

Where Have the Leaders Gone?

BY GLENN RIFKIN



“When Cicero spoke, people marveled. When Caesar spoke, people marched.” —Cato

It's been a long and perilous year for political leaders around the globe.

In August, 2011, for example, *The New York Times* ran a controversial essay in the Sunday Review section entitled, “What Happened to Obama?” The article, written by Emory University psychology professor Drew Westen, offered a scathing commentary of President Barack Obama’s failure to emerge as the leader nearly 70 million voters had hoped for and expected when he was elected in 2008. Recalling Obama’s inauguration speech in January, 2009, Westen noted the feeling of unease that came over him listening to the speech. The eloquent young president, a man whose brilliant oratory and charisma had inspired widespread hope among voters that change would come and he would lead us out of the terrible morass created by his predecessor, needed to tell a story.

“The stories our leaders tell us matter,” Westen wrote, “probably almost as much as the stories our parents tell us as children, because they orient us to what is, what could be, and what should be; to the worldviews they hold and to the values they hold sacred.”

Obama, Westen posited, failed to tell the story that the American people were waiting to hear and two-and-a-half years into his presidency, he had yet to tell the story. The story had to point out not only what was wrong but who was responsible and how the wrong would be made right. Rather than filling the giant shoes of F.D.R., Teddy Roosevelt or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — men who confronted the bullies who tried to shout them down — Obama displayed a “deep-seated aversion to conflict” that allowed an obstinate Republican party to consistently derail his agenda.

Despite what many considered significant accomplishments — championing the first major health care reform legislation in decades, lassoing an economic crisis that was heading for another great Depression, and most of all, sending out an elite military commando unit that killed Osama bin Laden — the perception remained that the president had failed to ascend to the iconic level of leadership so many had anticipated he would. In his ceaseless attempts to be bipartisan and act like “the adult in the room,” he appeared instead to be cowed by his

opponents and unable to exert the audacity required to lead the country to better times.

The Westen piece came at a particularly tense time for the nation and for the country’s leadership. The economy had limped along, and the unemployment rate had stubbornly settled at above 9 percent for much of Obama’s term. For most Americans, Washington appeared to be stuck in an intransigent stalemate. The deeply partisan and vitriolic fight over raising the debt ceiling by an early August deadline, lest the United States default on its debt for the first time in its history, caused even his most ardent supporters to question the president’s leadership skills. He was, they believed, being held hostage by Republicans pandering to the Tea Party conservatives and seemed unable or unwilling to get angry and get tough. Conversely, given the mess he was handed and the unprecedented opposition he was facing, this was a situation that would have taxed Caesar.

Obama’s approval ratings dropped precipitously. But Congressional leaders fared even worse. Respect for a deeply divided and gridlocked Congress plunged to historic depths. A Gallup poll of Americans revealed a stunning 82 percent disapproval rating of Congress, with Republicans receiving the worst ratings. Veteran Congressman Jim Cooper, a Tennessee Democrat, told *The New York Times*, “This is not a collegial body anymore. It is more like gang behavior. Too many people here are willing to deliberately harm the country for partisan gain.” As the stock market tumbled in late summer, there was a pervasive sense of dread that the country was heading in the wrong direction. It also raised a deeply troubling question: Where have all the leaders gone?

This question, it seems, has no borders. Most of the world is asking the same thing. While Obama struggled to assert control in the United States, nations around the globe grappled with their own leadership quandaries. Overseas, where the 17-nation euro zone has endured a similar economic crisis, the dearth of strong leadership from both the healthy countries such as Germany and the laggards such as Greece and Portugal has had dire effects.

Germany’s Angela Merkel, for example, came under fire for her failure to assert strong leadership in the quest to find ways to assist Greece, which teetered on the brink of default, leading to investor nervousness around the globe. Italy’s billionaire



president, Silvio Berlusconi, once beloved, is now embroiled in scandals and charges of fraud. Berlusconi's popularity has plummeted, and Italians are worried about their future. In France, the leading Socialist Party candidate for president, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn, was arrested for sexual assault in a New York City hotel room, and put in jail before being released on bail before the criminal charges were dropped. (Civil suits continue.) Considered a front-runner to succeed Nicolas Sarkozy, Strauss-Kahn allegedly had a history of incidents that are now coming to light. Once a strong candidate because of his economics background, Strauss-Kahn's political career appears to be in ruins.

