideology. And, in so doing helped to create a new political party, the Republican Party. The parapolitical principle that Lincoln upheld and elaborated most courageously prior to and during the Civil War was the principle of human equality. And, he did so in a morally responsible and self-transcending manner. That is, he took a heroic stand but with an abiding respect for those that differed from him, that criticized him, that belittled him. Why? Because he wished to convince and persuade his opponents to choose a better path. He hoped to

bring about a change of heart as well as a change of viewpoint. In his stand on principle – on human equality and the eventual abolition of slavery – Lincoln refused to be the moralist or to separate himself from those who opposed him. In taking the higher moral ground, he never claimed or gave the impression of moral superiority. He was too self-critical and too generous-hearted to ever do so. In this respect, Lincoln's act of self-transcendence meant widening the moral context, seeing his actions beyond the limited arena of political parties and the confines of immediate history. It meant thinking in terms of the character of the national mind and of future generations. Lincoln's appeal to human equality was the deliberate act of directing everyone's attention to forgotten, over-looked or ignored fundamentals of the American political community. This was done by many Abolitionists and moral reformers too. But unlike the latter, Lincoln's appeal was free of self-righteousness and the taint of the moralist. He appealed to the slave holder's human sympathy and to his innate sense of justice. He repeatedly attempted to draw the larger circle, to point out the complexities of the moral situation between North and South, between slaveholders and non-slave holders. He encouraged his recalcitrant opponents to see that they can be part of a worthy solution and he subtly intimated to anti-slavery advocates that they might well be part of the problem. By expanding the moral context, by expanding the circle of community and by sharing the blame for serious national ills, Lincoln was attempting to make it possible for the American Republic at large to regenerate itself and to reorient itself "toward Zion" as he would say.

8. From the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854 until his assassination in 1865, Lincoln displayed many instances of genuine political responsibility and personal self-transcendence. I will cite one example out of many instances; namely, his bid to be elected senator to the U.S. Congress in 1855.
9. As a young man Lincoln wished to make his mark upon the world, to be esteemed by his fellow man. Politically speaking, that ambition was concentrated in his wish to be elected to the U.S. Senate. He wished to occupy this political office more than to be president. His chance came in January of 1855. He was the favorite to win the vacant Senate seat of Illinois. He was the leading Whig party member and one of the emerging anti-slavery politicians at the national level. Furthermore, the Illinois Assembly was composed mainly of anti-slavery members – both from the Democratic and the Whig parties. His prospects were promising. At the initial ballot Lincoln fell six votes shy of winning the Assembly's vote for the vacant Senate seat. Fortunately, the pro-slavery candidate was far behind Lincoln. However, as the balloting continued Lincoln's votes slowly descended from an initial 45 votes down to 15 votes. Meanwhile, the quasi-pro-slavery candidate's votes correspondingly rose higher. And so did the ballot of the democrat, anti-slavery candidate Trumbull. Just before the 10th ballot, Lincoln was told by loyal Whig party members that they would still vote for him. He responded by saying, "if you vote for me you will lose both Trumbull (the democratic anti-slavery candidate) and myself and I think the cause in this case is to be preferred to men." Thus, the remaining Whig representatives voted for Trumbull, a democrat, who barely won the

election to the U.S. Senate. Shortly after this event, Lincoln receded into seeming political obscurity.

10. It is important to remember here that political responsibility and self-transcendence are reciprocally related. However, there are times when a political leader must ascend the staircase of thought to the parapolitical cupola of individual conscience, must transcend conventional commitments and must reassume wider responsibilities for the greater good. The true politician leader must be ever ready to enfold his political consciousness into that of the conscientious citizen and of the latter into "man qua man" -- man as a dignified member of the human race. Lincoln was able to take the high ground of human equality and liberty for all over his own political ambitions because he had been so dutiful and conscientious for so long. We might say that his immediate personal ambition to be senator "died" but that he, himself, was reborn into the "spacious empyrean" of the politically noble. This self-cancelling act of Lincoln's in Illinois in 1855 was a precursor to many more demanding acts of personal transcendence that he would face as President of a divided nation with a divided and contentious cabinet. His innate magnanimity and his deft handling of both friends and enemies as President, would result in his being admired by peoples near and far and would lead many to say that he had indeed left his mark upon the earth, that he had unquestionably earned the esteem of his fellow man. To quote Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, on the occasion of Lincoln's death: "Now he belongs to the ages." He does indeed.

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