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Guest Editorial: Silence is Not Golden

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Silence is Not Golden

– *by Ritch Eich, member of the JVBL International Editorial Board*

The condemnation of President Trump has ramped up significantly, especially with the recent release of *Fear* – Bob Woodward’s bombshell book about the White House, the anonymous opinion article written by a Trump Administration official published September 5, 2018 in *The New York Times*, and the support of 175 former U.S. officials spanning national security service across multiple intelligence agencies (including the U.S. State Department, National Security Council, and Department of Defense) who all added their names in August 2018 to a list of intelligence officials denouncing Trump’s decision to revoke former CIA Director John Brennan’s security clearance.

At a time when a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, administration insiders, and national security officials are leveling the heaviest criticism of the Trump presidency, where are the voices of our nation’s major leaders in business, higher education, the faith community, the non-profit world, law enforcement, and other industries outside of politics or the media? Where is the moral leadership, in words and action, from leaders in these sectors?

Far too few prominent leaders have spoken out about:

- The shameful acts of the president.
- The vicious name-calling.
- Rollback of climate change initiatives and repudiation of science.
- The immoral family separations that left immigrant babies and toddlers locked up alone in the United States.
- The escalating gun violence.
- The corruption by his former campaign leaders, personal attorney, and former EPA chief.
- His incompetence and shameful performance with foreign leaders.
- What many journalists have called his repeated lies.
- His disrespect of our nation’s cherished values and institutions.
- His disdain for the First Amendment.
- His extramarital affairs with a porn star and a Playboy playmate and the payoffs for their silence.

The list goes on and on.

As *The New York Times* put it in 1990, “A generation ago college and university presidents cut striking figures on the public stage.”

Contrast this to today when university presidents use op-eds but seldom assume the larger “bully pulpit” and stand up for what’s right. The same goes for leaders of major *Fortune 500*

companies, heads of large foundations and think tanks, and leaders of the major religious denominations.

In my 2013 book, *Leadership Requires Extra Innings*, I describe how some past university presidents and faith leaders spoke out about public issues of their day. Robben Fleming, former president of the University of Michigan, was a courageous spokesperson for racial justice, equality for women, and a vocal critic of the Vietnam War.

The Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, who led the University of Notre Dame as president for 35 years, advocated for civil rights, science and immigration reform at a time when it was not in fashion.

Today, the higher moral ground once taken by university presidents has been weakened by pressure from conservative governing boards and insular faculty. Many university and business leaders fear offending their boards, shareholders, alumni, or donors.

One exception is Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University, a small, Catholic women's college. She publicly criticized presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway, a Trinity alumna, for manipulating facts. She told *The Washington Post*, "People can agree or disagree around national policy or domestic policy ... but when you lie so consistently as this administration does, that's a moral issue. We are teachers. We have an honor system here. We believe deeply in upholding the value of truth."

Speaking out from the military was retired Navy Adm. William H. McRaven, who oversaw the Navy SEALs mission in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden. He publicly asked the president to revoke his security clearance too, so his name could be added, "to the list of men and women who have spoken up against your presidency."

Another person showing a profile in courage is Kenneth C. Frazier, chairman and CEO of *Merck & Co.* who publicly disagreed with the president's response to the Charlottesville, Virginia, violence and, after conferring with his company's board, resigned from the president's manufacturing council that later disbanded.

Perhaps there is no one reason as each must wrestle with his or her own conscience and live with the consequences. Could it be they:

- Fear alienating their major constituencies?
- Fear reprisals from a vengeful president who has proven he will punish opponents and critics in an effort to silence them?
- Fear losing their jobs if they get involved in a controversy?
- Fear losing donations, funding, and profits?
- Serve on boards or committees with the president's supporters?
- Give the president's appalling personal behavior a pass because his economic policies are good for business?

Our nation's leaders must break their silence. They must stand up for civility, justice, integrity, and honesty. They must condemn the president's constant barrage of personal insults, embarrassing statements, and staggering narcissism that damage our country at home and abroad.

This need for moral and effective leadership is also emphasized in the recent article *"We Saved 155 Lives on the Hudson. Now Let's Vote for Leaders Who'll Protect Us All"*

written for *The Washington Post* by retired American Airlines captain, Chesley B. “Sully” Sullenberger. Revered as the principal hero for his flawless and now legendary landing in the Hudson River shortly after take-off without incurring a single fatality, Sullenberger opines that the *Miracle on the Hudson* was actually no miracle at all but required the competencies and collective action of all aboard. He states that this incident portrays a microcosm of what we should be doing in the United States to successfully and morally confront and correct the national crisis: “To navigate complex challenges, all leaders must take responsibility and have a moral compass grounded in competence, integrity and concern for the greater good.” Furthermore, he opines that to appropriately navigate humanity’s complex challenges, “all leaders must take responsibility and have a moral compass grounded in competence, integrity and concern for the greater good.”

Yet another public figure, also known for being reserved and well-respected, has stepped forward, imparting his own words concerning civility and the need to uphold democratically-established institutions. On November 21, 2018, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts addressed Donald Trump’s rebuke of the California-based Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and in particular, a judge from the Northern District who temporarily enjoined the administration’s recent attempt to halt asylum-seekers at the southern border. Said Roberts:

We do not have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges. What we have is an extraordinary group of dedicated judges doing their level best to do equal right to those appearing before them. That independent judiciary is something we should all be thankful for.

Many Americans lament the loss of civility in our society. We lament the absence of public officials like the late John McCain and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, policy-makers who contributed significantly to shaping public policy while serving in the U.S. Senate (Moynihan also held appointments for Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford and like the other five men was a former naval officer himself – he spoke from the heart but what he said was based on facts).

And in light of the recent violence in the United States as evidenced by the slaughter of 11 Jewish parishioners in Pittsburgh, it is wise to remember that in a country marked by an atmosphere of hate and division, the words of the German Lutheran, Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) speaking of the rise of Fascism in Europe in the 1930s, ring true today:

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

I believe our business, religious, and education leaders can help bring it back – if they have the guts and leadership skills to do it.



About the Author

Ritch K. Eich, Ph.D. (Michigan) has spent most of his career as an executive in corporate and university medical center posts and has served on more than a dozen boards of directors and trustees. He chaired the board of trustees at Los Robles Hospital and Medical Center in Thousand Oaks, CA where he and his wife Joan reside.

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