

Picking a President

The nature of leadership has changed profoundly in this global era. Business knows it. The military knows it. America needs its next president to know it too.

Americans will go to the polls this fall to replace a President who made his mark on history as an alpha male leader, exuding confidence and demanding unquestioning loyalty. Despite having never seen combat, George W. Bush won his 2004 reelection by depicting himself as an unflinching, nationalistic warrior, in contrast to the “flip-flopping,” cosmopolitan John Kerry (who just happened to be a decorated veteran). But while Bush is not in the running this year, the search for an appropriate warrior-leader is very much a subtext of the race.

That is because, when it comes to politics, Americans still tend to talk about power and leadership as though they were synonymous with hard power and command. We rarely speak of the soft power of attraction, of persuasion. Soft power is an analytical term, not a rallying cry, and perhaps that is why it has taken hold in academic and business discussions, and in other parts of the world like

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Europe, China, and India, but not in the American political debate. Especially in the current political climate, it makes a poor political slogan—post-9/11 emotions have left little room for anything described as “soft.” We may need soft power as a nation, but it is a difficult political sell for politicians. Bill Clinton captured the mindset of the American people when he said that in a climate of fear, the electorate would choose “strong and wrong” over “weak and right.”

Consequently, an old fashioned warrior-leader ethos continues to dominate the American imagination. We want a leader who is ready to take up the mantle of war, a decisionmaker who can win the battle, at least by proxy. And it’s not limited to the United States, or to presidents: As journalist Robert Kaplan points out, the world is experiencing the birth of a new “warrior class as cruel as ever, and better armed,” ranging from Russian mafiosi to Latin American drug kingpins to terrorists who glory in the thrill of violence just as ancient Greeks did in the sacking of Troy. Kaplan argues that modern leaders must respond in kind, that modern leadership will demand a “pagan ethos” rooted in the past.

At the same time, the very nature of leadership has changed in today’s interdependent, globalized world. In information-based societies, networks are replacing hierarchies and knowledge workers are less deferential. Business is changing in the direction of “shared leadership” and “distributed leadership,” with leaders in the center of a circle rather than atop a hierarchy. According to Samuel Palmisano, CEO of IBM, under today’s conditions “hierarchical, command-and-control approaches simply do not work anymore. They impede information flows inside companies, hampering the fluid and collaborative nature of work today.” Likewise, the Pentagon says that American army drill sergeants do “less shouting at everyone,” because today’s generation responds better to instructors who play “a more counseling role.” And as we have discovered in Iraq, hearts and minds matter. Smart warriors need the soft power of attraction as well as the hard power of coercion. It is not a manly modern Achilles or the strongest alpha male who makes the best warrior-leader in today’s communication age. Modern military leadership also requires political and managerial skills. The best generals use words more than swords.

But our politicians lag behind these changes. George W. Bush has described his role as “the decider,” and he uses his macho swagger to great effect. But there is much more to modern political leadership than that. Modern leaders need an ability to use networks, to collaborate, and to encourage participation. They need to be able to make decisions within rapidly changing contexts. They need to attract followers into new identities—both individual and social—and provide meaning in a disruptive world of globalization. In short, they need to use the soft power of attraction as well as the hard power of force and threat,

both at home and in foreign policy. But as long as we cling to outdated images of power and leadership, we will be limited in our ability to formulate strategies that utilize both. As Americans debate the qualities of our next leader this autumn, we need to think about power and leadership in these new ways. The next Administration will face security challenges equal to or greater than those of the last eight years. The world remains a dangerous place, but to face the challenges successfully, we need a different kind of leader.

Beyond the Big Man

Our conventional image of a leader is a man who relies on command and control, issues orders, and favors force. Fundamental to our current veneration of the alpha-male warrior leader is the belief that leaders are born rather than made. This belief focuses our attention on the selection, rather than the training, of leaders. The search for the essential traits of a leader dominated the field of leadership studies until the late 1940s, and it remains popular in common discourse today. How often have you heard someone say that a political candidate looks (or does not look) like a leader? A tall, handsome person enters a room, draws attention, and “looks like a leader.” In fact, various studies have shown that tall men are often favored as leaders, and corporate CEOs are taller than average. Tall men tend to earn more than shorter men; other things being equal, an inch of height is worth \$789 a year in salary. (This despite the fact that some of the most powerful leaders in history, including Napoleon, Stalin, and Deng Xiaoping, were little over five feet tall.)

