

HUMBLE FOR PRESIDENT

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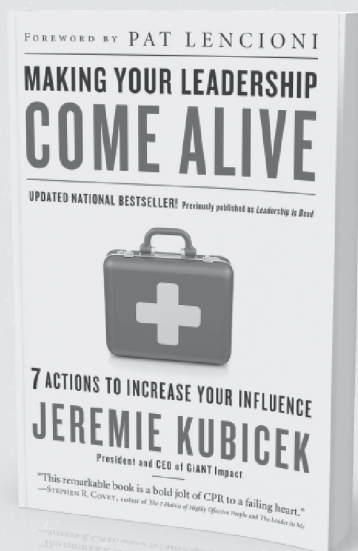
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“I Pray Heaven to Bestow The Best of Blessing on THIS HOUSE,
and on All that shall hereafter Inhabit it. May none but Honest and
Wise Men ever rule under This Roof!”

*- John Adams, in a letter to his wife after moving into the White House
in 1800; later inscribed on the mantel of the White House's State Dining
Room by Franklin Roosevelt.*

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Introduction: A Leadership Revolution

There's a second American Revolution afoot across our nation. It's building momentum slowly but with force. This revolution isn't being waged by minutemen armed with muskets but by citizens empowered with their voices and votes. They're weary of leaders who disguise their motives and divide us with their rhetoric. They've had it with the spin and the sound bites, the damage control and deceptive talking points. They crave a new kind of leader and a new kind of leadership, one marked by authenticity, integrity, and, most of all, humility: the ability to lower oneself to lead others by placing their interests before your own.

If there is any common thread that runs through the colorful tapestry that is our current American ideological spectrum—Tea Party types and Occupiers of Wall Street, Starbucks and Dunkin' Donut Democrats, Ron Paul Libertarians, Ralph Nader Green Partiers, and Reagan Republicans—it's an appetite for this kind of leadership. Though their individual policy goals are vastly different, they're all tired of unchecked, prideful leadership and how it's corroded our country, from Wall Street to Main Street. And they're ready to do something to reclaim their freedom.

Are you ready to join their ranks?

Humble for President is a non-partisan, grassroots movement calling on this nation's next president—and all leaders and citizens—to adopt a new spirit of humility: an ancient, quiet, and unvarnished virtue that has the potential to transform not only our politics but our everyday lives and leadership. A lot of ideas exist about how to bridge our nation's political chasm and fill our leadership vacuum—vote out one party, vote in another, change the leadership in Washington.

But what we need most are changed leaders in Washington and across the nation. Leaders who are humble rather than prideful. Leaders that unite rather than ignite. Leaders who care more about the cause than the applause.

And that's my mission in writing this book: To raise up a new crop of leaders who lead with humility and transform the leadership culture of America. In the following pages, I'll explore the paradox and the power of humility, and why it's an essential character trait in our nation's next president and every lowercase *p* president across the country—presidents of corporations and colleges, small businesses and school boards, charities and town councils. At the same time, I'll weave in the fictional story of John Humble, a man who led our country with character, honor, and humility, and gave himself away to build the foundations of a bridge that crossed our nation's partisan divide.

A Leadership Vacuum

Why this book, and why now? Because more than ever before, America is in need of humble leaders.

In 1988, David Broder, the late *Washington Post* political reporter, interviewed Douglas Bailey, who worked on Gerald Ford's presidential campaign. Bailey disclosed his concerns to Broder about the growing reliance of politicians on polling data. "It's no longer necessary for a political candidate to guess what an audience thinks," Bailey told Broder. "He can [find out] with a nightly tracking poll. So it's no longer likely that political leaders are going to lead. Instead, they're going to follow."¹

We have a leadership problem in America. Our leaders no longer have to lead. Call it a vacuum. Call it a void. Call it what you will. As the CEO of GiANT Impact, an Atlanta-based company committed to developing leaders, I call it a problem.

A Trust Deficit

In one two-week period last year, I decided to take the temperature of the nation and tune in to televised town halls and interviews with politicians. What I heard did not surprise me: A deep discontent and dissatisfaction has set in across the country. Poll after poll tells the story of a public disenchanted with the quality of its public servants. They cite the sluggish economy, a dearth of leadership in Washington, and constant partisan sniping and bickering. We've seen those forces play out on the political landscape before in our nation's more than 200 years of history. Those things aren't new. But what about this new, deep-seated distrust?

