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A Grand Notion for Power-Center Lawyers

By Porcher L. Taylor

LIKE LEADERS of so many administrations before them, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, both lawyers, surrounded themselves with an inner circle composed mainly of lawyers-turned-political advisers and policy bureaucrats.

Some would argue that lawyers and politics are a bad brew. But lawyers like lawyers. And it would seem that lawyers trust lawyers so much that some will steadfastly defend their political bosses, even if that means being key players in the potential cover-up of a crime. In their skewed minds, accusations of crimes by leaders of the opposing political party are merely biased power politics.

The result: bold and immediate invocation of executive privilege and other specious presidential perquisites in this context is par for the course. Yet such arrogance by those who so intimately know and control the law can breed public contempt.

Several Nixon inner-circle lawyers served prison terms and were disbarred or received painful and shameful professional discipline. Nixon pre-empted his own disbarment with a resignation before congressional impeachment hearings ran their course.

There's a sober lesson here for Clinton, his inner circle and all lawyers who have long held a veritable monopoly on influential positions in the White House, on Capitol Hill and in corporate America.

After the Watergate scandal in 1974, the American Bar Association worked with law schools to place "increased emphasis on professional ethics and conduct."

The Watergate taint, due to the bad acts of an unscrupulous president and his Praetorian Guard that happened to have law degrees, had to be immediately purged from the profession before it spread throughout like a cancer.

Now, following the special prosecutor's report on the Clinton sex scandal, there should be a call for law schools to create and teach a permanent course on leadership studies with a focus on moral responsibility. In the same "pervasive professionalism" vein, continuing legal education for lawyers should include a leadership studies component.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, prudent leadership can be taught and learned. Two influential books on leadership studies should be on every lawyer's and aspiring lawyer's personal bookshelf:

"Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times" and "Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness." These works constitute a case study in some of the core professional values that sometimes seem elusive in our profession: civility, ethics and selfless service to the public.

Both of these classics continue to be best sellers because of their practical application of selfless leadership principles and doctrines to today's complex world.

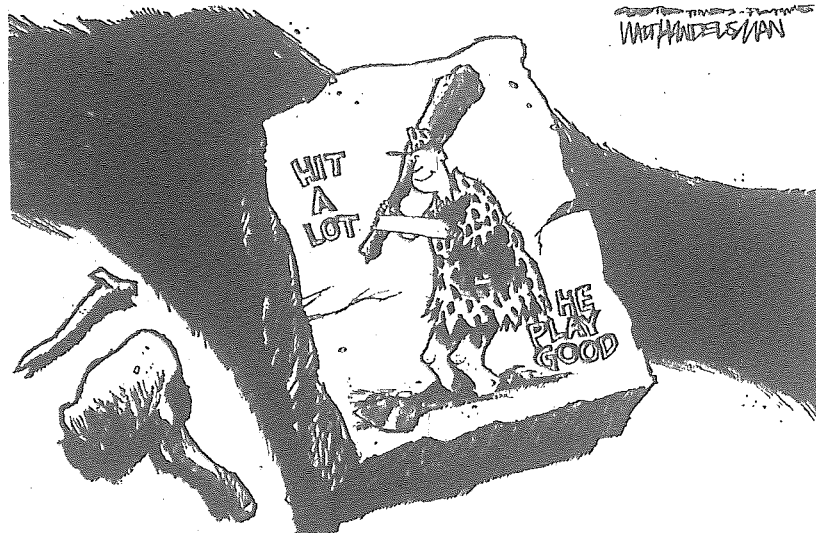
As for lawyers, state bars should grant up to four hours of continuing education credit for those lawyers who certify that they have read at least one of these books. Such an incentive for those in the legal profession to scrutinize leadership would demonstrate the bar's serious commitment to the academic and practical study of this discipline.

"Lincoln on Leadership" presents us with 15 "tangible examples" — case studies on Lincoln's "remarkable leadership genius" — both as a lawyer and statesman. This is leadership through metaphor, where an indelible imprint of an effective leadership model is etched into the mind of the student-reader through association with a history-changing figure. Certainly, Lincoln qualifies here.

Significantly, "Servant Leadership" posits that "only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant-led." Both the White House and Congress should take heed. As long as the public continues to misconstrue the call to exterminate all lawyers in Shakespeare's "Henry VI," lawyers are in danger of becoming professional dinosaurs.

Cynicism proliferates. Servant leadership with a moral responsibility component must become an integral part of legal education and practice.

CARTOON VIEW



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Handelman, New Orleans Times-Picayune

Porcher L. Taylor, a lawyer and senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, teaches law and leadership at the University of Richmond. Lawrence C. Levy's column will appear Thursday.