



Timeless Leadership

The great leadership lessons don't change.

A Conversation with **David McCullough**

“WE NEED LEADERS,” insists the American historian David McCullough, “and not just political leaders. We need leaders in every field, in every institution, in all kinds of situations. We need to be educating our young people to be leaders. And unfortunately, that’s fallen out of fashion.”

McCullough, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and well-known public television host, has been thinking for decades about the role played by American leaders. His books - including *The Great Bridge*, *The Path Between the Seas*, *Truman*, *John Adams*, and *1776* - offer vivid, painstakingly detailed pictures of the American past, reminding readers that although the United States was once a very different country, the struggles, visions, and ideals of

its founders and best leaders remain a constant source of inspiration. His work underscores his deep belief that even in the nation's darkest moments, solid, old-fashioned values - optimism, hard work, and strength of character - endure.

In this edited interview with HER senior editor Bronwyn Fryer, McCullough describes the fundamental qualities of what might be called timeless leadership, using both past and present American leaders as examples. These qualities are familiar as well as ageless - and taken together, they offer us a clear sense of the ethical stance that model leaders share.

You are passionate about the necessity for history education. Why do you think it's so important for a leader to have what you call a sense of history?

I like to remind people of something General George C. Marshall said. Asked once whether he had had a good education at the Virginia Military Institute, Marshall said no, "because we had no training in history." He knew that a sense of history is essential to anyone who wants to be a leader, because history is both about people and about cause and effect. The American historian Samuel Eliot Morison liked to say that history teaches us how to behave - that is, what to do and what not to do in a variety of situations. History is the human story. Jefferson made that point in the very first line of the Declaration of Independence: "When in the course of human events..." The accent should be on "human."

History also shows how the demands of leadership change from one era to another, from one culture to another. The leaders of the past experienced their present differently from the way we experience ours. And remember, they had no more idea how things were going to turn out than we do in our time. Nothing was ever on a track, nothing preordained. The more you study the year 1776 and the course of the American Revolutionary War, the

more you have to conclude that it's a miracle things turned out as they did. Had the wind in New York City been coming from a different direction on August 29, 1776, Americans would probably be sipping tea and singing "God Save the Queen."

Leadership, then, partly has to do with luck. And luck, chance, the hand of God - call it what you will - is a real force in human affairs; it's part of life. Washington might have been killed; he might have gotten sick; he might have been captured; he might have given up. Besides being fortunate, he knew how to take advantage of a lucky moment, because he was blessed with very good judgment. Luck provided the opportunity, but Washington's night escape across the East River - made possible by the direction of the wind - after an overwhelming defeat in the Battle of Brooklyn would never have succeeded had it not been for his leadership and the abilities of Colonel John Glover. Glover was a Massachusetts merchant and fisherman who, with his Marblehead Mariners, knew how to do the job.

So part of harnessing luck - or the lucky historical moment - is knowing talent when you see it?

Yes. Spotting talent is one of the essential elements of great leadership. Washington had it to a remarkable degree. Washington was not an intellectual. He wasn't a spellbinding speaker. He wasn't a military genius. He was a natural born leader and a man of absolute integrity. And he could spot ability when it wasn't necessarily obvious. Washington didn't much like New Englanders, but his two best men were bred-in-the-bone New Englanders. Henry Knox was a big, fat, young, and totally inexperienced Boston bookseller who had a brilliant, brave idea - to go to Ticonderoga, get the big guns there, haul them back to Boston, and thereby drive the British out of the city. And this in the dead of winter. There were all kinds of reasons why it wouldn't work, but Washington not only saw at once that it was a very

good idea, he saw that Knox was the man to do it.

He did the same with Nathanael Greene, a Quaker with a severe limp and absolutely no military experience. Washington looked at Greene and thought, This could be the best man I have. Lo and behold, Greene turned out to be an even better strategist and tactician than Washington. Having spotted their talent, Washington knew just what to do with these two exceptional men who didn't fit the standard mold. He gave them their chance, loosed the reins, let them do their jobs.

Harry Truman, too, knew how much more there can be to people than meets the eye. Consider his choice of Dean Acheson as secretary of state. Acheson looked like a tailor's dummy, even a fop, with his fancy mustache, his elegant suits - and there was his aristocratic way of talking. It would have been easy for someone of Truman's background to write Acheson off, but Truman could see how much more there was to him.

