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# Challenges in Global Leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

2016 was a momentous year for elections and leadership transitions around the world, and these will continue to be a top storyline in 2017. In 2016 alone, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union; Colombians voted down a peace deal with the FARC, only to have it approved by parliament afterward; the United States elected Donald Trump; and Italian voters rejected a referendum on constitutional reform. Even as the full effects of the 2016 leadership changes unfold before our eyes, 2017 promises further developments in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the EU, and China—to name just a few highlight events.

Leadership transitions, whether by election or otherwise, have real consequences. As I learned during my time in the Navy, even the largest bureaucracies and most technocratic systems can be deeply influenced by the person at the top. I can also attest that no leader's agenda perfectly survives contact with real life, either because of internal challenges endemic to the organization or country he or she is leading, or due to the contingencies of external circumstances that inevitably arise and must be met.

Two of the best predictors for how leaders will function once in office, however, are the temperaments they bring with them and the teams they

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build to help accomplish their agendas. The higher up and therefore more publicly visible a leader is, the more her temperament and team matter, both in terms of public perception and in achieving her objectives.

Two examples serve to illustrate these points. When I think of temperament, I often think of World War II Admirals William “Bull” Halsey and Raymond Spruance. Those two men alternated command of the U.S. fleet in the Pacific over the course of the war, and both won many key victories. However, they could hardly have been more different in temperament: Halsey was a hard-charging, hard-drinking hothead, while Spruance was a near-teetotaler who almost never raised his voice. The two admirals’ command styles reflected their personalities: Halsey was aggressive almost to a fault, and Spruance was known for his remarkable restraint. Luckily, the temperaments of both men proved effective in their own ways at their own times—and Halsey and Spruance were close personal friends both during the war and throughout the rest of their lives.

In terms of team-building, I think of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was not only an outstanding leader in his own right, but, crucially, built a team of associates who were able to amplify his work in

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life and carry it forward even after his death. Fundamentally, team-building is what separates lone prophets like St. Francis or the Buddha from organizational leaders like Dr. King. While the lives of St. Francis and the Buddha were powerful examples in their own

way, it is the organizations inspired by their lives that have really carried their influence into the modern world. As the old saying puts it, “if you want to go far, go together.”

Although there are some commonalities among successful leaders—a strong vision, the ability to inspire, and the practicality to achieve goals—it is hard to posit a particular prescription for temperament or team-building that accurately predicts success across time and contexts. Rather, a leader’s success is in large part determined by how well her temperament and team comport with situations and circumstances inherited or imposed. This is particularly true of national leaders who inherit longstanding traditions and organizations, inevitably confront crises beyond their control, and must lead in a way that achieves national aims within present geopolitical circumstances. A leader, in short, must match his or her moment—as Grant and Churchill for example did, but McClellan and Chamberlain did not.

Four historical examples can show how particular national leaders’

temperaments and teams matched—or failed to match—their respective moments. Otto von Bismarck unified and expanded Germany, then established a system of alliances to secure the country's geopolitical position. Nelson Mandela assembled an intersectional team of anti-apartheid forces and demonstrated the evolution of a temperament required to lead a country out of racial oppression and into an era of unified democracy. Lee Kuan Yew led Singapore for more than thirty years through two independence movements and transformed the country from a colonial outpost to a thoroughly modern globalized city-state. Finally, Ronald Reagan demonstrated a powerful combination of effective team-building, masterful communication, and relentless optimism as he proclaimed “morning in America” and set the stage for the downfall of the Soviet Union.

#### **CASE 1: OTTO VON BISMARCK (PRUSSIA/GERMANY, 1862–1890)**

Born of minor nobility in 1815, Otto von Bismarck worked his way up the diplomatic and ministerial ranks of the Kingdom of Prussia, ultimately becoming the driving force in Prussian and European geopolitics for over thirty years. After serving as ambassador to France and Russia, Bismarck was appointed Minister President in 1862 and embarked on a series of short, sharp wars to unify the German states into an empire under Prussian leadership. Once he had achieved this aim, however, Bismarck ceased his expansionary policy and famously switched to the hard-nosed *Realpolitik* of maintaining the continental balance of power. The complex system of alliances he created and orchestrated maintained stability for nearly a quarter-century until the outbreak of World War I.

Although the “Iron Chancellor” is still remembered for his tough temperament, he was effective as a statesman and leader because he was able to balance toughness with pragmatism. As seen in his transition from war provocateur to alliance-builder, Bismarck came to power with a clear vision of what he wanted his country to become and was able to harness his temperament to achieve it. When at first war was required, he started three of them; when the empire was established, Bismarck turned his iron-fisted methods to diplomacy and alliance-building instead.