According to the PEW Research Center for the People & the Press, an organization that has been studying the public's trust of elected leaders since 1958, it's not new—but it has reached a new low.² In November of 1958, when the poll was first conducted during the Eisenhower administration, 73 percent of Americans reported trusting their government. In 1974, following the resignation of President Richard Nixon, that plummeted to 53 percent. It rose briefly after the crises of September 11, 2001, under President George W. Bush, but it quickly receded again. By March of 2010, voter sentiment and trust in our leaders reached a historic low: Just 22 percent of the public reported trusting leaders. That's an approximately 50 percent decline in public trust in government in roughly half a century.

What's driving that trend?

The answer is simple: Pride-based leadership.

In more than three decades as an entrepreneur, leadership consultant, and CEO, I've learned that humility creates trust; pride weakens it.

Our leaders have lost any sense of humility. As they've lost humility, we've lost trust. As pride divides our leaders, we've become divided—collateral damage. Consequently, each election has become something of a political seesaw. We vanquish those in power out of office. Then, they proceed to engage the other side in a kind of

scorched-earth political warfare. That's not what we've elected them to do. We've elected them to lead us.

The Better Angels of Our Nature

On the eve of another election, what if our best bet to solve our trust deficit and leadership crisis isn't to elect new leaders but renewed leaders? Leaders who are committed to serve every American—not only those who share his party affiliation? What if our best path forward doesn't involve electing a leader who shares our view on every single issue, but has the ability to lead well?

If you're looking for a book telling you what to think about controversial policies, you'll be disappointed by what follows. If you're looking for a book championing one side of the aisle at the expense of the other side, you can stop reading now. For those things, all you need to do is find the nearest television, tune into the news channel of your choice and tune out. Instead, this book is for those who have high expectations for our nation's leader. It's for those who value faithful leadership over faithful partisanship. And it's for those who still harbor hope that our leaders can, as Abraham Lincoln said in his first inaugural address, be influenced “by the better angels of our nature.”

Before Lincoln delivered that address in 1861, he wrestled with what tone to take. Should he take a confrontational approach, calling out the South for their actions? Or should he take a more conciliatory approach? An early version of the speech was much more pointed, asking the South, “Shall it be peace or sword?” But deciding that our national unity was more important than assigning blame, Lincoln made an interesting choice. He chose to strike a more diplomatic tone:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over

this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.³

Imagine how different our political atmosphere would be if we were more influenced by our better angels. Imagine how different the tone of our debate would be if we had leaders who weren't caught in the cycle of self-preservation: getting elected and then governing to merely maintain their power by bowing to the whims of fickle followers. We need true leaders who are willing to lay down their political lives in service to a nation that faces survival-level threats.

The Humility Revolution

There's also been a revolution in the way we understand humility and its power to shape us. For years, we've considered humility, at best, a soft skill—one that informs our manners more than the substance of self and society. At worst, we've considered it a weakness.

But what new research in fields such as psychology and business is showing—backed by centuries of ancient wisdom—is that humility is actually an asset in an individual, not a weakness. On a practical level, a healthy dose of humility helps a leader to learn from his mistakes and shortcomings, to earn trust from and unite those they lead, and to make their life more meaningful by inspiring them to pursue causes greater than themselves. It's also the missing ingredient in diffusing our political gridlock. And it's a must-have trait in our next president.

Humility Can Make Our Politics More Civil

The premise of nearly every campaign in every election goes roughly something like this: Those in power have failed the public trust, haven't led well, haven't governed well, don't share our values, and

don't deserve a second chance; therefore, those in power need to be replaced by those out of power.

And here's why *Humble for President* is different from every political campaign that's ever existed: *Its success doesn't lie in changing leaders but in leaders changing.* We offer no Humble-approved slate of candidates. We're not endorsing any particular candidate or parties in this election. We're simply asking our elected leaders and candidates to govern and campaign with humility, and we're asking you, the voter, to encourage them toward that end. In fact, consider our endorsement announced: Humble wins.

This book's aim is to advance a simple but transformative axiom: Pride divides; humility unites. To fully live out the motto that has bound such a diverse people together for years—*E pluribus unum*, “out of many, one”—we must humble ourselves again.

In the tradition of great American pamphleteers such as Thomas Paine, who wrote impassioned pleas arguing for freedom from British hegemony, this manifesto is an argument for how humility can bring us freedom from the pride that has infiltrated and immobilized our politics and leadership culture.

In these “times that try men's souls,” as Paine would say, Democrats and Republicans alike must lay aside the pride and partisan rancor that's been consuming this nation from the inside out, and pursue their respective agendas with humility.

