

# A Great Time To Lead

December 30, 2020

What do you think of this time in our history?

Recently I was with some friends who were lamenting the incredible burden the leader of another organization is under. One person casually remarked, "This is a really terrible time to be a leader." I thought about that for a moment and realized I didn't agree. "I think this is a great time to be a leader."

Yes, leading now is tough; it's always tough. That comes with the definition. But leading when it is difficult is also exhilarating.

Leading when it is tough is when you get to really inspire people. It is when you get to experience great victories and when you get to see dramatic results.

Dwight Eisenhower was the leader of the Allied forces during World War II, and then President of the United States. Between those two jobs he was President of Columbia University. Guess which job he liked the least?

I've always admired Ike. I respect that he could go from leading the toughest military endeavor of the twentieth century to leading the peacetime boom of the 1950's. I think it was uniquely difficult to lead during peace, and great peacetime leadership is under appreciated. Peacetime leadership presents a completely different set of challenges than war time leadership. Wars tend to unite people against a common enemy. People put smaller differences aside to fight a war and there is a sense of striving together toward a great victory. Eisenhower was able to lead during both war and peace.

Peace times, or as George Will called them, "the time between the wars," are uniquely difficult periods in which to lead. People turn their attention to small things and exacerbate them to become big things. They turn their attention to issues that would be mundane in war but are made significant in peace because human beings need big things to bring meaning into their lives.

Ike led as President during the post war Fifties and he was able to keep the nation at peace, navigate the tension between the military and domestic interests, and oversee great economic growth. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't as difficult as sending troops across the English Channel to attack Nazi held

France. That was truly difficult and required the greatest magnitude of leadership.

Ike's worst job? President of Columbia University. He didn't like the battles of a university and didn't want to be there. He thought faculty politics were trivial and hardly worth his time. He viewed academia as tedious and insignificant. It was anything but exhilarating, but it may have been a great transitional period from D-day to DC. It was his personal "time between the wars."

This is a great time to be a leader. The challenges facing us today are the kind that are shaping our civilization. From a global pandemic, to civil unrest, to the repositioning of global alliances, this is an incredible time to be a leader.

This was the first summer I couldn't go to France since 2001. We tried to make up for it by watching French films on our deck with other Francophile friends. One of my favorites is "Midnight In Paris" the Woody Allen, time travel film that suggest we always look back on earlier times as being a "golden age." We romanticize an earlier period of time and think it was better back then. Those times carry with them the sweet memories that have become aspirational in our minds. We think, "If only we could go back to then."

Baby boomers in particular look back on the Eisenhower years - the Fifties - as the golden age. We think life was better when we were growing up. Life was simpler. We ran around in our neighborhoods carefree and safe and families ate dinner together. We weren't slaves to our cell phones, and we could actually go on vacation without being constantly connected to the rest of the world.

But the Fifties were also full of challenges. Ike needed to rebuild a peacetime economy after a wartime economy. He had to navigate the Cold War and send Federal troops to enforce desegregation in the South. It required great leadership, and a great leader. Dwight Eisenhower fearlessly led in the middle of it. In a time of peace Ike confronted the truly significant issues and led boldly.

Ike knew who he was and was comfortable in his own skin. He had known the loneliness of failure in the African campaign, and the burden of dealing with huge personalities as Allied Commander. He somehow managed to lead Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Charles DE Gaulle, George Patton and Bernard Montgomery? Nearly impossible; And exhilarating. Only a great leader could have done it. Ike could call men to a seemingly impossible

mission like the D-Day landings because he could embody the vision, mission and direction of his calling.

Like Ike, all leaders are responsible for a great vision, great direction and a great mission. We lead for something beyond ourselves that is more than we are and more than we can ever be. We are looking for something to give ourselves to that is more than just the next level of comfort.

Times change, and the challenges that faced General Eisenhower, or President Eisenhower are not the same challenges that face today's leaders, but the need for great leadership remains the same. You lead and you may get it wrong and be unpopular or you may be a hero, but at least you will have led.

The world is looking for great leaders who will inspire us to join an impossible mission like sending troops across the English Channel or the National Guard to Selma; to take a beach or take a stand for justice.

It is a great time to be a leader. It is a great time to stand for big things. Important things. A great time to take the heat, inspire courage, and carry the weight of big decisions.

This will be the golden age to another generation because of great leaders.

Know Who You Are And Be It!

Questions For Thought

What are the big decisions that require you to lean into them?

What are the costs and benefits of acting boldly?

What are the cost and benefits of not acting boldly?