And Acheson, who might well have looked down on Truman, also saw beyond surface appearances. To Acheson it was Truman's "priceless gift of vitality, the life force itself" that was his strongest, most inspiring quality. Describing Truman, Acheson liked to quote from Shakespeare's *Henry V* the lines about the night before the Battle of Agincourt:

...every wretch, pining and pale before,

Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks...

His liberal eye doth give to every one...

A little touch of Harry in the night.

Good leaders also judge people by how they handle failure. I'm told that young people new to the business world today suffer because they're used to constant recognition. The truth is, not everybody gets a star on his or her forehead. Good leaders don't tolerate self-pity in themselves or others. The star performer who has never failed, never fallen flat on his face or been

humiliated publicly, may not have what it takes when the going gets rough.

You like to quote the military historian Douglas Southall Freeman, who once said that his work had led him to believe that leadership came down to three qualities: "Know your stuff, be a man, look after your men." What exactly does that mean?

Put in present-day terms, "knowing your stuff" means having expertise and experience and knowing what you're talking about. I believe there are three essential ingredients to education: the teacher, the book, and the midnight oil. So do the hard work necessary to know your subject. But knowing your stuff isn't just about accruing information, which has little to do with knowledge. You have to learn how to analyze problems, learn to do things by doing them. You don't learn to play the piano by reading a book about it; you learn to play the piano by playing the piano. You learn to write by writing. You learn to be a leader by leading people.

Regardless of gender, "being a man" means having the attributes of courage - backbone - resilience, and strength of character. Are you so filled up with your own ambitions and your sense of being terrific that you can't see the strengths in others? Are you someone who can be counted on when the chips are down?

When I started out on the Truman biography, I tried to interview as many people as I could who had known Truman before Roosevelt died. I asked them all the same question: "How did you feel when you heard that Harry Truman was president?" Without exception they said the same thing in so many words: "I felt good, because I knew the man." Truman was no great charmer, but he was admirable and effective in many ways. He understood human nature. He had great common sense, and one of the lessons of history surely is that common sense isn't common. He wasn't afraid to have people around him who were more accomplished than

he, and that's one reason why he had the best cabinet of any president since George Washington. This so-called little man from Missouri surrounded himself with people who were better educated, taller, handsomer, more cultivated, and accustomed to high-powered company, but that didn't bother him. He knew

who he was. He was grounded, as the Quakers would say.

"Look after your men" means take care of your employees. Take a genuine interest in them. Be empathetic. Treat them well. I'm appalled when I'm taken to see a factory and it's clear that the people running it have seldom if ever

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walked among the men and women who work there.

By contrast, consider Washington Roebling, the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge, who led the biggest, most ambitious engineering project in our history until then. He was only in his early thirties, and not by appearance or manner an obvious leader. He was not the charismatic figure his famous father, John A. Roebling, had been - not at all. But he never asked any of his people to do anything he wouldn't do himself. And much that he called on them to do was extremely dangerous. He led by example and by trying always to solve problems in the most expedient and effective manner. After he was stricken by the bends, Roebling was confined to his home on Brooklyn Heights, where he directed the whole project from an upstairs window with the help of his wife, Emily Warren Roebling. She had to learn a lot rapidly and turned out to be a superb assistant engineer in her own right.

But I would add another quality to Douglas Southall Freeman's list. That's the power of persuasion - what Franklin Roosevelt, for one, had in such grand abundance. Truman called it the ability to get people to do what they ought to know to do without being told.

How does one learn to become this Trumanesque kind of leader?

Start by listening. If I were teaching a course at Harvard Business School, I'd put a lot of emphasis on listening. Listening means asking good questions and taking in what people have to say. Listening also means hearing what people are not saying. What's bugging them? I worked for Edward R. Murrow at the U.S. Information Agency during the Kennedy administration. "Find out what's bugging people," he liked to say - the Arabs, the Koreans, whom ever. What was bothering them about life, about their country, about us? And if we listened attentively to what they said, what would we learn, and how would we act differently?