In his memoir *Decision Points*, President George W. Bush recounts a tale that highlights a major character trait in great leaders: They actively search out common ground with their opponents. Shortly after President Bush assumed office, he received a note from the late U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy:

Dear Mr. President:

You and Mrs. Bush couldn't have been more gracious and generous to Vicki and me and the members of our family last night and these past few days. I very much appreciate your thoughtful consideration. Like you, I have every intention of getting things done, particularly in education and healthcare. We will have a difference or two

Introduction: A Leadership Revolution

along the way, but I look forward to some important Rose Garden signings.

Warm regards,
Ted Kennedy ⁴

This bipartisan gesture offers a glimpse of how our leaders can work together, in humility, to get things done in Washington. We don't have to agree on everything. But when we disagree, we must do so humbly.

But before humility can happen in Washington, it must happen in us. We must realize this fundamental truth: Our political system is largely a reflection of ourselves. In short, Washington is broken because we are: A corrosive pride pervades our pursuits—in our personal lives, our businesses, and our politics. In Ancient Greek mythology, hubris kept heroes like Achilles and Icarus from achieving true greatness. And so it has with leaders in our world today.

But that's about to change.





Part 1:

Humble for President

Humility unites; pride divides. And so the most important quality we should look for in our next leader—and in every leader, for that matter—is humility: an ancient, quiet, and unvarnished virtue that has the potential to transform not only our politics but also our everyday lives and leadership.

A New Kind of Leader

The Roman farmer had no idea how quickly his life was about to change.

When Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus looked up from plowing his three-acre plot of land, he saw the delegation in the distance approaching him quickly. As they grew closer, Cincinnatus recognized them as Roman senators, leaders of his country.

What could the government officials want from him, a simple farmer?

Cincinnatus called for his wife to bring him his toga. He had to dress respectfully to greet such distinguished visitors.

After exchanging pleasantries, the senators got down to business. They told Cincinnatus that they had an important issue to discuss with him, one that would certainly change the course of his life, and the destiny of his nation. The senatorial delegation told Cincinnatus that whatever happened, they hoped “it might turn out well for both you and your country.”

Might turn out well?

What happened next came as a shock to Cincinnatus: The senators designated him dictator of the Roman Republic.

They explained to him that the Roman army was under siege by not one, but two foreign powers, the Aequians and the Sabines. They needed a powerful leader to marshal their forces in battle. Cincinnatus did just that, winning a glorious victory in 458 B.C. His legions fought so hard under his guidance that the opposing armies begged for mercy—literally.

Then, sixteen days after having become dictator, he resigned.

More than a decade later, Cincinnatus once again accepted the role of dictator in order to crush the efforts of Spurius Maelius to become king of Rome. After accomplishing his objective of keeping the republic, Cincinnatus once again relinquished his power.

Why? Humility. For Cincinnatus, power was only a means to serve others. It was a privilege. It wasn't a commodity one sought to acquire; it was something that one accepted from the people with an attitude of humility.

Caesar: Holding Power for Power's Sake

Fast-forward some 500 years. Julius Caesar, another Roman leader, took a very different approach to power. Like Cincinnatus, Caesar was a remarkable and talented military leader. He oversaw an expansion of Roman power and influence, led an invasion of Britain, started and won a civil war.

Unlike Cincinnatus, he held on tightly to power. As one historian wrote, "There can be no escaping the fact that by any definition Caesar was a tyrant: he gained power via a bloody premeditated coup; employed brutal force; suppressed democracy; and, brooking no opposition, ruled through fear."⁵ He helped Rome move from a republic to an empire, and in the process, planned to make himself king. Caesar launched a sweeping, ambitious legislative agenda, increasing his own authority and weakening the authority of other people and institutions around him.

On the infamous Ides of March, a group of senators rushed Caesar, just as a similar group had approached Cincinnatus centuries before. This time, though, the mob of sixty senators did not come to bestow power on Caesar. They came to seize it from him. In a bloody melee, the senators stabbed him with their daggers, killing him because of his disregard for the traditions of the Republic, and, most of all, a personal ambition that kept him from leading with humility.

A Tale of Two Leaders: Cincinnatus vs. Caesar

Cincinnatus and Caesar were two different leaders with two remarkably different styles. And they met two remarkably different ends. Caesar, immortalized by Shakespeare as a tragic figure in his epony-

mous play *Julius Caesar*, was ultimately a victim of his own ambition and pride—even though he displayed occasional flashes of adept leadership. Cincinnatus, on the other hand, became a model for leaders who lived thousands of years after him. What led to one’s downfall and the other’s success?

