

What is Leadership?  
by Dwight D. Eisenhower

A former President of the United States  
and the man who led the Allied armies to victory  
in Europe talks of leaders he has known,  
and of their qualities of heart and mind that  
can increase the stature of all of us

When Sir Winston Churchill died last January, the spontaneous outpouring of admiration and affection from all over the world was a tribute to a great and noble man. But it was more than that; it was also a shining testimonial to the qualities of leadership. This world has always set a high value on leadership, and in the person of Sir Winston people everywhere found a superb combination of those characteristics which lift and inspire the human spirit.

I have long suspected that men who possess the capacity for leadership are always among us - waiting in the wings - but it sometimes takes a great crisis to bring them to prominence. The turbulent period in which I have lived has produced its share of outstanding leaders, and it has been my good fortune to know a number of them. Because of this, the editors of The Reader's Digest have asked me to comment on the qualities I have observed in these men. What is it - what is the combination of characteristics - that makes a leader? What lessons can the younger generation draw from the lives of these men?

Not long ago I read an item quoting some psychologist as saying that the virtues of intelligence, integrity and courage alone are not enough for leadership. The most important ingredient, he said, is a mysterious "Factor X." This, of course, is just a fancy way of saying that we don't know all there is to know about leadership. It is obviously impossible to dissect the human mind and spirit and identify all the parts. But I, for one, am willing to leave "Factor X" to the psychologists and concentrate on a handful of known qualities which I am convinced are the essence of leadership.

Selfless Dedication. Perhaps the greatest of these qualities is single-minded and selfless dedication to the task at hand. Any leader worth his salt must of course possess a certain amount of ego, a justifiable pride in his own accomplishments. But if he is a truly great leader, the cause must predominate over self. An old and respected commander of mine used to say, "Always take your job seriously, never yourself."

I don't know of any man in our time who embodied this quality of selflessness to a greater degree than Gen. George C. Marshall. Time and again I saw him refuse to let ambition or personal preference color his judgment or actions. Perhaps the finest story I know about George Marshall - a story that has never been widely known - was told to me by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Late in 1943 the President was confronted with the difficult task of deciding which American soldier should command the invasion of Europe next spring. He asked General Marshall whether he would like that assignment or would prefer to remain in Washington as Chief of Staff. The General said simply, "The decision is yours, Mr. President; my wishes have

nothing to do with the matter."

President Roosevelt later told me that he was certain General Marshall would have preferred the field command. "But so long as he would give me no intimation of his wishes," the President said, "and because I had such complete confidence in his judgment, I kept him here close to me."

General Marshall remained in the Pentagon and, with superb military wisdom, ran two wars simultaneously - one in Europe and the other in the Pacific. Looking back now, it is hard to imagine any other man doing the job he did. Had it not been for his unselfish devotion to America, his refusal to say he wanted the more glamorous field command, we would have been denied his great talents as the all-important military administrator behind the scenes.

Courage and Conviction. Our country, of course, has no monopoly on such dedication. Even while World War II was still in progress, I had heard of a distinguished German named Konrad Adenauer, one of the few leaders in his country with the courage to oppose Hitler. After the Nazi takeover, he continued to espouse the principles of democracy sturdily and openly. Although he was imprisoned for a time, his standing among the people of Germany was such that the Fuhrer did not dare execute him.

Following the war, Adenauer emerged as the leader of his people. In due time he became the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. Although I could talk with him only through an interpreter, we became good friends, and I held him in great respect. I found that he had a wonderful sense of humor, and was also most considerate of the views of others - although he was firm in support of his convictions, as any real leader must be. Most important of all, his every thought and action were directed toward the restoration of his country to an honored place in the society of nations. He never deviated from this high purpose, and personal ambition never clouded his view.

Gen. Charles de Gaulle is another example of supreme dedication. Although our government is now having its problems with General de Gaulle, I respect, admire and like him. We should not lose sight of the fact that he has many splendid characteristics, and the greatest of these has been his overriding determination to restore France to a position of glory and prestige. If this motivation has at times seemed so strong as to dim his vision and color his judgment, it must also be said that he has been free from any taint of pettiness or personal selfishness. Ever since the French defeat in 1940, Charles de Gaulle has been dedicated to one cause: France. It was this devotion, plus the man's strength of character, that saved his country from internal disaster in 1958. Without him, it is probable that France would then have disintegrated.

Fortitude. Closely related to dedication is another vital ingredient of leadership: fortitude of spirit - the capacity to stand strong under reverses, to rise from defeat and do battle again, to learn from one's mistakes and push on to the ultimate goal. George Washington, of course, is the classic American example of this quality. Except for one or two small triumphs, Washington was denied any important military victory until the final surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. However, the heartbreak of his 1776 battles around New York, the disappointments of Brandywine and Germantown, the bitter ordeal of Valley Forge, the neglect of his men by Congress and the states, the starvation, freezing and fighting, often with almost no weapons - all these he endured throughout the long years of the Revolution.

Washington never even considered final defeat, and his conviction and devotion were so great that he pledged his entire private fortune to the cause of independence. Here was an almost sublime embodiment of the finest qualities of leadership: dedication, stamina, courage, honesty, intelligence, fairness, patience, capacity to plan, consideration for others, pride leavened with

humility and, perhaps most important of all, the ability to inspire other men.

Fortitude in the face of defeat can take many forms. I want to tell here the story of one of my subordinate commanders in the war, a story I have always found inspiring. This officer, who was a major general in command of a division, made such serious mistakes of judgment that I was compelled to relieve him, which meant also that he had to go back to his peacetime rank of lieutenant colonel. A decision such as this was heartbreaking for me, particularly when the officer in question was intelligent, technically proficient and sincere - as this man was. But when the lives of thousands of men are at stake, a commander has no choice.