In teaching a course for future leaders I'd also warn against the insidious disease of greed. We read again and again of business leaders caught grossly feathering their own nests. It makes one wonder how they were raised. What were they taught at home and at school?

With a knowledge of history comes the understanding that one day you, too, will be judged by later generations. How will you measure up? How will you and your generation be judged by history?

There are a lot of moments in the lives of those I've written about when I would dearly love to have been a fly on the wall. One of them was when old John Adams sat down to talk with young Ralph Waldo Emerson. "I would to God there were more ambition in the country," Adams said. Then he paused and added, "Ambition of that laudable kind, to excel." That's what we need far more of - ambition to *excel*.

I would also tell a young MBA, "Conduct yourself in a way that lives up to your own high standards." That is, have a sense that your work matters, that your efforts contribute to something bigger than you and your salary. If eventually you do rise in the system, your good conduct will become a standard for others. If you find that your standards clash with those of the people running the company, then get out and start your own. From the beginning this country has been built on risk. That, too, is a lesson of history.

Can you think of some executives who exemplify the qualities of leadership you've described?

I think of three. The first would be my father. He ran an electrical supply business in Pittsburgh, the McCullough Electric Company. He worked hard and knew his stuff, and he was up against very stiff competition from big conglomerates. One thing he always said was "Don't knock the competition. It only reflects badly on you." At the dinner table some nights, the conversation would go like this: My mother would

ask, "Well, dear, did you get the order from U.S. Steel?" My father would say, "No, I didn't." She'd say, "That's too bad, dear." And he'd reply, "Well, the other fellow has to make a living, too." He never spoke of his competition as an enemy. And he took care of his people. His company was strong and successful. In fact, it's still in business, after more than a hundred years.

The other examples are leaders of nonprofit organizations. Rebecca Rimel, head of the Pew Charitable Trusts in Philadelphia, began her career as a nurse. She is a visionary who is able to generate a great sense of mission. Her enthusiasm is infectious, and she's willing to take risks. She personifies the old adages "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," "Any job worth doing is worth doing well," and "Handsome is as handsome does." Those are all the kinds of things your grandmother used to say, and they probably can't be said too often. Samuel Johnson once observed that we "more frequently require to be reminded than informed."

Dan Jordan, who runs the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello, is a terrific leader who has made Monticello a historic site like no other - superbly staffed, innovative, exciting. When DNA evidence suggested that Jefferson had had a relationship with his slave Sally Hemings and fathered children with her, Dan told his staff, quoting Jefferson, that they would "follow truth wherever it may lead." He said that the foundation would rely on scholarship, and not to worry about politics or Monticello's image. He put together a team of experts who performed a meticulous study and issued an objective report of their findings. And in doing this he was, of course, showing his own high professional ethic as a scholar.

Dan has a list of rules of leadership that I've written down. First, he has no organizational chart. He believes, as Thomas Jefferson did, that people are more important than paper. Second, he tells his staff to give him the bad news first - he insists on full disclosure

at all times. Third, he makes sure his door is always open and that anyone can talk to him about anything. Fourth, he tells his people they must always take responsibility for their actions. Fifth, he says that you can never have too many friends. Sixth, make other people's success your success. Seventh, hire only A-plus players. And finally, he believes that in the last analysis, character counts above all.

As an American historian, you have a long-term view of the United States. Given the problems facing the country, including its diminished reputation overseas, do you think that America is in very serious trouble?

I tend to be a short-term pessimist but a long-range optimist. Certainly we are in a time of great stress, danger, and concern, but there's never been a time when America didn't have problems. And this is by no means the darkest, most dangerous time we've been through. Anyone who says or thinks that has little sense of history. I remain optimistic about this country. I still believe the United States has the most productive workers in the world, and I think what we offer primarily is opportunity - opportunity of all kinds and as never before. And along with our freedoms of speech and religion, our insistence on a government of laws and not of men, we have that all-important freedom to think for ourselves. You can become an American regardless of where you're from, and you have a greater chance to make the most of your abilities here than anywhere else.

I sense a great desire among people everywhere I go to get the country back on track, to improve education, improve performance in all fields, and recover the old commitment to the common good. The world has a vested interest in how well we succeed in that, and make no mistake: It will take a lot of strong, enlightened leadership.

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