In England, reports of widespread phone-hacking by Rupert Murdoch's media outlets, with some editors jailed, turned up startling revelations about Prime Minister David Cameron's and several previous prime ministers' relationships and dependence on Murdoch and his organization. Who exactly, the public asked, is running the show? And in Japan, Naoto Kan, its prime minister, was forced to resign in August after his approval ratings nose-dived following charges of ineptitude in his handling of the devastating March earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant crisis and their aftermaths. And in India, alleged pervasive political corruption, which has long been whispered

about as a hindrance to that country's emergence as a global economic power, is now under the spotlight. Widespread protests have erupted throughout the country, led by Anna Hazare, an outspoken government critic who embraces Gandhian political tactics.

Despite the wide variety of circumstances, the common thread is clear: Strong, effective, ethical leadership has become a rare commodity around the globe. As a result, strong, effective leadership has become rare, and millions of people have lost confidence in their leaders and are wary about the future.

Building Confidence

Leadership, after all, is an amorphous talent. Even our most treasured leaders, from Lincoln to Churchill to Gandhi, had their ebbs and flows; were alternately despised and adored by the people, and suffered defeat nearly as apocryphal as triumph. But what is happening today is beyond the normal ebbs and flows that define stable, largely democratic societies. Given the complexities of new millennium political realities, this may well be the new normal.

Scholars have long studied the attributes of those considered great leaders and waged running arguments over whether leaders are born or made. Leaders in both the arenas of business and politics share innumerable traits and challenges, and these days are graded regularly and intensely. In a 24-hour



news cycle, aided and abetted by the Internet, Facebook, Twitter and levels of transparency heretofore unknown in executive suites, the spotlight on our leaders is bright and harsh. And many have wilted under the glare.

The question that naturally follows the one above is: What is required to inspire confidence in our leaders once again? How can leaders turn a tide that has left constituencies on every front disillusioned and angry?

Warren Bennis, the legendary organizational scholar and leadership author who has studied and written about leadership for five decades, said

it was difficult to remember a time when there has been such “a void in leadership across the board.” At 86, Bennis has lived through 15 presidencies, and he has personally advised several, including Obama. “Every decade, I can write a piece entitled, ‘Where have all the leaders gone?’” Bennis said. “I wrote that for the first time in the 1950s. But this is by far the worst case of leadership flu I’ve seen. It seems as if nobody has the touch right now. Why is this? Because we are living in a time where things are changing more often and faster than ever before. Things are far more complex than in 1931.”

Bennis suggested that rebuilding confidence has to start with some basic requirements, including a turn toward some clear thinking, pragmatism and truth-telling. “Max De Pree said, ‘The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality,’” Bennis recalled. “The reality is that we are in a decline, and our leaders don’t know how to manage during decline. We’re not used to this. But we have to face a grim reality, and every leader has to find a way to express it in a way that people can understand.”

In addition, Bennis said, we need to hear far more from corporate leaders in addressing the economic issues, especially in the area of job creation. The president and Congress can do just so much. Michael Useem, a management professor at the Wharton School and director of the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management, agreed.

Useem has put together a leader’s checklist of 15 “mission-critical leadership principles” and for him, the 15th is the defining principle of leadership: the ability to get beyond self-interest, transcend constituencies and do what the country requires. Abraham Lincoln did this when Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox in 1865, just days before he was assassinated. Instead of imposing harsh terms and retribution on the Confederacy, Lincoln sent word that he wanted reconciliation, ignoring many political opponents who sought vengeance.

In today’s political environment, Useem is clear that no leader, even one anxious to transcend partisanship, can go it alone.

“Are there forces outside Washington that can make a difference? Yes,” Useem stated. “We saw Howard Schultz [CEO] of Starbucks begin a campaign he called ‘Just say no to Congress.’” Until Congress gets on with the true business of the country and leaves electioneering and partisan politics aside, Schultz urged people in the business community to cut off campaign donations.

“The Business Roundtable, the National Chamber of Commerce, the Council on Institutional Investors and the National Association of Corporate Directors all could and should step up to the plate and suggest actions to restore national leadership,” Useem said. “Obama can turn this around if he can build the momentum and bring in a range of constituents to appreciate why we have to transcend these partisan struggles. They have to understand that if we don’t do that, we are going in the wrong direction.”

But building confidence in leadership, under current conditions, can be a Sisyphean gambit. Jay Kizer,

global market managing director in the life sciences area for Korn/Ferry International, the global recruiting firm, spends much of his time interviewing leaders and searching for traits that inspire confidence.

