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Editor's Notebook: So You Want to be a Leader?

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

So You Want to be a Leader

*He pays too high a price
For knowledge and for fame,
Who sells his sinews to be wise,
His teeth and bones to buy a name,
And crawls through life a paralytic
To earn the praise of bard and critic*

*Were it not better done,
To dine and sleep through forty years;
Be loved by few; be feared by none;
Laugh life away, have wine for tears;
And take the mortal leap undaunted,
Content that all we asked was granted?*

*But Fate will not permit
The seed of gods to die,
Nor suffer sense to win from wit
Its guerdon in the sky,
Nor let us hide, what'er our pleasure,
The world's light underneath a measure*

*Go then, sad youth, and shine,
Go, sacrifice to Fame;
Put youth, joy, health upon the shrine,
And life to fan the flame;
Being for seeming bravely barter,
And die to Fame a happy martyr.*

from "Fame"
Ralph Waldo Emerson

As a student of politics I have always had a fascination with leaders. Because politics is at its core an exercise in power, those men and women in government have an enormous opportu-

nity to make the decisions and distribute the resources that affect the lives of every citizen. Assuming a leadership position is thus not only a heady experience, it is an awesome responsibility.

These days we Americans seem fixated on our leaders, not so much as decision-makers and administrators, but rather as interesting people whose personal lives seem more important than their public lives. There appears to be little interest in how our government works and how we get the policies that influence our lives, but there is a seemingly endless interest in what our leaders do behind closed doors at night.

Because of this obsession with leaders as National Enquirer figures rather than decision-makers and administrators, we constantly pick apart the human frailties of our elected officials and long for that ideal leader who is a mix of superman (superwoman), Mother Teresa and God. Finding no such person, we complain that our politicians are crooks and sinners and two-faced liars who are not worthy to lead us. For too many of us there are no great men and women in politics, only ambitious, media-hungry phonies who con us into voting for them.

What is sad about this current exercise of downgrading leaders and leadership is that there are many men and women in public life who are serious about serving their country and enhancing the life of their fellow citizens. Despite the fact that politics is a rough game that requires a thick skin and a willingness to give up a private life, public life still attracts people whose sole interest is in improving their town or state or nation. Cynicism about the motivations of politicians is at an all time high, but most political leaders in this country are not in it for the money or the fame, but rather because of a burning desire to do some good.

It is not necessary that we love our political leaders, but it is important for the country that we have an appreciation of what it is that presidents and senators and

governors and mayors do. These leaders are hired by the people to say yes and no to hundreds if not thousands of public policy initiatives from leash laws for dogs and cats to sending a convicted murderer to death in the electric chair. By saying yes and no political leaders are not only making decisions that most people would not like to make themselves, they are also setting priorities about what we value and how we should look at the future.

Whether most of us would like to admit it, being a political leader is a tough job, the most important job in a civilized society. Take away the political leader and what we have is unrestricted self-interest and Thomas Hobbes' vision of man as leading a life characterized as solitary, nasty, brutish and short.

It is interesting to note that political leaders have one of the few occupations where their popularity and contributions are better examined years after they have left the public spotlight. Some of our best presidents - Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt - were the objects of ceaseless criticism and political opposition, only years later to enter the pantheon of greatness.

There is much debate in America about whether our democracy is in retreat. Voting abstention, public apathy, disrespect for authority and lack of confidence in governing institutions are signs that we are in trouble. But there is no more disturbing sign of democracy's travail than our sad excitement over trashing our leaders, especially when we wouldn't touch that job with a ten foot pole. ☐

Michael Kryzanek
Editor