One led out of his pride and ambition, and one led out of humility and selflessness. How we lead matters.

More than a thousand years after the time of Cincinnatus, a young man across the world became enamored with the historical figure, modeling his own leadership after Cincinnatus’s selfless approach. Like Cincinnatus, he would be offered the chance at near-absolute power over a nation, and he would walk away.

That man was George Washington, our first president. He would also later go on to become the president general of The Society of the Cincinnati, a nonprofit educational organization that was founded in 1783 by the leaders of the Continental Army. Their motto: “He gave up everything to serve the Republic.”

Politicians Must Become Public Servants Again

Caesar was a politician. Cincinnatus was a public servant.

What’s the difference? At core, public servants put the interests of those they serve ahead of their own. Politicians do the opposite.

Politicians frame leadership success in terms of wins and losses: debates, elections, and short-term political battles. As the former U.S. Senator and Governor of Arkansas James Paul Clark once famously said, “A politician thinks of the next election; a statesmen of the next generation.”

Politicians are not just confined to the political arena. There are politicians in the marketplace who think only of the next business deal or quarterly earnings report—not the good of their team. There are politicians in organizations who care more about accomplishing their personal agenda than their company’s mission.

Public servants, on the other hand, work tirelessly for the good of those they serve. Unlike politicians, public servants don't sacrifice the good of their followers on the altar of their own ambition. They put the next generation ahead of the next election, the good of their team ahead of their agenda, and the success of the cause ahead of their own success.

A Major Bipartisan Victory

That dynamic seems like a distant reality from the dysfunctional ethos that dominates our leadership culture today. Democrats and Republicans have actually been remarkably bipartisan when it comes to humility: They've been successful in not pursuing it at all. President Harry S. Truman captured this accurately when he said, "There are more prima donnas per square foot in public life...in Washington than in all the opera companies ever to exist."⁶

On a personal level, pride ruins potentially great candidates for leadership. On a national level, it immobilizes and poisons our politics and could ultimately lead to our collective demise—if we let it. But it doesn't have to be that way. Geographically, we may be far removed from the rancor of our gridlocked Capitol, but we can still be a part of the solution.

Day after day we watch news reports and click on salacious stories touting the demise of another leader. We fuel the daily ratings and traffic beast with our appetite for the scandal, consuming stories that chronicle how the mighty have fallen. We share YouTube outtakes of a candidate fumbling over a word or forgetting the name of a world leader. Presidential debates are no longer substantive exchanges over policy differences. Instead, they've become gladiatorial events during which candidates are encouraged to deal their opponents mortal political wounds. And if they don't, if they play nice, if they're diplomatic in their appraisal of their opponents, we vanquish them from the arena. Here's how President Barack Obama's former Chief of Staff, Bill Daley, once put it in an interview:

A lot of people say, ‘Oh, politics is so uncivil. Isn’t that terrible, why can’t they get along, gee, I’ve never see anything like this.’ Well, it should be better, but maybe it’s more reflective of society. And watch the cable [news] shows. What gets [ratings]? The angry, the nasty, the insulting, the edge[y] thing. So maybe politics is just more reflective of society than we want to admit.⁷

Don’t think pride has gripped us as a nation? Its effect can be subtle, and it’s sometimes so deep in our psyches that it’s difficult to detect. Consider a few simple examples, trends, and facts that show how pride displays itself in our everyday lives:

- In recent decades, psychologists have documented what they call a self-serving bias, which means that we tend to take credit for our successes, chalking them up as outcomes of our personal strengths while simultaneously disowning our failures, explaining them away as results of external factors beyond our control.
- Studies show that 90 percent of business owners see their performance as superior when compared to the work of their peers. But in reality, that’s obviously not the case.⁸
- Research shows that drivers who have been hospitalized for accidents believe they are more capable on the road than average drivers.⁹
- Some experts have made the case that now-defunct companies such as Bear Stearns and others met their demise because of overconfidence and institutional hubris.¹⁰
- The famed business and leadership expert Jim Collins has pointed to “hubris born of success” as the first stage of decline that formerly great companies enter into on a slide toward eventual corporate death.
- Leadership development consultant and author Tim Irwin has diagnosed arrogance—not incompetence or being the victim of a dicey economy—as the number-one derail of executives, such as former Hewlett-Packard CEO

Carly Fiorina (who once used the word *I* 129 times in a commencement speech at Stanford University) and former Lehman Brothers CEO Dick Fuld (who once proclaimed to the *Wall Street Journal* “As long as I am alive this firm will never be sold. And if it is sold after I die, I will reach back from the grave and prevent it.” The firm went bankrupt in the financial crises of 2008).¹¹

- Social commentator and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks rightly argues that during the course of the twentieth century, there was a shift from a culture of self-effacement to self-expansion: In 1950, for example, he notes that Gallup organization asked high school seniors whether they were a very important person; only 12 percent said “yes.” In 2006, the percentage of high school seniors who said they were a very important person ballooned to 80 percent.¹²

Pride comes before a fall, we’ve heard. And we’re witnessing the falls around us every single day. But does it have to be that way?