“There are a couple of ways to look at confidence,” Kizer said. “I consider the confidence of the leader himself and then look at the confidence that he inspires in the people around him. I think the second is more important than the first. People can learn to

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become confident: the more experience they have, the more information they have. Some people are born with it; others can learn it. But more critical is the question: What do all the interest groups around you think about you? Your team, your board of directors, your customers. Do they have confidence in your ability to deliver?”

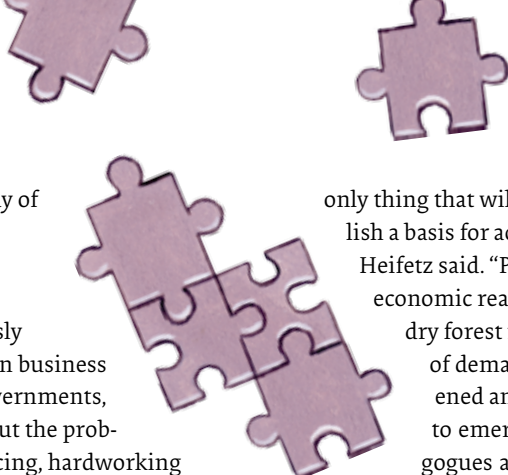
During interviews, Kizer probes deeply with those questions. How did that person build his or her team? How did they get the team to follow? What kind of legacy do they leave behind?

Kizer points to Steve Jobs, the legendary Apple co-founder and long-time CEO, as a prototypical confidence-builder. Much of Jobs’ success, Kizer explained, came from his ability to drive innovation and to deliver what he promised. But mostly, it came from his incredible impact on those who worked around him and for him. “He inspired an amazing level of confidence,” Kizer said.

Those traits that inspire confidence are what Kizer seeks when he interviews prospective executive recruits. From his years of experience, the list of key attributes he looks for is relatively short:

- A clear vision
- Outstanding communications skills to share the vision
- An ability to follow through and execute on that vision

“People are forgiving and will allow for mistakes,” Kizer said. “But if you won’t even admit the mistake or keep making the same mistake over and over, confidence will disappear. A strong leader has to have the courage to stay the course but when it is not working,



not let pride get in the way of saying so.”

Handle the Truth

In fact, there are obviously plenty of great leaders in business organizations, local governments, nonprofits and the like. But the problem is that these self-effacing, hardworking people are not at the top of the pyramid where much of the authority resides and most of the problems lie.

According to Ron Heifetz, senior lecturer in public leadership and founder of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, those at the top of the pyramid have far more constrictions and obligations than anyone else. To gain the authority that gets them to the top, they must form relationships with directors, shareholders and other constituencies that inevitably come with strings attached. Those strings can tie the hands of even the most competent leaders.

“Our attention tends to focus upward toward authority,” Heifetz pointed out. “Everyone, including journalists, scholars, those within organizations, focus on people in high positions of authority for leadership. We are getting some great leadership up and down and far and wide, but not from people at the top of the pyramid.”

Those with the authority, Heifetz continued, “become selectively responsive to some of their constituencies more so than others. The basic algorithm is that these leaders will try to find a way to make a dominant coalition hold together in support of their position. They will try to find the least common denominator amongst various constituencies to create a sufficient coalition to keep them in power. They don’t want to lose their jobs.”

Of course, in a time of rabid partisan politics and deeply entrenched constituencies such as lobbyists and political action committees, creating a bipartisan coalition these days is nearly impossible. To that end, Heifetz believes a leader like Obama has only one choice in his attempt to build confidence and accomplish his agenda: to educate and explain reality to the public. Given how complex the issues are — everything from health care reform to jobs creation — the public isn’t looking for complex explanations. They need simple, clear but honest explanations of what is going on, something Obama has often failed to do, according to Heifetz.

“In a prolonged painful economic period, the

only thing that will really reassure people and establish a basis for action is a clear, honest explanation,” Heifetz said. “People need to understand basic economic realities. An ignorant public is like a dry forest ready to burn. It doesn’t take a lot of demagoguery, when people are frightened and in pain, for charismatic forces to emerge and mislead people. Demagogues always emerge in times of crisis because they are very good at giving people simplistic answers.”

Heifetz offered a favorite quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes: “I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

Another intrusive factor often cited by leadership scholars is the role money has come to play in today’s election campaigns, particularly presidential and key congressional races. Election cycles have morphed into perpetual campaigning, nearly from the day a victor is sworn into office. Campaign finance reform has done nothing to slow the inflow of hundreds of millions of dollars from special interests into the election process in the United States, and that is much to the detriment of leadership, said Drew Westen.