In that sense, Bismarck's qualities as a leader and statesman embodied the dictum of that other famous Prussian, Carl von Clausewitz, that “war is a continuation of policy by other means.” Bismarck was unusually—perhaps uniquely—able to singlehandedly change the fortunes of his country by application of the full range of policy tools. However, Bismarck's legacy also offers a warning. His chancellorship changed the destinies of Germany

and Europe, but the architecture of alliances he built could not survive his own demise, and ultimately played a role in plunging Europe into the cataclysm of World War I. As much as a leader's time in power matters, his legacy also depends on the infrastructure he leaves in place and how well it maintains his achievements. Bismarck raised Germany to new heights during his own time, but also helped to plant the seeds of his country's utter destruction in the two world wars that followed.

#### CASE 2: NELSON MANDELA (SOUTH AFRICA, 1994–1999)

Few men or women in recent history offer as many or as rich lessons in leadership as the leader of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle: Nelson Mandela. Mandela was imprisoned for more than twenty-seven years for his commitment to a democratic and free society, and ultimately emerged to lead a remarkable, peaceful transition from apartheid to inclusive democracy.

Mandela was famous for his peaceful and unifying temperament, which was arguably the most important determining factor in South Africa's peaceable democratic transition. However, it is important to note that his character was formed over time, and in no small part by his decades in prison. As a young man, Mandela had been much more of an agitator; in the 1940s, he and similarly ambitious young people formed the Youth League to push the African National Congress party to take more drastic actions to oppose apartheid. Mandela was also not a purely nonviolent actor. His autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, traces his evolution from

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a purely nonviolent stance to admitting the strategic value of controlled instances of violence in overthrowing a regime.

Finally, despite his remarkable success in life, Mandela provides another example of a transformational leader whose movement could not fully sustain the energy and quality imparted by the leader himself. Though South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy remains a remarkable story,

an honest look at the country today shows some of the promise as yet unfulfilled. Mandela's successors and onetime deputies have not demonstrated his level of personal and political integrity, and the country has experienced

some democratic backsliding during their tenures. Even unique and transformational leaders like Mandela are reliant on the quality and durability of the teams and systems they build to sustain their accomplishments.

### **CASE 3: LEE KUAN YEW (SINGAPORE, 1959–1990)**

Lee Kuan Yew was a Cambridge-educated lawyer who became Singapore's first prime minister, a role he held for thirty-one continuous years through Malaysian independence from the United Kingdom and, two years later, Singapore's own forced independence from Malaysia. In total, Lee spent more than a half-century in public service, until his death in 2015.

Lee displayed a tough temperament steeled by his experience as a young man under Japanese occupation, from which he and other young Singaporeans “emerged determined that no one—neither Japanese nor British—had the right to push and kick us around.”<sup>1</sup>

However, like many blunt personalities, Lee's toughness and propensity for unvarnished opinion cut both ways in terms of domestic policy and international opinion. His government was essentially a benevolent dictatorship with a democratic veneer, and his policies—such as strict quota-based ethnic integration of public housing—were rightfully described as “paternalistic.”<sup>2</sup>

Though some of Lee's policies and pronouncements might strike us as uncomfortably blunt, his leadership was central to Singapore's meteoric rise from colonial backwater to globalized city-state. Lee's decision to declare English the national language, his determined and successful efforts to avoid ethnic conflict in an unstably mixed society, and his masterful exploitation of alliances and Singapore's geostrategic location helped bring outsize prominence and prosperity to the tiny but strategically sited city-state.

### **CASE 4: RONALD REAGAN (UNITED STATES, 1980–1988)**

President Reagan, nicknamed the “Teflon president” and the “great communicator,” was famous for his even temperament and communication ability. He managed to convey both the sunny optimism of “morning in America” and the toughness of “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” in ways that reassured the American people and initiated the endgame with the Soviet Union. He was also able to work effectively with Tip O'Neill, the powerful Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, and to help realign U.S. politics through the “Reagan Revolution.”

Because we tend to remember leaders as individuals, however, the quality of the team Reagan assembled can be overshadowed by the memory of the man himself. Vice President George H. W. Bush, Secretary of State George Shultz, and Chief of Staff James Baker III, among others, constituted a superb high-level team. There were mistakes, too, however—notably the Iran–Contra affair, which came within a hair’s breadth of costing Reagan the presidency and demonstrated the essential importance of both active management of a team and the difference between “doing nothing wrong and doing enough right.”<sup>3</sup>

Although he had previous executive experience as governor of California, Reagan was an unusual candidate for president—something of an “outsider” before that became the phenomenon it is now. However, his steady, sunny temperament, generally strong team, and political skill allowed Reagan to reshape the American electorate and set the table for a fundamental shift in the international system. This combination of factors enabled him to become the first two-term president since Dwight Eisenhower, and that legacy was secured by George H. W. Bush in his immediately subsequent term.

