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Great Leaders Fight for the Right Cause at the Wrong Time*

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Men acquire a particular quality by constantly acting in a particular way. — Aristotle

Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful. — Samuel Johnson

What is left when honor is lost? — Publilius Syrus

No one can be happy who has been thrust outside the pale of truth. And there are two ways that one can be removed from this realm: by lying, or by being lied to. — Seneca

Don't measure your neighbor's honesty by your own. — American Proverb

If we believe a thing to be bad, and if we have a right to prevent it, it is our duty to try to prevent it and damn the consequences. — Lord Milner

Let no pleasure tempt thee, no profit allure thee, no persuasion move thee, to do anything which thou knowest to be evil; so shalt thou always live jollity; for a good conscience is a continual Christmas. — Benjamin Franklin

*This essay is scheduled to be published in the author's new book, *Reflections, Stories of Power, Love, Inspiration and Remembrance*, in the summer of 2014.

If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything. — Mark Twain

In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers . . . we are ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations. — Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Keep true, never be ashamed of doing right, and decide on what you think is right and stick to it. — George Eliot

As a leader, you have to not only do the right thing, but be perceived to be doing the right thing. A consequence of seeking a leadership position is being put under intense public scrutiny, being held to high standards, and enhancing a reputation that is constantly under threat.

— Jeffrey Sonnenfeld and Andrew Ward, *Firing Back*

Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.

— Peter F. Drucker, *Essential Drucker: Management, the Individual and Society*

The Measure of Leadership

Profiles in Leadership from Caesar to Modern Times provides the following definition of a great leader:

*Great leaders make significant, positive, and permanent differences in the lives of people and institutions, and stand as symbols of justice, fairness, strength, honesty, integrity and courage.*¹

One measure of great leadership is when Individuals struggle for what they know is the right cause but, in historical, social, and political terms, is the “wrong time” for implementation. The “wrong time” means that society and the leadership of the moment are not ready, not willing, or not able to do the “right thing” and, in fact, the “right thing,” may, in popular terms, be considered the “wrong thing.” Great leaders exhibit courage to pursue their mission, even if no one will listen.

Examples can be traced back over the centuries:

- Napoleon tried to convince the people of Europe that the ideals of the French Revolution of liberty, brotherhood, and equality, would topple tyrannical monarchies and lead to a United States of Europe with one language, one legal and commercial system, one monetary unit, and one government. He wanted to create a European Union.

Since the fall of the Roman Empire, there were movements to establish a new society of European states. Charlemagne in 800 AD had himself crowned by the Pope as Holy Roman Emperor. On his imperial seal, the words, “the Renewal of the Roman Empire,” were emblazoned.²

Napoleon fashioned the Legion of Honor to hark back to Charlemagne’s Roman Legio Honoratorum and invoked Charlemagne in his coronation in 1804. The Napoleonic Code was the first modern pan-European effort to unite the legal systems of Europe.³

We can argue that Napoleon developed his plan to reconceive the Roman Empire in the wrong way via wars of conquest that cost millions of lives. Yet, in some of the nations he controlled, there were those who believed in his ideals. Nearly three centuries after he espoused his cause, the EU he dreamed of materialized.

I wished to found a European system, a European Code of Laws, a European judiciary: there would be but one people in Europe. — Napoleon Bonaparte

- Lincoln fought to save the Union and end slavery when many doubted the wisdom of his vision. He had to contend with dissent from the beginning of his administration. Riots against forced conscription in New York and other parts of the country exemplified the unpopularity of the war. Lincoln was under constant pressure to end the conflict at nearly any cost.

His key opponents were known as “Copperheads” — termed by Republicans who compared them to poisonous snakes. Instead, these politicians saw themselves as “Peace Democrats.” They were mainly conservatives who looked to Jefferson and Jackson as their Presidential role models because they viewed them as strict constructionists of the Constitution. The Copperheads had significant influence on the political and military war effort and were instrumental in nearly taking control of the Democratic Party in 1864.⁴

What would the United States look like today if Lincoln agreed with the Copperheads? Imagine if he compromised with the South, as many demanded, and allowed slavery to continue and America to be permanently divided into two countries?