“It seems pretty clear that the money in politics has led to a massive degradation in the quality of American leadership,” Westen said. “When you have the kind of competing demands that all members of Congress have in order to stay in office, the pressure is intense. It is hard to be much of a leader when you are bought. It takes a person of extraordinary willpower and integrity not to make the easy rationalization that they have to take that phone call of every wealthy person who wants something or they will be outgunned in the next election. They tell themselves, ‘I have to do this or someone worse will get the job.’”

For example, Westen said he had recently spoken to a state legislator in Florida whose opponent spent almost \$2 million on a statehouse race. “That was for a state race!” Westen said. “It’s mind-boggling.”

And beyond getting elected, today’s leaders may simply be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the job. “The idea that someone who has never made a series of consequential hiring or managerial decisions at all would have their internship as a President, is actually a frightening thought,” Westen added. Charles Handy, the legendary management guru and author based in London, agreed. “The job [of leader] is almost impossible these days. It is too big,” Handy said. “There are no secrets anymore. Transparency is great but you

can't do anything behind closed doors. There are no secrets and everything is out in the open. That makes it difficult to plan with any kind of confidence. As a result, everybody is reacting immediately to events."

Handy believes the same holds true for corporations, which have grown into multinational behemoths, far too large and unwieldy for a single leader to oversee. "You have to be a super-human being to deal with and ride above it," he said.

In the United Kingdom, Handy said, the current prime minister, David Cameron, "is trying to think long-term and to communicate an upbeat message, but he has to keep diving down to make sure the ship isn't sinking, let alone being able to concentrate on where it's going. It's very difficult. And it's even worse in the United States."

Manfred Kets de Vries, a clinical professor of leadership development and founder of INSEAD's Global Leadership Center near Paris, brings a psychological perspective to his study of leadership. Great leaders, Kets de Vries said, can be very dangerous. "Most leaders fall into the trap where they start to believe in their own invincibility, and they become more and more narcissistic and omnipotent."

Kets de Vries explained that "sometimes as a leader, you have to play dentist. You have to inflict pain. You have to say no. His message comes out wobbly because he wants to please everybody." As the old adage goes: Trying to please everyone results in pleasing no one. More important, it is not a confidence builder.

In fact, many of the iconic historical leaders such as Lincoln, F.D.R., Churchill, rose from obscurity to greatness during times of war. But the ability to inspire confidence does not necessarily require a global military conflict. Some leaders transcend the underlying minefields by rising above the bickering and conflicts with powerful, symbolic actions. Kets de Vries said that when he asks students to name the living leader they most admire, 90 percent choose Nelson Mandela. The former president of South Africa, who spent 27 years in a tiny prison cell for his activist role in fighting apartheid, emerged as a folk hero and could have used his election to the presidency as a chance to inflict revenge on his enemies. Instead, he refused to bow to pressure for vindication and gracefully let go of the past to create a stronger future for the nation. Soon after taking office, for example, he was pressured to do away with the popular South African rugby team, the Springboks, which had long been a symbol of white oppression for the black community. Instead, he urged his constituents

to embrace the team and root hard for a victory for the Springboks in the Rugby World Cup that was held in South Africa in 1995. An improbable victory over New Zealand to win the cup only added to the power of the moment. Mandela appeared on the field to present the championship trophy to the team captain, François Pienaar, an Afrikaner, wearing a Springboks jersey with Pienaar's number, and this symbolic moment helped bring the troubled nation together in dramatic fashion.

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Kets de Vries believes that a great leader needs to understand the context and the prevailing emotional temperature of the country or organization he is leading. "There are no babies without mothers, and there are no leaders without the context," Kets de Vries said. "Great leaders work on people's pride. If you have full professors with tenure, what can you do other than appeal to someone's pride to do better?"

Coda

In early September, Obama spoke to a joint session of Congress to announce a far-reaching jobs program aimed at cutting into the country's stagnant unemployment levels. His disillusioned and weary supporters were pleased with Obama's impassioned performance. "This was a startling, feisty, combative and, in a way, commanding president that has rarely been seen on the stage in Washington," wrote pundit Howard Fineman on the *Huffington Post* blog site. "Friends and foes alike had to wonder watching him tonight: Where has that Barack Obama been? Why did it take so long for 'Give 'Em Hell, Barry' to appear?"

Although his political opponents predictably tried to discredit his effort, the president demonstrated the type of leadership mien that had been expected when he came into office. Whether or not it proved to be a jumping-off point for renewed confidence across America, there was no doubting how hungry people have been, in these troubled times, for a leader to emerge.