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Ronny J. Coleman

Honor, Hubris and Humiliation

With all due apology to the Novel War and Peace, we are going to start this month's column with a parallel phrase to one of the most famous opening lines in a novel. He was the best of the leader's; he was the worst of the leader's.

Those of you that have read War and Peace, observed the worst and best in the times as that story unfolded across the cavalcade of Europe's political and military follies.

But I chose a different target. I said something different in the focus of this statement. I alluded to the fact that a person can be simultaneously both the best and the worst in their interaction with others.

What prompted this column was the reading of a recent book entitled "the Coldest Winter" by David Halberstam. The book deals specifically with the beginning of World War II and how politics and personality laid themselves out over a period of some five decades in American history. At the center of the discussion was General McArthur. Probably no other General in the history of the United States Army was more controversial than McArthur, unless you consider Dick Patton to be his competitor. However, McArthur was larger than life in comparison to Patton who was merely aspiring to be larger than life.

The nature of this book to me was that it revealed both the good and the bad in leadership styles that play themselves out in the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of organizations over time. McArthur who is said by many is brilliant. Undoubtedly he carried on specific strategies that were instrumental in bringing the war to a close. But those very same strengths turned into weaknesses when it came to the delegation of authority, the sharing of responsibility and probably most important of all, being loyal to the organization.

As I read the narrative, I was struck by many of the cases in which McArthur had demonstrated a strength that many of us aspire to and that is confidence and competency. Not unlike a stone block made of granite however, it was often juxtaposed against other blocks of granite with the faultiest of mortars in between.

One might say that McArthur fell into the category of the Caesar like syndrome of suffering more hubris than any other person was authorized to exhibit.

As I continued reading my way through the book, I was reminded of a quote of an old friend of mine, Jim Page. He often said "egos eat brains". When he first said that, I laughed along with everybody else in



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the room. But over a period of time, I have come to appreciate the fact that individuals of great stature often become so convinced of their own self-importance that they fail to realize the strength that comes from surrounding yourself with people who are equally as competent as they are. As the old saying goes – it's not about me – it's about we.

Over many years, I have read hundreds of books on leadership, taught quite a few classes on the concept and have engaged in hundreds of conversations with other fire chiefs about what constitutes an effective leader. As I was reading this book, I began to question whether McArthur was a truly great leader or was he merely a lucky individual at the end of his life. How could a Medal of Honor winner become such a petty person as McArthur became in later life?

Those of you who are managing and leading fire departments today probably are not playing your careers out against the landscape as important as the Asian Theater was in 1940. Yet, at the same time, you are playing in an arena in which your leadership style will either leave a legacy or it will create a liability for the organization. Which is it to be? If you intend to leave a legacy, then it is very important that you learn the lessons from leaders like McArthur to make sure there are those who are behind you that will carry it on. You need to be defining what skill sets and attributes you are hoping that other people will adopt and live by once you have gone on rather than crushing any opposition to your style of getting things done. In McArthur's case, he challenged the authority of the President of the United States and lost. He took risks that made him look good but simultaneously cost the lives of thousands of individual soldiers. Some of them our parents and grandparents. Is that what any of us want to be known for? I don't think so.

Halberstam also discusses many other leaders who found themselves in positions of having to influence outcomes in the McArthur era. They included such people as Dean Rusk, President Truman, Mathew Ridgeway and a multitude of others whose names are also prominent in our history books. They probably had their strengths and their weaknesses also. But if an organization has a combination of individuals whose strengths are leveraged through the strengths of others the organization gets stronger and stronger. In an organizational setting where weaknesses undermine the authenticity of the organization, sometimes the organization begins to fail.

What I am suggesting with this column is that all of us take a look around and ask ourselves whether or not we are as good as we think we are and how do we know what our strengths and weaknesses are? This is a form of self-assessment that is a double-edged sword. If you convince yourself that you are doing everything right, that you can't make any improvement, there is a possibility that you will suffer the same fate as McArthur. An ego driven decision making model in which high risks can be rewarded but simultaneously can create severe consequences. On the other hand, if you analyze your strengths and weaknesses and clearly understand that one of the best ways of leveraging your strengths is to find other individuals that you can work with where you can combine your strength to be even more



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effective. It is also the place where you can identify that if you have a weakness, you need to find someone who can plug that hole in your skill set so that the team overall functions in a highly effective manner.

I can barely remember this but I do recall when McArthur came home. He received a hero's welcome. But it was a hollow victory in that his career was then made into a final chapter in a history book. He never became the President of the United States, a position which he aspired to. Instead, that position was taken by another army General, Dwight D. Eisenhower. There are no two general officers from this era that you could draw a portrait of that could not be more different than these two.

There are lessons to be learned from both of their styles. Which lessons are you looking for?