

## Remarks for the Council for Excellence in Government

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I've been thinking about leadership for the new generation of college students this week as we welcome the Class of 2012 to campus --- I had a startling realization when reviewing their profile that I've been Trinity's president longer than some of them have been alive -- the youngest were born in 1990! Goodness! And, according to the annual "mindset list" published by Beloit College (see <http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/>), the new students at college this fall never knew a Supreme Court without Clarence Thomas and always had presidents named Bush or Clinton. They never had a day without Pearl Jam and never heard of a Russian city named Leningrad. They've never known life without the World Wide Web, Windows operating system, GPS navigation systems and Jay Leno. They never knew about IBM typewriters -- except maybe in the antique office their folks kept up in the attic.

Whew. And they are being led by us luddites who remember landline phones and the days when hardware was something dad bought at Hechingers! Somehow, civilization marches on...

What a rare moment to gather with so many executive leaders in government to talk about public leadership for our nation and communities! With the Democratic Convention next week and the Republican Convention the following week, the nation will be refocusing its thoughts about leadership from Olympians to Politicians. No doubt, we'll see some gold medal performances in Denver and Minneapolis, and, if history is any prophet, at least a few speakers will fall off the balance beam.

Has there ever been a time when the very idea of leadership was so assailed from so many directions, and yet the need for great leadership is so urgent and necessary?

But the leadership we need today is certainly not the old-style "command and control" model, the "my way or the highway" top-down dictator who thinks he's being effective by the number of orders he dishes each day. In corporate life, we know that model was retired long ago in most places, but we still have this public yearning for authority figures nationally.

Yet, we also dislike authority intensely.

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. The naïve leader is devastated; the optimistic leader determines to change their minds; the realistic leader gets the job done.

In today's world, people have so many different perceptions of leadership. Americans often confuse leadership with celebrity or popularity. Any list of top leaders is just as likely to include

Katie Couric or Kobe Bryant as George Bush or Hillary Clinton. Depending on the age group, people who hold official positions of leadership might not even register --- I was recently at camp with a group of high school students and as we discussed famous women leaders, they were clueless on names like Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senator Barbara Mikulski, but they were quick to cite names such as talk show host Tyra Banks and American Idol winner Jordin Sparks.

In fact, the best leaders may often be the opposite of attractive and famous stars, and they may be quite unpopular. What some people admire most in a leader is exactly the quality that is deeply despised by others. A leader who can't make timely decisions is reviled as vacillating and indecisive; a leader who makes decisions is condemned as a brute dictator unconcerned with the will of the people. This isn't just about war and peace, friends ---- how many of you as executive leaders have needed a focus group to determine what to serve at your breakfast staff meeting --- donuts or bagels, coffee or tea, pepsi or coke? The beloved leader gets some of each; the insensitive leader has yesterday's coffee reheated; the wise leader tells everyone to bring their own.

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? 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 in bed.

One of the things I learn anew each day is that I cannot take anything for granted, including the respect and trust of those I lead. I have to earn respect and trust every day, and that's sometimes quite difficult in a society that generally mistrusts people in positions of leadership.

College presidents used to be revered as wise leaders for our society. Some of us still ardently believe that we can and should be such leaders. But public scandals by a few have led to public derision for all. Here's an example that came across my screen just earlier this week: an article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* talked about how complicated university presidencies are these days. Along with a number of other presidents, I was quoted in the article based on a letter I had a few months ago in the *New York Times* on this same topic. I had written:

"On any given day, I'm expected to raise capital, negotiate loans, manage investments, cheer for the lacrosse team, improve shareholder value, retain a top-notch management team, satisfy the alumni, understand the latest technology, meet with students, lobby for less regulation, manage the infrastructure of a small city, address the concerns of the faculty, and wax eloquent on Shakespeare's relevance in the age of Jay-Z." (Patricia McGuire in the *New York Times* online edition, April 13, 2008,

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E03E4D6123EF930A25757C0A96E9C8B63&scp=16&sq=%22Patricia%20McGuire%22&st=cse>

But not all readers appreciated the stress and strain story. Some online comments included this one: "Cry me a river!!! You have got to be kidding at the whining of these college presidents who are making a disgusting amount of money to serve as CEO of a large non-profit while handling their duties with the help of enormous administrative staffs who do their bidding!"

(See Carlos Santos, "Job's Demands Weigh on Presidents of Colleges," Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 17, 2008, <http://www.inrich.com/cva/ric/search.apx.-content-articles-RTD-2008-08-17-0167.html> )

That writer obviously never saw my pay stub or the very handsome orange parking cone that I have instead of a presidential house. Not all leaders are fabulously compensated or lushly staffed, but the public perception is that we are an elite class that takes up too much space with perks and puffery. That's a consequence of very bad leadership on the part of very few. The resilient leader doesn't take that kind of criticism too seriously. The smart leader lives her entire life as cleanly and carefully as possible, giving no fodder to the critics, taking pains to keep the #1 test of perks in mind: how would it look on the front page of the Washington Post? The servant leader gets her perks by seeing her constituents thrive each day.

Now, let's think about some of the very specific issues that you as executives in the federal government are facing. Regardless of which party wins the upcoming presidential election, you know that there will be a new administration in town, and that is going to cause the most dreaded disease imaginable in your lives --- CHANGE!

It's my first and most fundamental rule of leadership: Change is continuous. Deal with it!

How many of your colleagues come to work each day exclaiming, Oh, goodie! Let's have some change around here! Let's have new policies, new procedures, new programs! Let's switch-up all the offices and re-align the organization charts! Yipee!!

Anyone?

Nope. I'm shocked.