Let us have faith that right makes might; and in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it. — Abraham Lincoln

- Franklin Roosevelt was considered a “traitor” to his aristocratic class when he proposed legislation that would make the government more involved in the economy to heal the wounds of the Great Depression and put people back to work. He demonstrated the same conviction of fighting for the right cause at the wrong time when he created the Lend-Lease policy to support England in its struggle against Nazi Germany. Americans wanted no involvement in the European war, but FDR knew what was ahead and was willing to forsake political popularity to aid the British as the last bastion of democracy left in Europe.⁵

Confidence... thrives on honesty, on honor, on the sacredness of obligations, on faithful protection and on unselfish performance. Without them it cannot live.

— FDR, First Inaugural Address (4 March 1933)

These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.

— FDR, First Inaugural Address (4 March 1933)

Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be tough.

— FDR, Speech in 1935

- Martin Luther King, Jr. was told by fellow men of the cloth, while he was in a Birmingham, Alabama jail, that he and his people had to wait for reform. It was the wrong time, they said, for him to fight for a cause which even they recognized as right.⁶

Imagine if King had listened? He wrote:

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.”...We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We

*must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”*⁷

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Eleanor Roosevelt argued for the rights of women to vote and to obtain equal pay for equal work. She struggled to help women participate in the political process. Eleanor fought for the full equality of African Americans, and battled to make lynching a federal crime. She promoted the rights of workers in the early part of the last century when these causes were ignored. She was accused of being an idealist, yet imagine what the world would look like if Eleanor Roosevelt never fought for those concerns when no one listened or cared?⁸

Do what you feel in your heart to be right – for you’ll be criticized anyway.

— Eleanor Roosevelt

- President Obama fought for gun control legislation knowing full well that he did not have enough political support to achieve it. Even so, he knew it was the right thing to do.

In the face of impossible odds, people who love this country can change it.

— Barack Obama

- Many other leaders can be cited as having fought for social justice when few would listen. Peter Drier, in his 2012 book *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* mentioned many who had the courage to challenge those in privileged positions; the social norms of the day; and fought for social justice when few cared. He included people like: Martin Luther King, Jr.; Rachel Carson, the woman who inspired the environmental movement with her book *Silent Spring*; Supreme Court Justices Louis Brandeis, William O. Douglas, William Brennan, and Earl Warren; union organizers Walter Reuther and Cesar Chavez; and three Roosevelts — Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor.⁹

The Essence of Leadership

The essence of leadership refers directly and unequivocally to courage as well as to those who fight for the *right* cause at the *wrong* time. For this represents the seminal moment when greatness is exhibited for that point in history and for ages to come.

Conclusion

Each day we should keep these thoughts in mind:

- Prepare yourself to speak up about doing the right thing, even if it is not popular and may result in ostracization.
- Listen carefully to suggestions and criticisms and be ready to counter them with the facts and, most of all, with the truth.
- When you are wrong, be willing to admit the error, be fully accountable, accept the resulting consequences and ultimately demonstrate a change of course and attitude.
- There will be times when doing the right thing will cost you personally — your freedom, material goods, career, reputation, and, in some cases, even your life. Be prepared to accept the price instead of compromising your honesty, purpose, and humanity.

Endnotes

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About the Author

Professor Iodice spent over three decades as a senior executive in the public and private sectors, as an educator and now as a university administrator. He joined Loyola University in 2007 as Director of the John Felice Rome Center. In 2008, he was promoted to Vice President of the University. During those thirty years of experience, he was also a key official in Washington working under several Administrations. He was named by the President to the Senior Executive Service when he was thirty-three and considered the youngest public servant to reach the highest levels of federal service.



In the US diplomatic corps, he was among the most decorated officers in history and was awarded the Gold Medal for heroism, a Gold Medal for exemplary service, and the Silver Medal and nominated for two Bronze Medals. His honors include being knighted by the former king of Italy and receiving Medals of Honor from Spain and Italy.

Iodice speaks several languages and has traveled across the globe. His passions in life are the Rome Center, its staff, faculty and students, Loyola University, good music, writing, reading, his family and, in particular, his grandchildren. He is considered an accomplished public speaker

and author. His recent books include: *Profiles in Leadership from Caesar to Modern Times*; *A Kid from Philadelphia*, *Mario Lanza*, *the Voice of the Poets* and *Sisters*. Soon to be published is *Reflections, Stories of Power, Love, Inspiration and Remembrance* and *Future Shock 2.0*.

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