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## Will America Vote for a Messiah Leader?

**Simon Western**

### **Abstract**

In this article I describe four key leadership frames or discourses, one of which is the Messiah discourse. I pose the question, will America vote for a Messiah leader? Offering insights into Barack Obama and Hillary Clintons' leadership styles, the article discusses the impact they have on the subconscious hopes and fears of voters.

**Keywords:** Leadership styles, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama

Leadership stimulates many different desires, hopes and fears, some of these are familiar to us others are deeply embedded in our individual and collective subconscious. Different leadership styles and approaches stimulate different fears hopes and desires in others. Mobilising the hopes and diminishing the fears is therefore a key art of leadership and is key to winning elections.

Observing the American elections from the UK it is like watching a Greek epic drama unfold, with archetypal characters playing key and familiar roles. These characters are not necessarily wonderful personalities but the masks they inhabit represent what Alasdair MacIntyre calls 'social characters'. These stimulate various primitive reactions from within us, the clean cut, business-like Mormon versus the preacher Evangelist, the Vietnam war hero versus the 9/11 political hero, male versus female, white versus black, old versus young, its intriguing and very engaging. Different responses to these leaders will depend on who we are, our diverse life journeys and our social and cultural backgrounds.

Taking a closer look at the Clinton versus Obama 'battle of the titans' reveals some interesting and classical leadership traits, which are explored, in my new book 'Leadership A Critical Text' (Sage 2008). In this book I outline four key leadership assumptions (discourses) that have emerged in the past century. These assumptions dominate our subconscious expectations, hopes and fears about our leaders. Each leadership discourse came about through social, cultural and economic change, they are:

- The Controller Leader
- The Therapist Leader
- The Messiah Leader
- The Eco-Leader

Briefly describing each of these 'discourses' that frame how we think about leadership, I will then turn to Obama and Clinton to see how they fare against them.

*The Controller Leader* emerged at the beginning of the century and was aligned to the ideas that science and rationality would create a better and modern world. In the workplace the ideas of Frederick Taylor and the 'efficiency craze' helped to create mass production, with the emphasis on leaders maintaining tight control over the workforce to ensuring efficiency. Reductionist ideology and the 'machine metaphor' dominated organisations leading to the division of labour, Fordist production lines, and time management all to enhance productivity. The Controller discourse is still very much with us. The instincts of the political leader are always to tighten controls, to control borders and immigration, to control imports, control finances etc. For those being led by the Controller, the hopes stimulated are security, stability, a sense of being contained by someone in control, and the fears are a loss of autonomy, diminished creativity and of authoritarianism.

*The Therapist Leader* emerged as a reaction to the lack of humanity displayed by the Controller discourse, and there was a realisation that in the workplace employees were becoming alienated and they expected more in a post-war, baby boom society where mass production had increased wealth and the availability of consumer goods. The human relations movement grew in strength in the 1950s and brought with it motivational theories in the workplace "the happier the worker the more productive the worker" was the underlying business school theory. Personal growth became popular and political leaders now embraced this 'therapeutic culture' claiming to empower individuals and groups, to become more motivated and self fulfilled. In the workplace you now came to 'work to work on yourself' as Nicolas Rose puts it. Today's political leaders identify with this discourse when they work to portray themselves as caring deeply about the individual, offering policies about individual choice and when they show their caring side and people skills when campaigning. The hopes stimulated by these leaders are that our individual specialness will be recognised and given an opportunity to blossom. The fears are that the 'Therapist Leader' might be caring but is 'too maternal' but not robust enough and not global enough in their vision.

*The Messiah Leader* discourse emerged in the 1980s when the American economy went into demise in the late 1970s and the Asian tiger rose. To counter this challenge a new 'phallic' leadership was sought to save the day, as the 'Therapist leader' was no longer delivering, politically or economically. The Christian right came to the fore with gusto with their prophetic leadership, tele-evangelism, the rise of the mega-church and they captured the political agenda. Echoing the prophetic Christian leaders success, in the business world the transformational leader took the main stage. Leadership books and business schools advocated that leaders should have compelling visions, and 'engineer' strong organisational cultures, with cult-like dynamism. Employees worked long and hard and willingly (and unquestioningly) for a vision they believed in, no longer needing to be coerced, but because you were part of the dream! This was also a response to globalisation, recognising that hierarchically control from the centre was, too slow and too top-down. The Messiah leadership approach is often very successful in the early days, creating dynamic teams and organisations all pulling together for the greater good of all. However because of the need to align and conform, to believe in one vision, creativity suffers, difference is eliminated and conformist mindsets start to emerge. The hopes these Messiah leaders stimulate are very powerful salvation fantasies, and at some level we all want to be saved. The fears they stimulate are of messianic despotism that leads blinded followers to catastrophe.