I remember the time back when I was a relatively young president at Trinity, and we were going through a lot of change. We had spent an entire year doing strategic planning, reorganizing curricula, re-engineering structure. Everyone was exhausted. Then, I called a meeting to discuss the timetable for implementation the following year. One very senior colleague stood up in anger, as I laid out the new timetable, and she fairly shrieked, "Stop it! We're done with change! Next year we're not going to change one thing!" Tears were running down her cheeks. I said, as gently as possible, "We haven't changed anything yet, we've only planned to change. Next year we actually start the change process."

"You're nothing but a change junkie!" she screamed at me as she stomped out of the room.

That's the darn problem with strategic plans, y'know. They have to be implemented. And, dontchaknow, implementing a new strategic plan entails --- you guessed it! --- CHANGE!

The good leader has lots of Kleenex on hand. The great leader has baskets of Prozac. The realistic leader takes Advil and moves on.

You cannot spare your constituents the necessity of change. You can mitigate the negativity about change by helping your colleagues understand and welcome the opportunities that change opens to them. A new agency head comes in with fresh perspective and new approaches to personnel management --- but all new leaders want to win early acceptance, so they look for ways to identify those staff who are most likely to welcome them and be supportive. Rather than hanging back, step up! (How many of us have had colleagues who have hung back to see whether the new guy works out.... That's totally self-destructive behavior. The likelihood of the new leader tanking and disappearing in a few months is much less than the likelihood of living for years with the dull depression that follows eager anticipation of some ugly disaster. Your leadership requires you to confront that kind of behavior, to rally colleagues to support and not undermine the new execs, give them a chance and a helping hand. That's part of your job as a leader in a time of change.)

The other part, of course, is to help the new executive avoid the kinds of self-destructive actions that have debilitated so many offices. You stand in the middle, between the skeptical staff and the hard-charging political appointee eager to prove her authority. The real leadership test is yours, not hers, and it comes at the moments when you have to restore balance on either side and remind everyone of the goals you share in common.

This leads to my next fundamental rule of leadership: If you don't hear the noise, you're not doing your job.

Thin-skinned people will bleed to death in a leadership position. You have to be mentally tough and develop resilience in the face of criticism and controversy.

In my 20 years as Trinity's president, I've had just a bit of experience with the noise outside my window. Once, that noise was the sound of some of our alumnae chanting as they threw up a small picket line demanding that I be fired. My crime? Well, I was held responsible for changes that had occurred in the demographics of our student body.

Allow me this brief commercial for Trinity, a wonderful university that's been around here in DC for 110 years, a place deeply beloved by everyone who has ever inhabited our campus. And the many pockets of deep love and profound loyalty, of course, are also quicksand for leaders who are trying to manage institutional change. Trinity is one of the nation's historic Catholic women's colleges, now a small university that still has a core women's college but also two other academic units that are fully coeducational offering undergraduate and graduate degrees --- today you can get an MBA or MSA or MAT degree at Trinity, or finish your baccalaureate or encourage a colleague to get a second degree. But for the first 80 or so years of our institutional history we served primarily young Catholic women from the east coast, and our student body was predominantly white, middle class, and traditional-aged earning baccalaureate degrees. Like many women's colleges, once coeducation became the national norm, our enrollment suffered, and in response to changing external demands Trinity began a program for adult women in the middle of the 1980s, before I became president. This Weekend College program was remarkable, serving the women of Washington in large number, women who were working in the federal government as well as private corporations. By the time I arrived as Trinity's president in 1989, those adult women, predominantly African American, were bringing their

daughters to Trinity, and the student body in the women's college began its stunning demographic shift. Trinity today is about 90% African American and Latina, with nearly 1700 women and men enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. As these changes were happening, some of our traditional constituencies were very unhappy --- you know, the reason why people resist change so much is that change creates a powerful sense of loss of something valued, and so there's a grieving process that goes along with letting go of one thing while getting to know something else. There's also anger --- some people believe that change implies a rejection of the past. I disagree strongly with this point of view, but as the institutional leader in a time of great change for Trinity --- change that made us healthy again in our enrollments --- I was also accused of disrespecting the past by promoting new directions for the future.

Hence, the picket line and the "Fire McGuire" signs parading out front during a board meeting. This was a long time ago, so now I can laugh about it. At the time it seemed pretty serious, frankly. But I'm here today to tell the tale. And Trinity is at a wonderful new place in her history. Looking back on that frothy period in Trinity's history, I know that in order to accomplish the change we needed it was necessary to endure the angry reaction, the noise, the resistance and the genuine pain of those who mourned the passing of an earlier era. As time went on, I learned when to step back and let that noisy wave crash right over me, how to recover if it beat me down into the sand, and when to catch the wave and ride it well to a new place.

This leads to my last lesson in leadership for today. 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. The word 'change' became a mantra during the presidential primary season, and it's still a large concept driving the election moment. But I venture to say that "change" is too mild a concept for what our nation is seeking -- and I don't mean this as a political statement, but as a cultural observation. 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 different kinds of jobs, we work in different strata of the leadership mosaic of Washington, but we are all part of the Washington leadership dynamic. 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 allow the people of New Orleans to suffer so grievously, and more important, why not address that ongoing national tragedy more effectively and once and for all?

Why did we need to destroy so many lives of our own soldiers and citizens of another nation to defend our national security when the real intelligence information was suggesting otherwise, and more important, why not develop the best possible plan in the most expeditious way to prevent further harm and to wind-down the war?

Why do so many children and families still suffer a grievous lack of health care and other basic services in a nation that somehow found more than \$600 billion to spend on war, and why not take a stand for justice for those most in need right here in our own community?

Why are we exhausting the earth's resources so quickly, and why not demand more action on policies and practices to promote sustainability now so that there's something left of this planet for future generations?

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 reluctant leader asks, why me? The managerial leader says, I'll see what I can do within the parameters of my job description. 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!