

Remarks for the Council for Excellence in Government

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A little over a month ago, perhaps like many of you, I stood on the national Mall in Washington and beheld a breathtaking scene: literally, millions of fellow citizens in a sea of humanity stretching from the Capitol to the Potomac River, rising before dawn and gathering in cold and relative discomfort to offer our collective witness to the peaceful change of leadership that is a proud hallmark of the government of the United States. We came as well to affirm, yes, even to embrace a new kind of leadership, a torch-passing unlike any we have witnessed previously in our nation. Our young, vigorous new leader offers “change” in more ways than one; we saluted our first African American president, yes, but even more, we welcomed a new style of leadership, a style filled with hope and optimism in spite of the daunting challenges we face right now as a nation.

What an exciting time to be in leadership positions for the federal government! You are “present at the creation” of a new era in government, a time of great change, considerable stress, but also much opportunity. In so many ways, the fellows gathered here today are a vital part of the talented team that will revitalize and rebuild our nation’s economy, change the banking system, overhaul our schools, reform health care, rethink investments in national security and defense, welcome home our Iraq War veterans and help them earn college degrees, rescue homeowners who have gone “underwater,” expand college access for underserved populations, restore credibility for national intelligence, provide safe and affordable housing for our citizens, ensure equal justice for all. The scope of the agenda of the new administration is breathtaking -- and so are the risks as well as the potential rewards. How will your leadership contribute to the success of this new moment for all Americans and the world that depends on our nation’s improved fiscal and moral health?

Has there ever been a time when the need for great leadership is so urgent and necessary? But what is the great leadership we need right now, really?

The late, great Bart Giamatti, president of Yale University and later Commissioner of Baseball once wrote about the difference between mere management and great leadership:

*Management is the capacity to handle multiple problems, neutralize various constituencies, motivate personnel... Leadership, on the other hand, is an essentially moral act, not --- as in most management --- an essentially protective act. It is the assertion of a vision, not simply the exercise of a style: the moral courage to assert a vision of the institution in the future and the intellectual energy to persuade the community or the culture of the wisdom and validity of the vision. It is to make the vision practicable, and compelling. (A. Bartlett Giamatti, *A Free and Ordered Space*, p. 36)*

This idea of the persuasive leader as the hub of the community is so different from the old-style “command and control” model, the “my way or the highway” boss. That old model has managed to get our country and our corporations into a heck of a lot of trouble. The entire business of corporate governance in the private sector today is focused on ensuring that the singular leader is kept in check, placing faith in the wisdom of the group assembled to hold the leader accountable.

Too many private corporate leaders have acted in ways that were self-aggrandizing, unaccountable, reckless, ultimately, destructive. In the same way, too many public leaders have also fallen victim to their own mirrors. The intoxication of high office too often robs leaders of common sense and even decency. The people of the United States expect more, and demand more. I believe that the last election was less about party or ideology and so much more about a demand for fresh air, for new leadership, for change.

As President Obama is already learning, of course, the people governed can be quite fickle, so their loyalty and support cannot be taken for granted.

More than 200 years ago Alexis de Tocqueville noted that Americans have had a love-hate relationship with their leaders. No matter the position held, whether president of the United States or block captain for the firefighter’s fundraiser, the person in the lead is, first, begged to be in charge, and then pilloried for being in charge.

In today’s world, people have so many different perceptions of leadership. Americans often confuse leadership with celebrity or popularity. Oprah can move millions to do things that presidents or cabinet secretaries would never get people to do voluntarily. This is one of the challenges of leadership --- how to motivate the group without appearing to be giving orders. People want leadership but resist taking orders.

I learn something new about leadership every day. Impossible, you say? For heaven’s sakes, you’ve been in that job for 20 years now, how can there be anything you have yet to learn? We leaders must be students of our craft. A good leader starts each day wondering what new idea she will capture in the hours ahead. A great leader starts each day with a plan to evoke that idea from others. A bad leader stays home in bed – and isn’t a leader for long.

Leadership is put to the test in the most unforeseen circumstances. Your leadership skills will surely face such tests in the days to come. Recently, we saw a great example of extraordinary leadership in a moment of tremendous stress. Captain Chesley Sullenberger didn’t take off from LaGuardia airport expecting to land minutes later in the Hudson River. Yet, in the briefest flash of time, he flew his craft from near-disaster to miraculous escape. Later, in the most understated of ways, he said he was simply doing his job, and he drew upon all of his years of training to execute that one, perfect emergency landing.

Sully’s feat was more than just technical skill, though he surely needed the decades of expertise in his brain’s computer. His real feat, however, was an act of exceptionally competent and confident leadership in the face of a sudden, devastating danger --- change, a change in plans, a disruption to the plan, a threat to the leader’s personal safety that he could not even think about because 155 other people were depending upon him.

We all have moments when we're flying that stricken aircraft looking for a safe landing somewhere. Changes causes great turbulence; the opposition factors can be like geese flying into the rotors. Opposition can be so debilitating that the motors fail, you lose altitude, you literally come to a dead stop when you're trying to move forward. How many well-meaning leaders crash and burn because they are not able to muster the steely resolve and discipline necessary to execute a solution they never previously imagined. Great leaders know that they must always be mentally and emotionally prepared to deal with unforeseen challenges.