It's worth wondering to what extent the traditional leadership image was ever realistic. After all, physical traits such as physique, intellectual traits such as IQ, and personality traits such as extroversion have been extensively examined by researchers, but with poor explanatory results. Context, on the other hand, is often more important. The athletic child who is the natural leader on the playground may lose that dominant position when the group returns to a well-structured classroom. Winston Churchill was widely regarded as a failed leader in January 1940. By June 1940, he was seen as a hero. His traits did not change in those six months; the context did.

That said, the “Big Man” type of leadership works in societies based on tribal cultures which rely on personal and family honor as well as loyalty, such as many African and Middle Eastern societies today. But such social structures are not well adapted for coping with today's complex, information-based world; societies that rely on heroic leaders are slow to develop the necessary civil society and broad social capital. In modern democracies, institutional constraints such as constitutions and impartial legal systems circumscribe such heroic figures. And this is

even more so in today's hyper-complex world. Harvard Business School Professor John Quelch writes that "business success increasingly depends on the subtleties of soft power." Management gurus refer to "authentic" leadership that is more collaborative and integrative, and business studies report an increase in the use of more participative processes over the past 25 years. Modern leadership turns out to be less about who you are or how you were born than about what you have learned and what you do as part of a group. Nature and nurture intertwine, but nurture is much more important in the modern world. Modern society requires us to go beyond the big man—or woman—approach to leadership.

The alpha-male image has also defined the way women adapt to leadership positions. In the past, when women fought their way to the top of organizations, they often had to adopt a "masculine style," violating the broader social norm

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of female "niceness" (think of "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher). But in the new view, with the information revolution and democratization demanding more participatory leadership, the "feminine style" is becoming a path to more effective leadership. Women tend to be better at the sort of skills needed in a community structured as a network or circle rather than a hierarchy: intuition, empathy, and, of course, the soft power of attraction. It would seem to follow, then, that we are on the verge of entering a "woman's world."

Or are we? If the new conventional wisdom in leadership studies is that we are entering a woman's world, why aren't women doing better? Gender bias, lack of experience, primary care-giver responsibilities, bargaining style, and plain old discrimination help to explain this gender gap. Indeed, reality has yet to catch up with expectations. Women lag in leadership positions, holding only 5 percent of top corporate positions and a minority of positions in elected legislatures (ranging from 45 percent in Sweden to 16 percent in the United States). But there is another, equally compelling answer. The opposite of the alpha male is not the Sensitive Woman. Even if communications-based societies are more open to "feminine" styles of leadership, it is a mistake to identify the new type of leadership we need in an information age as "a woman's world."

The issue is not which type of leader we need, but the very notion of leadership. We need to see leaders less in heroic terms of command than in terms of encouraging participation throughout an organization, group, nation, or network. Questions of appropriate style—when to use hard and soft power

skills—are equally relevant for men and women, and should not be clouded by traditional gender stereotypes. In some circumstances, men will need to act more “like women” and women more “like men.” The key choices will depend not on gender “styles,” but how individuals combine hard and soft power skills to produce smart strategies.

Leadership and American Identity

Globalization is altering the context of America’s role in the world, and this new context calls for a new type of leader. Warrior leaders gain support by appealing to the existing identity and solidarity of their groups. But the great leaders of tomorrow will need to educate their followers about the world beyond their group. Historical precedents abound: After World War II, following Germany’s third invasion of France in 70 years, France’s Jean Monnet decided that seeking revenge on a defeated Germany would just produce another tragedy. Instead, he invented a plan for the gradual development of the institutions that evolved into today’s Europe Union and helped make such a war unthinkable. Or take Nelson Mandela. He easily could have chosen to define his group as Black South Africans and sought revenge for the injustice of decades of apartheid and his own imprisonment. Instead, he worked tirelessly to expand the identity of his followers both by words and deeds. In one important symbolic gesture, he appeared at a rugby game wearing the jersey of the South African Springboks, a team that had previously signified white South African nationalism. He seized the moment at the end of apartheid to teach his followers about a broader identity. But most leaders today tilt in the other direction: Contrast Mandela’s actions with the narrow approach taken next door in Zimbabwe by the archetypal big man Robert Mugabe, who used colonial grievances to build support and now must rely on force to maintain his position in power.