What would happen if humility infused our everyday interactions—in politics, the marketplace, and our communities? Could humility, that virtue which has waned in popularity and is so often misunderstood in our time, be an antidote to our acidic hyperpartisan atmosphere, a bridge to cross our nation’s political divide?

The Change We Need

Tom Rosshirt, a former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton, accurately captured the national mood leading up to the 2008 presidential election:

The current political campaign is replete with calls for change. But I haven’t heard anybody chanting, “I want to change! I want to change!” The call for change is always a call for other people to change—the rich people, the poor people, the black people, the white people, the Republicans, the Democrats—if only they would change, the country would get back on track. But a campaign to change others is based on pride, not humility. It will polarize the

country, and a polarized nation is a paralyzed nation.¹³

One would be hard-pressed to refute that we are a polarized or paralyzed nation.

No matter your political affiliation, it's difficult not to sense that the rapturous applause that followed the historic election of 2008 has receded to a collective sigh. As a nation, we're more divided than we've ever been.

Here's the thing, though: Our much talked-about political division is not rooted in our policy differences, as cable news pundits and demagogues would have us believe. Our chief problem is not that there is a Red America and a Blue America. It's not that one side of the aisle is entirely right while the other is entirely wrong. It's that both sides are unwilling to admit that they might be wrong. Both lack humility. And that pride is something that doesn't stop at Washington's Beltway; it's also in each of us.

In this country, at this time in history, our political chasm can be bridged. Not by some Grand Bargain. Not by another Great Communicator. But with the unvarnished, often ill-defined, and almost forgotten virtue of humility, which fosters in us a readiness and willingness to lay down personal ambitions in service to a cause outside of ourselves.

It won't be easy. If you haven't noticed, the virtue of humility is not a popular one in our world today. Twentieth-century poet T.S. Eliot said, "Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself."

Dr. Everett L. Worthington, a Virginia Commonwealth University professor of psychology, who has spent much of his academic career studying the virtue, says, "As a group, Americans are least accepting of humility in leaders." Instead, he says, we "desire outspoken confidence, almost arrogance in our leaders."¹⁴

If we—politicians and voters alike—admit that we could be wrong or that the other side could be right, we create space for what columnist and formal presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan described as a "patriotic grace," in her book of the same name, a buffer zone

in which progress can take place, where we're for each other—not merely some abstract policy or ideal. “We must try to reclaim our unity,” Noonan writes. “We should leave behind bitterness and blame: they are empty wells. We must try again to be alive to what the people of our country really long for in national life: forgiveness and grace, maturity and wisdom.”¹⁵

Will you be part of a movement to bring about this change?
Will you vote Humble for President?

What criteria are most important to you as you consider which presidential candidate to vote for? Tell us online and see what other readers think at www.HumbleforPresident.com.

- Party affiliation
 - Electability
 - Religious affiliation
 - Character
 - Management abilities
 - Experience
-

The Perfect President...

Doesn't exist. Perfect presidents—like perfect leaders—are mythical creatures. But that hasn't kept scholars, historians, and pundits from coming up with their own ideas about what essential ingredients that person would have. Here are a few of the formulas—yes, formulas—researchers have developed:

Presidential success = .42(Intellectual Brilliance) + .15(Height) - .24 (Attractiveness) - .33(Tidiness) + .32(Achievement Drive)¹⁶

Well, that's simple enough. If you want a winning president, according to Stewart J.H. McCann at Canada's University College of Cape Breton, just pick the candidate who has a handful of intellectual brilliance, who is tall, while adjusting for attractiveness and tidiness a smidge, and throw in a dollop of drive. Got it.

Another set of academics offers a slightly different winning recipe:

Presidential success = .136(Assertiveness) + .315(Achievement striving) - .214(Straightforwardness)¹⁷

While those formulas may seem quasi-comical (as if selecting a great president is as simple and seamless as is figuring out the square root of 49), they're actually honest efforts by serious-minded academics who have studied what makes great presidents tick.

