

## TRIAL BY FIRE (1985)

-Jim Stockdale

*In the time of peril, like the needle  
to the loadstone, obedience, irrespective  
of rank, generally flies to him  
who is best fitted to command.*

*-Herman Melville, 1850.*

Let me tell you something about myself.

In 1960, I was a U.S. Navy lieutenant commander, a fighter pilot just off carrier duty, when I started the most important years of study of my life, at Stanford and at the Hoover Institution. I studied the humanities in a postgraduate program paid for by the government.

Within three years after I left Stanford, I had been shot down over North Vietnam, imprisoned in an old French dungeon in Hanoi, and become one of the first heads of government of a covertly organized colony of American prisoners of war – a colony destined to remain autonomous for nearly eight years.

During this period I thanked God for those twenty-four months of history, politics, and philosophy at Stanford and Hoover. And I was grateful, too, for the practical lessons in leadership at sea I had had up to that time.

In that atmosphere of death and hopelessness, stripped of the niceties, the amenities of civilization, my ideas on life and leadership crystallized. I returned home with a simple, almost sparse concept of what qualities a leader should have. *And I believe with utmost conviction that these traits are right.*

## A CRISIS LEADER

I would like to share my views with you. But let me make one point first. I think these criteria are important because our changing times demand the kind of person who can lead them in troubled times. Down the road, locating these individuals will be crucial to the welfare of all sectors of our society.

I'm not talking about our "nominal" leaders who may look the part, who say the right things, who indeed may be the right people in calm waters. I'm talking about the leaders who, to use Melville's phrase, "in time of peril" come out of nowhere to control the flow of events: the businessman who rises to the top to keep a company afloat during a depression; the warrior who takes command of a decimated battalion, rallies its spirit, and makes it whole again; the mayor who gets a bankrupt city back on its feet.

Frequently, these are not the people the public was acclaiming before the fire started. These are the *natural* leaders to whom others instinctively turn in times of crisis, who become the leaders through trial by fire.

What are the true qualities we're looking for? Let me examine just five.

### *Must Be a Moralist*

First, in order to lead under duress, one must be a moralist. By that, I don't mean being a poseur, one who sententiously exhorts his comrades to be good. I mean he must be a thinker. He must have the wisdom, the courage, indeed the audacity to make clear just what, under the circumstances, the good *is*. This requires a clear perception of right and wrong and the integrity to stand behind one's assessment. The surest way for a leader to wind up in the ash can of history is to have a reputation for indirectness or deceit. A disciplined life will encourage commitment to a personal code of conduct.

### *Must Be a Writer of Law*

Second, there are times when leaders must be jurists, when their decisions must be based solely on their own ideas of fairness. In effect, they will be writing "law." When they're on the hot seat, they'll need the courage to withstand the inclination to duck a problem. Many of their laws will necessarily be unpopular, but they must never be unjust.

Cool, glib, cerebral, detached guys can get by in positions of authority until the pressure is on. Then people ease away from them and cling to those they know they can trust – those who can mete out just punishment and look their charges in the eye as they do it. When the chips are down, the man with the heart, not the soft heart, not the bleeding heart but the Old Testament heart of wisdom, the *hard* heart, comes into his own.

### *Must Be a Teacher*

Third, every good leader is a good teacher. He is able to give those around him a sense of perspective and to set the moral, social, and particularly the motivational climate among his followers. This is not an easy task. It takes wisdom and self-discipline; it requires the sensitivity to perceive philosophic disarray in one's charges and the knowledge of how to put things in order. I believe that a good starting point is that old injunction "know thyself." A leader must aspire to strength, compassion, and conviction several orders greater than required by society in general.

### *Must Be a Steward*

Fourth, a leader must remember that he is responsible for his charges. He must tend the flock, not only cracking the whip but “washing their feet” when they are in need of help. Leadership takes compassion. It requires knowledge and character and heart to boost others up and show them the way. The Civil War historian, Douglas Southall Freeman described his formula for stewardship when he said you have to know your stuff, to be a man, and to take care of your men.

### *Must be a philosopher*

A fifth requirement of a good leader is a philosophical outlook. At least he should understand and be able to compassionately explain, when necessary, that there is no evidence that the way of the world assures the punishment of evil or the reward of virtue. The leader gives forethought to coping with undeserved reverses. As he is expected to handle fear with courage, so also is he expected to handle calamity with emotional stability or – as Plato might say – with endurance of the soul.

Humans seem to have an inborn need to believe that virtue will be rewarded and evil punished. Often, when they come face to face with the fact that this is not always so, they are crushed. The only way I know to handle failure is to gain historical perspective, to think about people who have successfully lived with failure. A verse from the book of Ecclesiastes perfectly describes the world to which I returned from prison. “I returned, and saw that the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise nor riches to men of understanding, nor favors to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

## THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

These are my views, based on my professional and personal experiences, my own trial by fire. As we look to the leaders of the future, I believe that the criteria that I have listed will give us leaders who do not *follow* public opinion but *transforming* leaders who can implant high-minded needs in place of self-interested wants in the hearts of their people.

One of their tests will be the ideals they inspire in their followers. And the other will be their own fortitude and behavior. The key to our future leaders’ merit may not be “hanging in there” when the light at the end of the tunnel is expected. It will be their performance when it looks like the light will never show up.

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