Many men, when confronted with this sort of personal defeat in World War II, were completely crushed. In this case, however, the officer accepted my decision without the slightest bitterness. He had one request: that I not send him back to the United States. He still wanted to help fight the war - out where the bullets were flying. There was a need for an officer of his rank in another kind of division, and I sent him there to lead troops. He performed so well in his new assignment that he rose to the rank of brigadier general in combat, and long before his retirement was again a major general. He went on to a successful civilian career and was so highly regarded that he was elected mayor of his city.

This man not only possessed inner resources of the spirit; he also had the unusual capacity to admit error and learn from it. (Since writing this little story, I have received the man's permission to mention his name. It is Leroy Watson, and he lives in Beverly Hills, Calif.)

Humility. A sense of humility is a quality I have observed in every leader whom I have deeply admired. I have seen Winston Churchill with humble tears of gratitude on his cheeks as he thanked people for their help to England and the Allied cause. I have never doubted the stories of Washington on his knees at Valley Forge, humbly asking help from a power greater than he.

My own conviction is that every leader should have enough humility to accept, publicly, the responsibility for the mistakes of the subordinates he has himself selected and, likewise, to give them credit, publicly, for their triumphs. I am aware that some popular theories of leadership hold that the top man must always keep his "image" bright and shining. I believe, however, that in the long run fairness and honesty, and a generous attitude toward subordinates and associates, pay off.

Thorough Homework. Another quality common to leaders is their willingness to work hard, to prepare themselves, to know their field of activity thoroughly. I have often heard it said of some individual: "Oh, he'll get by on his personality." Well, he may "get by" for a time, but if a charming personality is all he has, the day will come when he will find himself looking for a job.

I never knew President Roosevelt as well as I did some of the other world leaders, but in the few conferences I had with him I was impressed, not only by his inspirational qualities, but by his amazing grasp of the whole complex war effort. He could discuss strategy on equal terms with his generals and admirals. His knowledge of the geography of the war theaters was so encyclopedic that the most obscure places in faraway countries were always accurately sited on his mental map. President Roosevelt possessed personality, surely, but as the nation's leader in a global conflict, he also did his homework - thoroughly.

Power of Persuasion. A trait always noticeable in a successful leader is his ability to persuade others. There are times, of course, when every leader must make a decision and see that it is carried out regardless of what others may think. But whenever men can be persuaded rather than ordered - when they can be made to feel that they have participated in developing the

plan - they approach their tasks with understanding and enthusiasm.

Prime Minister Churchill was a persuader. Indeed, his skill in the use of words and logic was so great that on several occasions when he and I disagreed on some important matter - even when I was convinced of the correctness of my own view and when the responsibility was clearly mine - I had a very hard time withstanding his arguments. More than once he forced me to reexamine my own premises, to convince myself again that I was right - or accept his solution. Yet if the decision went against him, he accepted it with good grace, and did everything in his power to support it with proper action. Leadership by persuasion and the wholehearted acceptance of a contrary decision are both fundamentals of democracy.

Heart and Mind. I learned long ago that the qualities of leadership wear no single outward badge. I sometimes chuckle a little bit when I ponder the differences between George Patton and another successful battlefield general, Alexander Patch. Patton was colorful to the point of flamboyance and loved to shock people. Although he had many fine qualities, more than once his impulsiveness threatened to destroy his usefulness. Patch was quiet, reserved, gentlemanly in manner. Yet both were superb leaders of men. Both won battles.

It would be hard to imagine two men more unlike, in external traits, than General Marshall and Winston Churchill. Marshall was remote in manner, often abrupt. I knew no man who could call him an intimate friend. Churchill was convivial, out-going, full of humor. The give-and-take of conferences delighted him; he liked people, and people instantly liked him. Yet both men had the same inner qualities of heart and mind that made them great leaders.

At Every Level. I have been talking here about leadership in military and government service, but the same fundamentals apply at every level, in every walk of life. In the Army, good leadership must go down through the ranks to the youngest corporal; in business there is always need of men who can direct others effectively; in community life we need men and women who, by right thinking and sound deeds, influence others. This is the way leadership works in a democracy. And from the ranks of little leaders eventually come big leaders.

Occasionally, I have heard some young man say cynically that advancement is usually the result of "getting the lucky breaks." This is a defeatist attitude that I deplore. It would be less than honest to say that good fortune - being there, in the right place, when the lightning strikes - does not play its part. Yet when opportunity comes, even by chance, the man must be prepared, must be able to deliver; otherwise, his triumph will be short-lived. A steady rise to a position of preeminence most often comes with hard work, constant effort at self-improvement - and devotion to principle.

One day during my White House years, I called in an assistant - a highly competent man of fine personality - and asked him if he would like to have a more responsible and remunerative job which was then open. I explained that he would be operating rather independently, largely responsible for his own decisions. He thought for a moment and then said, "No, I'd be no good at it. I am a No. 2 man - and I think a good one - but I am not a No. 1 man. I am not fitted for such a job, and I don't want it."

Although his answer startled me, I respected his honesty. Moreover, this world always needs competent No. 2 men, also good No. 3, No. 4 and No. 5 men - and each, on his own level, can be a good performer.

Yet I would urge any young man with ambition never to be too hasty in concluding that he doesn't have the stature for top leadership. Often I have seen a man who had doubts about his own resources rise to the occasion and perform with great competence when the opportunity finally came.

Any man who does his work well, who is justifiably self-confident and not unduly disturbed by the jeers of the cynics and the shirkers, any man who stays true to decent motives and is considerate of others is, in essence, a leader. Whether or not he is ever singled out for prominence, he is bound to achieve great inner satisfaction in turning out superior work. And that, by the way, is what the good Lord put us on this earth for.