I think it's hard to imagine any previous era --- perhaps the dawn of the Roosevelt Administration is parallel --- when government officials faced more unforeseen challenges. Economic catastrophes each day, the continuing threat of terrorism, lagging educational outcomes, declining productivity, the crisis in health care, the stress that the last decade placed on our international relations. So much leadership is needed in so many areas of public life. There's no time to lose.

While great leaders must be forward-thinking visionaries, good leaders should also be curious historians. As you participate in shaping the change agenda for your department or agency, what can you learn from case studies of past leadership challenges that will make you more effective today and next week? Bookshelves are full of case studies on presidential and executive leadership in government, and the failures of leadership. Here are just a few of the lessons to think about as you move forward:

1. Do Not "Just Say Yes" --- how many times in recent and not-so-recent history have we seen terrible mistakes made at high governmental levels because good people with the best of intentions did not speak up --- or maybe they did speak up and were ignored, but someone else surely knew they were right. Surely, the hard lessons of very recent history tell us that the worst possible service to your department, agency, government and nation is abject agreement for the sake of getting along. Leaders must speak the truth to each other. And, when you are the leader, you must set the right tone by insisting that your colleagues feel free to disagree with you, challenge your assumptions, bring you correct data and information. Leadership is not about being right --- leadership is about doing what is right.

2. Blow That Whistle --- perhaps it's a simple corollary of #1, but when you know what is right and it's not being done, you must blow the whistle. This takes real courage. Courageous leaders do risk their jobs, but the reward is being able to live with yourself. Not a bad risk, actually.

3. High Office Has NO Perks! --- I don't know who coined the phrase, "Rank has its privileges," but surely we have seen enough shocking examples of executive excess, including in some governmental agencies, to know that the last person who should have a new carpet is the boss. I have learned in my own career that no matter how controversial or unpopular your decisions might have to be at times, you will always have the respect of colleagues --- maybe not love, but at least respect --- if you cultivate a reputation for living modestly, never taking more than your co-workers, and even taking less. Trappings of office are definitely out; living like a plain citizen is definitely in.

4. Just Say No--- to indiscreet email, to twittering in the wrong places, to social networking faux pas. All agencies have rules about this, I am quite sure, and yet we read every day about individuals who somehow think that they have special rules. And, by the way, don't destroy those emails, either!

5. Remember that your life's work is in service to others. It's not about winning or losing. It's not about whose party is in or out of power, whose ideology is prevailing today. What matters is whether the people are safe, able to get a decent education, able to work and living in clean housing, able to get mortgages and buy on credit, free to travel without fear of disaster, confident in their health care and secure in their retirement. Governmental leadership is the essence of servant leadership; if you look out the window each day at the citizens passing by on the street, and think of them as representing the legions you do not see, your life's work will have great purpose and a sense of direction every day. The people for whom you work want the Good Society of our fondest hopes; they have suffered great disappointment recently, and some have even known despair. You have the opportunity to lead them out of this moment of pain into a much better future.

I have a sign hanging on my wall that someone gave me during the height of our transition days, with an anonymous quote that reads: "When reform becomes impossible, revolution becomes imperative."

Let me be very serious here for a minute about larger issues. We are in a transformative cultural and sociological moment. We are looking for a paradigm shift, which requires a break from the past to move to a completely new place in the future. We are seeking revolution, not reform, in our sense of ourselves as a culture, a nation, the most advanced civilization in human history.

Each one of us in this room is a privileged person, a member of an infinitesimally small elite among the planet's billions of inhabitants. We are a small elite of well-educated, well-employed, well-fed and well-resourced workers in the capital of the richest and most powerful nation the world has ever known. We have an important responsibility to recognize the part we play in the fate of our nation, our society, our civilization, our planet, our brothers and sisters who depend upon us for so many dimensions of their daily lives.

And, when we take stock of those profound responsibilities and the ways in which we have carried them out over the last few years, we have to know we can do better. Leadership means we don't look around the room or the city to see who to blame; leadership means we see things as they are, to paraphrase Bobby Kennedy, and ask ourselves both why, and why not?

Why did we look the other way as banks and Wall Street financiers engorged themselves with the hopes and dreams and cash of others, only to see it all melt to ashes in the firestorm of greed that became the market panic of recent memory? Or, we can say, why not reform our banking and finance policies and practices to be sure that, never again, will our trust in our money managers be so grievously betrayed.

Why did we blunder into a pre-emptive war in another nation when the evidence for that action was so deeply flawed? Why did we stand by while ancient treasures and contemporary lives were shattered beyond repair? Or, we can say, why not now reach out in peace, ensuring the rebuilding of Iraq and whatever we can do to heal the wounds of their citizens and our soldiers.

Why do we allow children to attend schools in which they never learn how to read or write or add or subtract, dooming generation upon generation in our cities to lives of illiteracy, poverty and the violence that is the bitter progeny of educational failure? Or, we can say, why not start now, today, this minute to clean up our broken schools, not with tests and formulas that only do more damage, but with patient, caring and effective teaching and leadership that earns a decent wage and is rewarded for excellence.

Oh, I could go on, but you're probably sitting out there saying, c'mon, I'm just at GS-14 in my federal agency, how can you expect me to have any impact on war and peace, healthcare or the after effects of the largest hurricane disaster ever to strike our nation?

The true leader says, there's so much to do there's no time to lose, let's be on with it! That leader lives with the words of John Gardner engraved on her heart: "The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive... the hope that we will see our way through to a better society."

Thanks for listening!