National identities also become more permeable in a globalized world, upsetting the hierarchies that support warrior-leaders. National identities are imagined communities in the sense that few people have direct experience with the other members of their nation. For the past century or two, the nation-state has been the imagined community that most of the world’s people are willing to die for, and most leaders have seen their primary obligations to be national. But today people belong to a number of imagined communities—local, regional, national, cosmopolitan—that are more like overlapping circles sustained by the Internet and inexpensive travel than exclusive communities. Diasporas connect across national borders. Professional groups have transnational standards. Activist groups ranging from environmentalists to terrorists connect across borders. Sovereignty is no longer as absolute as it once seemed; the United

Nations, for example, has recognized a responsibility to protect endangered peoples. Tomorrow's leaders need to understand that their followers will often have such multiple identities and even multiple allegiances, and the best of them will try to overcome, rather than suppress, those qualities.

Of course, insularity is not an all or nothing moral dimension. In a world in which people are still organized primarily in national communities, a purely cosmopolitan ideal is unrealistic. For a leader to say there is an obligation to equalize incomes globally is not credible. But to say that more should be done to reduce poverty and disease can rally cosmopolitan followers. No national leader can turn his back on the needs of his own people, or ignore the priority of their claims. But an effective leader can help his or her people define their interests in broad terms that include duties beyond their country's borders. As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, "Thou shalt not kill is a test you take pass-fail. Honor thy father and thy mother admits of gradations." The same is true of cosmopolitan versus insular leadership.

The next American President is going to have to help Americans make meaning of a world of disruptive globalization. As the world watches the American presidential candidates wrestle with issues of protectionism, immigration, global public health, climate change, and international cooperation, we should ask what aspect of American identities they are appealing to and whether they are educating followers about broader meanings. Are they stretching our sense of identity or appealing to our narrowest interests? A good leader helps us define who we are, rather than just reinforcing what we used to be.

Leadership and Contextual Intelligence

If the new style of leader helps relate his people to the broader world, the central quality this new leader will need is "contextual intelligence"—the ability not only to make decisions, but to know which decisions to make at a given time and in a given situation. Psychologists generally agree that multiple forms of intelligence exist. What we today measure as IQ was originally developed a century ago in the context of the French school system, and thus it focuses on linguistic, mathematical, and spatial skills that tend to predict success in school, but not necessarily in life. Contextual intelligence, on the other hand, consists partly of cognitive analytic capabilities and partly of tacit knowledge built up from experience. Tacit knowledge tends to be implicit and inarticulate, or expressed in rules of thumb. In some situations, such "street smarts" are much more important than "school smarts."

Contextual intelligence is an intuitive diagnostic skill that helps a leader align tactics with objectives to create smart strategies in new situations. It implies

both a capability to discern trends in the face of complexity as well as adaptability while trying to shape events. Bismarck once referred to this skill as the ability to intuit God's movements in history, and seize the hem of his garment as he sweeps by. More prosaically, like surfers, leaders with contextual intelligence have the judgment to adjust to new waves and ride them to success.

In unstructured situations, it is often more difficult to ask the right questions than to get the right answer. Leaders with contextual intelligence are skilled at providing meaning or a road map by defining the problem that a group confronts. They understand the tension between the different values involved in an issue, and how to balance the desirable with what is feasible. According to leadership theorist Ronald Heifetz, the first thing a leader needs to diagnose is whether the situation calls for technical and routine solutions, or whether it requires adaptive change. In the former case, the leader

may want to clarify roles and norms, restore order, and quickly provide a solution. In the latter, the leader may want to let conflict emerge, challenge unproductive norms and roles, and let the group feel external pressures in a

range it can stand so that it learns to identify and master the adaptive challenge. This may require delaying a decision. Leaders are often tempted to decide quickly to reduce followers' anxieties, but those with contextual intelligence may be better able to use those anxieties as a learning experience. This is a very different image of the work of leadership than simply to be "the decider."

Indeed, deciding how to decide is as important as making the final decision. What should be the composition of the group the leader turns to, what is the context of the decision, how will information be communicated, and how much control does the leader maintain over the decision? Some situations call for autocratic decisions and some require the opposite. There is an infinite variety of contexts in which leaders have to operate, but it is particularly important for leaders to understand culture, distribution of power resources, followers' needs and demands, time urgency, and information flows. A leader who gets any of these factors wrong may be decisive, but also decisively wrong.

Bush described his leadership strategy as having three core components: outline a vision, build a strong team, and delegate much of the process to them. Unfortunately, his vision did not include contextual intelligence, a shortcoming that undermined each point in his leadership strategy. Bush's decision-making on Iraq has been criticized for the grandiosity of his vision, his failure to manage the divisions in his team, and his failure to monitor the delegation of decisions.