Intuitively, we know choosing a leader for our country, our states, our cities, churches, and companies is more complicated than an equation. In many ways, the presidential election is the most expensive, intensive, high-stakes job interview there is. But are we, the voters—democracy's human resource department—even asking the right questions? What kind of skills do they need to succeed?

Presidential Elections as Job Interviews

In most job interviews, the questions asked to the interviewees fall into three main buckets. They're asked about their past experience and how that past experience would translate into success in the current position. Interviewees are asked questions to reveal their personality. And, oftentimes, they're asked questions that reveal their character.

As voters, we do a pretty good job asking candidates the first kinds of questions, a mediocre job with second types of questions, and a miserable job with the last. That should change.

In what is becoming a perpetually divided government, where permanent partisan majorities just don't exist, presidents will almost always be forced to play the role of Compromiser-in-Chief. They will change their positions on issues at times. And that's not always the detestable thing we make it out to be. What matters more is that they possess some solid, foundational character and leadership traits that remain concrete.

Here are some questions we can ask that can be a relatively revealing glimpse into how a candidate would lead:

- 1. How has a candidate handled power in the past?*
- 2. Did he use it for the good of others or himself?*
- 3. Does this candidate have something to hide or protect?*
- 4. Does he exercise his power with humility?*

And that last question is really the most important of these questions, because when power becomes untethered from humility in a leader's life, we all lose.

Rubenzer and Faschingbauer solicited the opinions of dozens of experts for the roles and responsibilities we should consider when assessing a president's job performance.¹⁸ Here are a few they came up with:

- Role as Chief of State
- Role as Chief Executive
- Role as Chief of Foreign Relations
- Role as Legislative Leader
- Role as Commander in Chief
- Role as Party Leader
- Role as Guardian of Prosperity
- Role as Molder of Public Opinion
- Role as International Leader
- Role as Chief Law Enforcement Officer
- Planning, development, and implementation of policies
- Establishment of responsibilities and procedures
- Coordinating functions and operations of executive agencies
- Reviewing activity and reports to determine progress, revising objectives as appropriate
- Development and implementation of public relations policy
- Supervision of subordinates
- Concern for the country
- Addressing the country's problems
- Transcending party politics for the good of the nation
- Providing emotional leadership
- Providing moral leadership
- Avoiding exploitation of other nations or groups of people
- Written and oral communication
- Expending extra effort to meet challenges
- Self discipline: avoiding vices at work
- Facilitating team performance
- Leadership
- Interpersonal skills displayed on the job
- Productivity
- Quality of work performed
- Job-related knowledge
- Problem solving
- Compliance with the Constitution and the laws

- Compliance with rules and procedures
- Avoiding unethical behavior
- Enhancing the office and prestige of the presidency
- Commitment to the job
- Initiative
- Cooperation with others
- Overall job performance

It's quite a list. And yet somehow, for decades, we've accepted a dumbed-down, armchair analyst's version of American politics. We examine electability. We run down our individual checklists: right religion, right personality, a level of intelligence that matches the demands of the job, and, more recently, the can-I-enjoy-a-beer-with-them test.

But we should ask more from our candidates. More than for them to merely nod their head with us as we voice our concerns. More than for them to parrot back to us our favored positions on individual pet issues and causes. More than for them to keep their head down and follow the polls.

The presidency is much more than a platform, a set of policies, a white paper on tax policy and green jobs. And at the same time, our presidents have less sway over the direction of our nation's policy than we'd like to think. As journalist and commentator Ezra Klein has it:

Forget the president. Not totally, of course. The president matters. But not as much as you think. Not as much as you've been led to believe. The centrality of the executive is something of a convenient fiction in American politics. Convenient for the media, which can tell the story of national affairs by following a single character. Convenient for the party that holds the White House, which can outsource the messy work of constructing an agenda to one actor. Convenient for the party that does not hold the White House, which can create an agenda out of simple opposition. And convenient for voters, who can understand politics through the actions of a discrete player and offload their dissatisfaction onto the failures of a hapless individual.¹⁹

Though they can't control everything, presidents have an incredible platform to exercise leadership from; and, at core, true leadership is nothing more than influence. So, absent the perfect president or perfect candidate, what's a voter to do?