*The Eco-Leader* has emerged strongly since 2000 as a reaction to the Messiah leadership that was seen as both dangerous and unsuccessful. The neo-con agenda to save the

world with a vision of exporting the free market and democracy and Enron became symbolic of leaders who peddled false hope as a cover for greed and revealing the transformational leader as a potentially very dangerous character.

A more ethical leadership was sought after and companies were forced by activists and by the recognition that natural resources are finite, to confront their insular behaviour. Their futures are being linked not just to short-term profit but also to wider environmental and social eco-systems. Leaders who faced these issues early were ahead of the game. It is also about recognising the eco-system of the organisation, working to create a distributive leadership so that decisions can be made locally and quickly enabling a company to be more adaptive. This leadership is also about recognising how we are interconnected and must work more collaboratively. The Eco leader stimulates hopes of humanities connectivity with each other and nature. The subconscious fears it stimulates are that humans are vulnerable to natural disasters, challenging our deeply held fantasies and desires about our human omnipotence.

### **How do Hillary and Barack Compare in Their Leadership Approaches?**

Hillary Rodham Clinton fell very much into the trap of being portrayed as a Controller leader. Her lack of ability to display warmth (until the tears) to be the Therapist leader showed, and she also lacked the charisma to be a Messiah leader. This left her few options, except to fall back on her experience to deliver and this to many people sounded like a humanless drive towards results-focused achievements, some commentators describing her as machine-like or robotic.

#### **Tip For Hillary Clinton**

Hillary's best chance is to focus on the Eco-leadership discourse This means playing on her skills to deliver results but through partnership, collaborating with others and getting the best from all people by distributing leadership. The fears are that she will centralise power, through an old dynasty and political elite. The Eco-leader thinks about connections rather than control and has an ethical focus. They take account of the big picture, the environment, social issues and making explicit connections between climate change, social change and the economy. This message could fit with Hillary's natural talents and with her political message. Hillary also has to keep working on becoming more of a Therapist Leader without this being inauthentic. People intuitively want to identify with, and to like their leaders...Bill needs to share his magic!

#### **Barack Obama**

Barack Obama is clearly the Messiah Leader, learning this leadership style from his charismatic church pastor and from looking over his shoulder to Dr Martin Luther King. Increasingly playing this card, his speeches became more upbeat and prophetic in nature after his initial success.

However Dr King had an agenda, a very clear agenda of civil rights. So when he spoke of hope, he linked it to the civil rights struggle. Obama on the other hand talks of change and hope but has yet to clearly articulate what the hope is for, change is good but change to what?

There are three key dangers with the Messiah Leadership:

- 1) Followers become disciples rather than active participants. Obama's rhetoric here is paradoxical; saying he is 'riding the wave' and that change comes from ordinary

- Americans whilst setting himself as an extra-ordinary American (a Messiah). This is a classical Messianic leadership stance.
- 2) Messiah leadership is dynamic and persuasive at the beginning but very difficult to sustain (as Obama is finding out).
  - 3) Messiahs are prone to be crucified, either in reality or metaphorically by the press and public who love to idealise and then to denigrate Messiah leaders.

### ***Tip for Barack Obama***

Being anti-establishment is the easy part! But if Barack Obama continues to identify himself with Messiah leadership then he'd better start linking his rhetoric to a clear cause. Barack also has the qualities of a Therapist leader and in some situations seems very comfortable in close proximities to people but in others can seem a little stiff. He also needs to adopt a bit of Controller 'I am in control' 'I have boundaries' 'I am grounded and robust' 'I have policies I can defend' should now begin to be heard alongside the beauty of 'riding the wave'.

Also he needs to use his Eco-leadership; so far he shows the potential for building a rainbow coalition across racial, class and political divides. The problem here is that to be all things to all people makes you a leadership relativist. Avoiding standing on solid political ground for fear of marginalising parts of his rainbow constituency becomes a weakness. Finding coherent policies to go with his message of unity and hope will help ground the Messiah tendencies he has.

### ***So Will America Vote for a Messiah Leader?***

The yearning for a new start, for salvation from economic and world strife is so strong it makes this leadership discourse, so, so tempting! But in spite of Obama being more liberal than Bush and a Democrat, he sings from the same leadership discourse 'a vote for me will save ya all!'

My hunch is that following the Bush administration with its neo-con messianic agenda, that America will hesitate before voting for a new messiah. Perhaps Obama will ground himself, and become less messianic; if he does I think he has a real chance, if he doesn't and Hillary shifts her leadership stance from Controller to Therapist/Eco-leader then Hillary will win through.... Now as for the Republicans.... that's another story!

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