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In each case, his inability to see his vision, team, and delegated authority within the context of time and place proved fatal.

Contextual intelligence is not new, but failure to understand changing contexts has particularly plagued our leadership in recent years and will do so increasingly in the future. In the business sphere, we have seen how context matters. General Electric, for instance, prides itself on producing leaders, but half of GE high-flyers who went on to become CEOs of other Fortune 500 companies had disappointing records. Why do some leaders succeed in one context and fail in another? A common answer is “horses for courses.” Some run better on a dry track and some in mud. Many a good CEO turns out to be a disappointment when appointed as a cabinet secretary. A street gang leader lacks skills to be a successful college dean, and vice versa.

The best leaders, however, are able to transfer their skills across contexts. Dwight Eisenhower, for example, was successful both as a military leader and as a President. Many leaders have a fixed repertoire of skills, which limit and condition their responses to new situations. To use an information age metaphor, they need to develop broader bandwidth and tune carefully for different situations. That set of skills is contextual intelligence. Leaders need to learn it, and voters need to judge it.

Contextual Intelligence and Foreign Policy

This new leadership paradigm is needed in all aspects of American society, but nowhere more so than in foreign policy. Academics, pundits, and political leaders have often been mistaken about the global context of American power. With the end of the Cold War, the new conventional wisdom was that the world was a unipolar American hegemony, leading some neo-conservative pundits to the conclusion that the United States could decide what it thought was right, and others would have no choice but to follow. Charles Krauthammer, among many others, celebrated this view as “the new unilateralism,” and it heavily influenced the Bush Administration even before the shock of the attacks on September 11 produced a new “Bush Doctrine” of preventative war and coercive democratization.

But this new unilateralism was based on a profound misunderstanding of the contexts of power and the requirements of leadership in contemporary world politics. Power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants. Whether the possession of resources will produce such outcomes depends upon the context. In the past, military power dominated most issues. But in today’s world, the contexts of power and leadership differ greatly on military, economic, and transnational issues. Resources that produce favorable outcomes in one

context sometimes turn out to be counterproductive in another—witness recent efforts to export democracy via military power.

And make no mistake: Leadership matters in foreign policy. States follow their national interests, but different leaders help to define national interests in different ways. For a powerful country such as the United States, the structure of world politics allows degrees of freedom in such definitions. It may be true, as some argue, that the most powerful state is like the biggest kid on the block, who will always engender a degree of jealousy and resentment. But it also matters whether the big kid is seen as a bully or a friend. Both substance and style matter. In terms of substantive policies, if the most powerful actor is seen as producing global public goods, it is more likely to develop legitimacy and soft power. And often to create these outcomes and perceptions, the style of leadership matters greatly.

The next President must be a leader of deep contextual intelligence, with the flexibility to respond to different situations with the different tools in the foreign policy tool box, from military strikes to public diplomacy. Only this type of leader can develop the kind integrated grand strategy that combines

hard military power with soft attractive power in different contexts (what I call “smart power”) that is critical to our security in a globalized world. In the struggle against terrorism, for instance, we need a leader to use hard power against the hardcore terrorists, but we cannot hope to win unless that leader also wins the hearts and minds of the moderates. If the misuse of hard power (such as in Abu Ghraib or Guantánamo) creates more new terrorist recruits than we kill or deter, we will lose. Currently, many official instruments of soft power—public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchange programs, development assistance, disaster relief, military to military contacts—are scattered around the government and there is no overarching strategy or budget that even tries to integrate them with hard power into an overarching national security strategy. We spend about 500 times more on the military than we do on broadcasting and exchanges. Is this the right proportion? How would we know? A leader bearing contextual intelligence and a deep appreciation of the complexities of contemporary power is a vital part of locating the answer.

The bad news is that the next President will inherit a difficult international environment. The good news is that we have managed to employ hard, soft, and smart power in equally difficult contexts. In 1970, during the Vietnam War,

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America was viewed as unattractive in many parts of the world, but with changed policies and the passage of time, we managed to recover our soft power. If it has happened before, it can happen again with the right leaders. The next president will command what Teddy Roosevelt called a “bully pulpit.” He needs to be a decider, and willing at times to use force. But he also needs to be a teacher with contextual intelligence: someone who uses that pulpit not just to “jaw-jaw,” but also to teach and help his followers make meaning of the changing context of America’s role in the world. ■