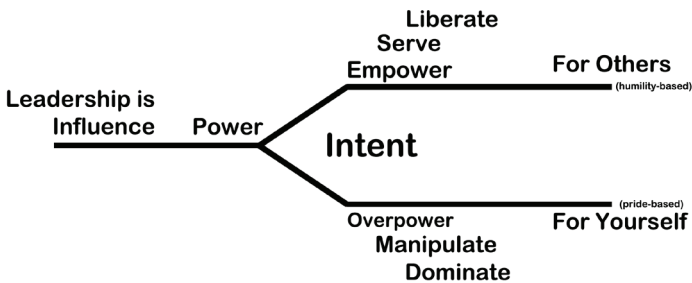
Our next best choice is to find a humble president.

Humble Leadership vs. Proud Leadership

Richard Nuestadt knew a lot about leadership. For four decades, the late Harvard University Kennedy School of Government professor served as an adviser to presidents and their closest advisers, including Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton. Nuestadt believed that the essence of a president's power was influence. "His strength or weakness, then, turns on his personal capacity to influence the conduct of the men [and women] who make up government. His influence becomes the mark of leadership."²⁰

Leadership, at core, is influence. And influence is power. What a leader decides to do with that power reveals their intent. Leaders who overpower, manipulate, and dominate—all for the sake of self—have dominated our national leadership culture in recent years, it seems. This is pride-based leadership.

Humility-Based Leadership vs. Pride-Based Leadership



Humility calls upon leaders to rethink how they use power: To use their influence to empower, to serve, and to liberate. This is leadership based in humility.

Humility-based leadership forms when leaders know who they are, know their strengths and weaknesses, competencies, and liabilities. Humble leaders are confident. And because they don't have anything to prove or hide, they are often easier to follow.

Pride-based leadership, on the other hand, forms in insecurity. It flourishes when leaders don't know their identity or their true purpose. No matter the mask they put on, they are, at their core, uncomfortable with themselves. Prideful leaders overcompensate by being overconfident.

For a leader, the ramifications of these two realities are groundbreaking: If you lead with humility, you diminish drama, while spurring productivity and increasing loyalty; however, if you lead with pride, then insecurity reigns, abuses of power run rampant, and stability escapes you and those under your leadership.

Are You a Humble Leader or a Prideful Leader, a Cincinnatus or a Caesar?

Which of these leadership foundations do you operate from? Consider your answers to these questions:

- 1. List the significant leaders in your life. Were they humble or prideful leaders?*
- 2. What impact did their leadership have on you?*
- 3. Do you have a tendency to be insecure or overconfident?*
- 4. Would you followers say you lead with humility or pride?*

If we're going to grow as leaders, we must be willing to ask ourselves the hard questions. Let's all choose to start now by building our leadership on humility. And then let's begin to raise up the leaders around us, from our communities to the nation's Capitol, to that same standard. It will benefit you and those around you.

The Most Important Leadership Trait

Humility is the most important characteristic a leader can have. When a person begins to understand humility, he begins to become more comfortable with who he is, both with his strengths and with his flaws. Humility draws a person to the understanding that he is not all-powerful and or all knowing, so he doesn't act like he is either of those things. Humility produces positive security and confidence in a person so that he's not trying to prove himself all the time to everyone he meets.

Pride, on the other hand, is the most detrimental characteristic a leader can have. It creates overconfidence, or what psychologists call a self-serving bias, which some have argued has actually led to colossal military defeats and business and personal failures of high-profile companies and figures.

Likewise, a humble leader doesn't overreach, a problem that in recent topsy-turvy election years has seemed to afflict both American political parties. A humble leader knows he's not perfect, and so he willingly admits when he's wrong. He assesses his own abilities with sobriety. As political and cultural commentator and columnist David Brooks writes:

A humble leader knows her performance slips when she has to handle more than one problem at a time, so she turns off her phone and e-mail while making decisions. She knows she has a bias for caution, so she writes a memo advocating the more daring option before writing another advocating the most safe. She knows she is bad at prediction, so she follows Peter Drucker's old advice: After each decision, she writes a memo about what she expects to happen. Nine months later, she'll read it to discover how far off she was.... She knows the world is too complex and irregular to be known, so life is about navigating uncertainty.²¹

Consequently, he surrounds himself with other humble advisers who complement his weaknesses in areas where they have strengths. His humility opens him up to new information that may be in conflict

with his view of the world around him, ensuring that his decisions take into account all information, not just that which confirms previously held views.