## CONCLUSION

As the examples of Bismarck, Mandela, Lee, and Reagan demonstrate, national leaders can have immense effects on the trajectories of the countries they lead. In particular, it is the temperaments of these leaders, the teams they build, and the fit between leader, team, and circumstance that ultimately go the furthest in predicting their eventual success or failure. Each of these leaders emerged at a key point in his country’s history—the unification of Germany, the end of apartheid, Malaysian/Singaporean independence, a U.S. domestic political realignment and the near-end of the Soviet Union—and both shaped themselves to their moments and those moments to their countries’ advantage. In this sense, each succeeded so well that they are often seen as instrumental to the historical events that happened on their watches. But they did not achieve what they did on their own: had Reagan’s Soviet counterpart been someone other than Gorbachev, Reagan might not now get the credit he does for “winning” the Cold War.

Each of these leaders also demonstrated the rare ability to not only provide a vision and a plan, but also to adjust their strategies and tactics in response to changing circumstances. Just consider how different were the leadership challenges Mandela faced as a political prisoner and as the first

democratically elected president of his country—not many people could achieve what he did in either context, and fewer still could have made the transition from one to the other. As in the transition from campaigning to governing, or even from one level of leadership to a higher one, it takes real skill for a leader to recognize the ways in which her situation has changed and how she will have to change to meet it. In that way, the best leaders are more like Columbus than the captain of a ferry: setting and steering a course to a known destination is challenging in its own right, but the ability to set out with a bold vision and bring a ship and crew safely through unforeseeable challenges is the test of a truly exceptional leader.

As we watch leadership transitions unfold during these uncertain and turbulent times—and keep our eyes out for more on the horizon—these examples provide some general guidance in evaluating prospective leaders as well as those currently holding leadership positions:

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- *Temperament matters.* The challenges all leaders face today—particularly in terms of international relations and the nonstop global media environment—are so complex that it takes a special kind of temperament to succeed. In the midst of uncertainty, a leader must be realistic but unflappable, calm amidst chaos, and fundamentally optimistic. A leader should not seek to foment chaos, and must be, as Napoleon said, “a dealer in hope.”
- *Transformation takes a team.* Leaders generally reveal much of their own character in the people they surround themselves with and how well those people function together. Moreover, durable change requires not just one charismatic leader, but in fact a cohesive, effective team that is able to work together to tackle challenges and build structures that will outlast their own time in power. No one is as smart alone as many thinking together, and today’s challenges are simply too big for any one person to address, no matter how powerful her vision or charisma.

- *Think several steps ahead.* Especially during uncertain times when many leaders promise change and transformation, it is critical that we try to think through the cascading effects of the changes they promise. Are the changes realistic? Are they desirable? Are they sustainable? Will they still be viewed favorably years or decades from now? Bismarck provides perhaps the starkest example above: he was a once-in-a-generation leader who truly transformed Germany, but sowed the seeds of destruction in the process.

Above all, we need to remember that leaders—especially transformational ones—need to fit the times and contexts in which they must lead. While vision, charisma, realism, and practicality are almost always prerequisites, the precise mixture required varies from place to place and time to time. And we must never forget that all leaders are tested, and that all of them continue to evolve even as they lead. Luck, circumstance, preparation, and the unquantifiable human element mean that all leaders have the potential to surprise—and surprises often turn out to have the most transformational legacies of all. *f*

#### ENDNOTES

1 William Branigin, “Lee Kuan Yew, Who Led Singapore into Prosperity over 30-year Rule, Dies at 91,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2015, Accessed March 1, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/lee-kuan-yew-who-led-singapore-into-prosperity-over-30-year-rule-dies-at-91/2015/03/22/00f7ccbe-d0d4-11e4-a62f-ee745911a4ff\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.81df94d1fe71](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/lee-kuan-yew-who-led-singapore-into-prosperity-over-30-year-rule-dies-at-91/2015/03/22/00f7ccbe-d0d4-11e4-a62f-ee745911a4ff_story.html?utm_term=.81df94d1fe71)

2 *Ibid.*

3 Robert Gates, *A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 163. Reflecting on his own tangential and ultimately unproven implication in the Iran–Contra affair, Gates writes that, “through this searing experience, I learned that while I had done nothing wrong, *I hadn’t done enough right.*”