

## In politics, good leadership eclipses mistakes and negative perceptions



**James Bracher**

President Bush has been a strong leader since September 11—any negative perceptions before that date have been erased. The American people have resolved this to a pollable certainty. And our legislators have been according our determination the appropriate respect, and our news media has been reporting it. Americans do not confer this type of power often. We have been tested many times before -- by world war, invasion, surprise attack, evil empires, disease, internal dissent and other threats. Sometimes we choose a leader to follow, sometimes we do not.

Leadership has certain dimensions in common, regardless of its venue. Whether within a family, a business, or the political arena, leaders demonstrate five characteristics for those who would chart their rise. They incorporate key attributes, attitudes, perspectives; they

embody certain “watchwords.”

“History” is the first such watchword. Bush has kept sight of our history – who we are and who we were. It is no coincidence that our most sacred political speech begins “Four score and seven years ago” – or that Bush uses terms like “axis of evil.” Contrast President Carter who, when using the term “malaise” to describe the American character, lost sight of the fact that America is and always has been a land and people of unbounded optimism, possibility, and future. (Business also provides innumerable examples of forgetting this watchword. Carly Fiorina did not frame the Compaq merger in terms consistent with the HP way. Jac Nasser failed to recreate Ford as a consumer products company when he failed to convince the Ford family why his path was consistent with the historical purpose of Ford—making affordable, high-quality cars.)

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The second watchword is “vision,” and it has been widely used and abused in recent times. Vision is that which draws us to our destiny. Bush has envisioned a world without terrorism, and America playing a central role in achieving such a world. We as Americans want that destiny, and how we get there is for “managers” – in this case, cabinet members – to figure out. Many who would spend the rest of their lives opposing the actions of Attorney General Ashcroft would gladly give their lives in the service of the President’s vision. President Reagan’s vision took us from McCarthy hearings and duck-and-cover drills to a world with the Soviet Union relegated to the ash-heap of history. Foibles of the Reagan managers (and there were many) did not dilute the power of his leadership.

The third watchword is “integrity.” The courage to commit to higher principles and stay the course is the basis for the followers’ trust in their leader. So long as Bush is seen as a man of integrity, he will remain largely unscathed by political struggles and scandal (Enron). President Clinton’s legacy stands in juxtaposition. Peace and prosperity are woefully insufficient.

The fourth watchword is “graciousness.” The manner with which we operate is often as important as the substance of our deeds. In the Collins and Porras book, *Built to Last*, each of the “premier institutions – the crown jewels – in their indus-

tries” have as a core ideology, a commitment to treating their employees and customers in an exemplary and gracious fashion. Politics is no different, and Bush seems to grasp this fundamentally. Beginning with his inauguration, civility of tone and action has marked his actions towards Republicans and Democrats alike. Whether he’s inviting Ted Kennedy to dinner and a movie, naming buildings after RFK, or thanking Tony Blair for his help with the war on terror, graciousness has been the hallmark.

The fifth watchword is “commitment.” Bush frames the war against terrorism as a long, expensive and probably blood-filled commitment. Commitment springs from values, and resists opinions based on situational ethics. Building a cathedral or a Great Wall, or landing on the moon takes commitment – often multigenerational. Today, we are inundated by opinions – often engineered by 24-7 punditry – untested by “the hard discipline of reasonableness and honesty.” Thoughtful values find expression in our commitments, and commitments sustain civilization.

Whether September 11 changed Bush, or merely unveiled him, he has shown the characteristics of leadership. So long as he embodies these leadership dimensions, the American people will follow him.

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