He can admit when he's wrong. Author and popular blogger Seth Godin says, "Politicians...are never wrong, apparently, and when they are, spin instead of admitting it. Which not only hurts their trustworthiness, it prevents them from learning anything. Two elements of successful leadership: a willingness to be wrong and an eagerness to admit it."²² Because they are not consumed with using those around them to maintain their inflated self-image, they are free to exhaust themselves in service to a cause greater than their own ego.

The Five Benefits of Humility

Humility gives a leader the capacity to lead out of a position of strength rather than weakness; the courage to set aside personal gain for the good of others; the candor to be honest with his followers and change course when it's necessary without fear of criticism; and the character to respond charitably when attacked by the other side of the aisle, breaking the stranglehold that partisan politics has on our political process. Let's look at each advantage individually.

1. *Humility gives a leader the capacity to lead out of a position of strength.* Though humility is often viewed as a weakness in our loud, proud, take-no-prisoners culture today, it's actually an incredible gesture of strength. First, it's a choice. That's the difference between being humiliated and being humbled. When you're humiliated, a negative occurrence, it's usually at the hands of someone else. But when you're humble, it's a consequence of a series of choices you've made.

2. *Humility makes a leader more persuasive.* This is one of the key benefits of humility, argues Macquarie University Professor John Dickson in his excellent book *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership*. It's a compelling virtue in others that attracts us to them, Dickson notes. It's why we cheer on the underdog and root against

their opponent. This is an especially essential quality in a president—or any leader for that matter—because one of a leader’s most powerful tools is his ability to cast a vision to his followers, and to persuade them to unite to make that vision a reality.

In Power and the Presidency: What’s Essential Is What’s Invisible, historian David McCullough says, “If we could put presidential power in a pot and boil it down, a big part of what we would find at the bottom would be language, the use of language, the potency of words.”²³ What’s also interesting, he notes, is that John F. Kennedy, though he led a tumultuous personal life, was one of our most effective presidents at inspiring with his words. And he accomplished that, in part, by never speaking about himself in his speeches. Instead, he communicated to people his vision of the country. He was not personally ambitious in his speeches but ambitious for the country. “It was a big part of his appeal,” McCullough says.²⁴

3. *Humility gives a leader the courage to set aside personal gain for the good of others.* We need leaders willing to think more about the next generation. We need leaders willing to jeopardize the prospects of their own reelection for the good of others. But when ego rules, decisions become about improving personal position. The law, the Constitution, and the good of others all become subordinate to the leader’s agenda. A humble person sees others as inherently valuable. Proud leaders are focused on themselves. Humble leaders are others-focused.

4. *Humility gives a leader the candor to be honest with his followers and change course if necessary.* A humble person separates himself from his accomplishments. When his accomplishments receive criticism, for him that’s not the same as receiving personal criticism. When proud leaders might be tempted to hide their weaknesses, humble leaders are open about their weaknesses.

5. *Humility gives a leader the character to respond charitably when attacked.* Because a humble leader doesn’t derive his identity from his accomplishments, he’s able to deal with the kind of searing criticism that’s so common in our political arena today with ease and grace. Rather than trying to deflect it or subject their political opponents to

an ad hominem attack, he simply owns the truth of the criticism—if there is any—and discards the rest. Because he’s willing to learn from his mistakes, he constantly grows. Prideful leaders have all the right answers. Humble leaders ask all the right questions—of themselves and others.

A Study in Pride

The politician—smart, suave, and successful—was on his way to the top. For years, the son of a real estate tycoon had been compiling a sterling political résumé, the kind that made would-be presidential campaign managers salivate: degrees from Princeton and Harvard and experience at one the nation’s most prestigious law firms.²⁵ Not to mention tenure as a tough prosecutor taking on corporate greed and the attorney general of a large state. At home, he had a picture-perfect family: A wife he met on a ski trip in his twenties and three young daughters. Some onlookers saw in him a future party leader; others, the makings of a future president.

He went on to win his state’s governorship in a record landslide. Along the way, he acted like a modern-day Jefferson Smith, the wide-eyed politician played by Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Even his rhetoric was reminiscent of the Boy Rangers leader-turned-U.S. Senator. “It is with profound humility about the task that lies before us and filled with great hope for what I know we will achieve, that I stand before you to announce that Day One of our time for change has arrived,” he told those gathered at his inaugural address on a cold day in January.²⁶

His character, those around him noticed early on, seemed impeccable. Where other politicians were tempted to cut corners, he doubled-down with integrity: “I’m running for attorney general,” he’d say tell his staff in his first campaign for public office. “We need to follow the letter of the law.”²⁷

He even seemed to have a firm grasp on how frail the human condition could be, how easily someone in a position of power could