

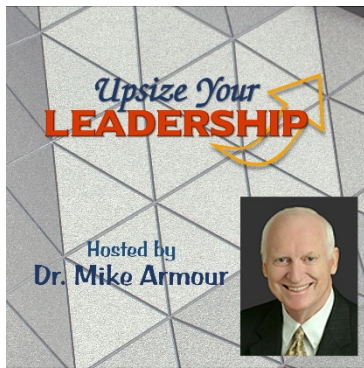
Toppled Statues

The Inevitable Flaws of Great Leaders

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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For the past two weeks, I've struggled with whether to address the topic of today's podcast. I've gone back and forth in my opinion.

The reason is very simple. It has never been my intention to make this podcast political. And I don't want to step over that line today. Yet, given the prevailing cultural climate at the moment, some might construe my comments in the next few minutes as political.

That's because I want to speak briefly about recent mob scenes in the U.S. which have toppled or agitated for removal of statues and memorials to past leaders. My purpose is not to

take an ideological or political stance. Rather, it's to highlight a historical reality about what makes leaders leaders.

Yet I know that my purpose could be easily misinterpreted. The truth is, all that I'm trying to achieve is to offer some insights to help you upsize your leadership.

In recent weeks there has been a widespread onslaught to deface, destroy, or dismantle statues which, in the judgment of some, are considered offensive. The rationale is that these monuments commemorate the life of someone who committed a grave injustice by today's standards. Mobs have physically attacked statues of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Francis Scott Key, Ulysses S. Grant, Christopher Columbus, and Junipero Serra, not to mention those of Confederate leaders such as Robert E. Lee.

As I watch these unfolding scenes, I'm taken back to a conversation which I had in 1970. I want to share that conversation with you. But before I do, let me give you a little background.

My academic training was primarily in history, philosophy, and the dynamics of Western culture. One of my undergraduate degrees is in history along with two of my graduate degrees, including a doctorate from UCLA.

My undergraduate work was interrupted at the end of my junior year by three years of active duty during the Vietnam War. I returned to campus at the height of the anti-war protest, when student sit-ins and fire-bombings of campus facilities were commonplace, including on the campus to which I returned after active duty.

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Anti-Authoritarianism

The peace movement of the late 1960s was not only opposed to the Vietnam War. It was also distinctly anti-authoritarian. It had disdain for authority. The movement summarily dismissed all authority, whether it was found in government, institutions, churches, or the police and military. Some even rejected parental authority. One of the most quoted slogans of the day was “Don’t trust anyone over 30.”

In the midst of all of this I was working to complete my degree and to begin graduate work. During my first year in graduate school, I was awarded a teaching fellowship in the History Department. I taught two classes on American history every semester. At the time, every degree plan, regardless of the major, required two semesters of American history. So, the History Department usually employed a dozen-and-a-half graduate students to help manage the teaching load for these required courses.

As teaching fellows, one of our assignments was to perform peer reviews on one another. Each person was periodically assigned a day to sit in on lectures delivered by one of the other teaching fellows. In short order, therefore, I became acquainted with the perspective from which most of my colleagues were teaching American history. And something disturbed me about what I was hearing.

The prevailing anti-authoritarianism of the day was making itself felt in their lectures. When they talked about the founding fathers, the amazing achievements of these men were passed over in an almost cursory manner. Instead, what the teacher highlighted were the foibles, failures, and shortcomings of these men. This one was a womanizer. That one was a slaveowner. Another had a questionable business history. It was as though the goal of the lecture was to shred the reputation of people who had made a pivotal difference in the history of our country.

What Makes Leaders Great

About once a month, those of us who were teaching fellows gathered to compare notes on how our teaching assignments were progressing. During one of these gatherings, I voiced my growing concern with denigrating important leaders from the past. “What we’re doing,” I said, “is making it appear that these historical figures were nobody special. They were just as flawed as anyone else.”

“But what makes them historical figures of importance,” I continued, “is not how they were like everyone else, but the unique ways in which they were different from everyone else. It was that unique difference which vaulted them to leadership, where they changed the entire direction of our country. It’s their unique difference as leaders that our students need to hear about.”

