

The Crisis in Leadership
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Human beings are herd animals. We are communal, which is key to our survival. But unlike the majority of other sentient animals, the herd instinct is tempered by our capacity for reason. There are human beings who live alone, but this is rare and hermits depend upon good people looking out for them. Herds require leadership: alpha males or females. Anarchists do not survive for long because they have no leadership.

A recent film documented how a sled-team of Huskies survived abandonment under the leadership of their alpha female. That film inspired this column.

We tend to think of leadership as something on high in the pecking order, but leadership is tested by most of us in our own lives. A leader puts protection ahead of self. Parents learn quickly how dependent children are on their protection, from newborn and helpless to maturity. The leadership qualities of both mother and father determine the outcome of having productive, good children, children willing to protect them in their own old age.

Anyone in the world of work learns the importance of good leadership from above and from among peers. Civilization is based on good leadership and intelligent adherence to law. Things go very badly when leadership and obedience to law are wanting.

The oldest institution of human governance was hereditary monarchy (chiefdom), a society under the leadership of one person. In small communities, leadership would fall to the most capable or the most brutal. Capable leadership led to survival and thriving, whereas the brutal led to internal divisions and eventual anarchy. But when capable leadership is linked to hereditary succession, there is no guarantee of continuity of capable qualities. Hereditary monarchies always fall and get replaced when competence fails.

Leadership in the modern developed world offers the best hope of competence when embedded in the institutions that can keep it honest. Our own system is based on participatory governance that requires both leaders and citizens to be of good character.

Our founders knew that this would not always happen and provided us with protections against the bad character of leaders or voters. Our votes can remove them and our institutions can impeach bad presidents, representatives, or corrupt judges. This system, flawed though it is, is still better than any others out there, and so far, it has worked.

When emergencies come that could threaten our very existence: a civil war, an invasion, an economic collapse, or a pandemic, we depend upon the good character and good judgment of our political leaders. We have historically depended upon our presidents to lead us, to make decisions and explain them to us, to show intelligence and compassion. Models of such presidents were our first, Washington, then Lincoln, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Obama, all of whom had to make difficult decisions and accepted the challenge. Intelligence and compassion were the primary characteristics that resulted in public credibility and willingness to sacrifice.

The 20th century provided us with a test laboratory of leadership styles. Dictatorship requires the unquestioned obedience of the governed, and during an emergency, most people are willing to give up power to a decisive leader. But when the emergency ends, yet the total control of a dictator and his circle remains, public faith falters. Every violent, yet once popular dictatorship, ended in violent removal. Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, and Ceausescu all were dispatched by their disillusioned people or their victorious enemies. Even Stalin, one of the worst of them, was (said to be) poisoned by his inner circle, not a minute too soon.

Evil leaders seized power through clever manipulation of gullible people and kept power through terror. Each trashed the institutions that would have protected their countries from them: the press, the courts, the legislators who were upright, and the government departments that were competent and honorable.

We now enjoy a bounty of biographies that offer intimate studies of what makes a great leader. Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln are all enjoying popular interest at a time we need it most: before the next election. Leadership matters. Good character matters most of all. Think, then vote.

685 words.

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.netglobalthink.net.