To put it mildly, my words got a cool reception. Two or three heads nodded. For the most part, however, my comment was greeted with stony silence. Looking back, I suppose that I should not have been surprised. Because I was the only veteran in the group and was maintaining a career as a reservist, I was something of a misfit, especially in the eyes of those most vocally opposed the war. Little wonder, then, that my views fell on deaf ears.

I remember walking home that day, thinking about the implications of what had transpired in the meeting. What happens, I mused to myself, if we start producing graduates who know great leaders of the past only in terms of their flaws, sins, and mistakes, not the unique contributions

which they made to who we are today? How do heroes of the past inspire us if we see nothing heroic about them?

We need heroes, you see, to capture our imagination of what's possible for us personally. There are dozens of noble traits which we cannot fully grasp until we see them fully embodied in someone who demonstrates the trait so remarkably that it stretches our sense of what's humanly possible. We need a distinct memory of men and women who have made a profound difference in the world – not because of what they shared in common with their contemporaries, but because of how they stood apart from their contemporaries.

How Leaders Make Their Mark

There is a long-standing debate in the field of history about great men and women and their influence. Do great leaders shape events of their own accord? Or do events create the environment in which certain people are thrust into leadership? Strong examples can be cited on either side, which means that the question is not a simple either/or issue.

One thing is certain. Leaders do not make their mark by settling with being ordinary. They purposefully choose to do the extraordinary, to break with the common mold. This does not mean that they set out to violate all of the norms of their culture or of the age in which they live. Were they to do that, the people on whom they depend as followers would be unable to relate to them. But in certain distinct and unique ways, great leaders separate themselves from the crowd.

And that's what makes them worthy of emulation. That's what makes them role models. Role models are not intellectually, socially, or morally perfect in every sense of the word. They are, after all, human beings. They are flawed. To that degree my colleagues in the History Department were correct.

But in certain aspects of their lives, leaders who make a lasting impact are exemplary. In one way or another they excel. It may be in wisdom, in courage, in foresight, in shrewdness, in determination, in fortitude, in character, in humility, or in dozens of other traits.

And it is this exceptional aspect of a leader's life that changes the course of history, whether for a family, a company, a community, a nation, or even mankind as a whole. We don't condone the sins or immoralities in a person's life when we celebrate what is extraordinary in his or her example. We are simply saying, "Here is a person who rose above the ordinary . . . and you can, too."

Judging Leaders from Another Era

Another debate in the field of history is over what standards you use to judge figures of the past. Are they to be measured by today's standards? Or the prevailing standards of their own era? The present mood among those tearing down statues is that people generations ago should be judged on the basis of our current morals, mores, and sensitivities.

From my perspective, there's a pernicious arrogance in that viewpoint. It assumes that our age has attained perfection in its moral viewpoint, such perfection that no future generation will look back at us and ask how we were so oblivious to things which that future generation considers outlandish. The truth is, none of us is very effective at rising above the prevailing moral

sensitivities embedded in our own culture because the principles of that culture are so deeply etched on our psyche.

Not that long ago we considered it nothing unusual for children to work long hours at very hazardous jobs in sweat shops and factories. Today we stand askance at such indifference to child safety. We've outlawed such labor practices and now consider them immoral. On another front, many things which were once commonplace in dealing with animals just two generations ago are today viewed as criminal cruelty. The moral consensus of any culture – especially modern ones – is continually changing, continually evolving.

None of us wants the future to judge us by some moral consensus which may emerge long after we have left the scene. After all, we can't anticipate what that moral consensus will be. And if we can't anticipate it, how can we live in accordance with it?

Which then leads to the question, why should we expect people of the past to have been more capable than we are of living by a moral consensus which was yet to evolve? While we should not dismiss the moral blind spots of leaders and heroes from the past, neither should we be so arrogant as to believe that we have no moral blind spots of our own. We need to learn from both the flaws AND the greatness of leaders past.

George Santayana famously observed that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The reason that the post-medieval world has spent massive fortunes building libraries and archives is so that the past can be remembered in as much detail as possible.

If our culture decrees the banning of books whose authors held to an ethical code which we now judge to be antiquated and improper; if our culture declares war on statues of people whose lives failed to align completely with today's ideals; if our culture moves to marginalize or destroy institutions whose founding violates modern sensitivities, then future generations may well look back at us and see this as our greatest blind spot.

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