Real Heroes and Real Leadership
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The horrific 9/11 tragedies demonstrated that good could flow out of the most devastating events. Americans of all races, religions, and socio-economic groups were united in a way not thought possible in recent years. New heroes were found, and they were not movie stars, athletes, or rock musicians, but they were ordinary men and women who found common purpose, and who found the decency and humanity that often comes in life or death moments.

That moment in history also demonstrated that political leaders could rise above the petty mundaneness of their jobs and rise to greatness. Such was the case with the mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, whose pre-September 11 life had degenerated into the stuff of tabloids, but whose post-September 11 leadership in rallying his city and the nation left a country in awe.

How tragedies provide the acid test of genuine leadership have been manifest throughout history, and the dramatic rescue of nine miners from the Quecreek Mine only reminds us that great challenges produce great leadership.

The leadership in the Quecreek Mine disaster came from many quarters, but nowhere more impressively than from Pennsylvania Governor Mark Schweiker. How Schweiker came to this moment in history and why he performed brilliantly is an object lesson in leadership and how crises can be transforming events.

On the surface, Schweiker's career had little in it to suggest he could rally a state and a nation through the tortuous three-day mining disaster ordeal. Plucked out of anonymity in 1994 as a Bucks County Commissioner by an ambitious gubernatorial candidate, Tom Ridge, Schweiker became his party's candidate for lieutenant governor.

Schweiker might have remained a local public official had it not been for Ridge's need to find a running mate in the Republican vote rich suburbs of Philadelphia, and a deal which was cut with Buck's County Republican leaders to exchange their support: Tom Ridge would get the support of the Bucks Republican organization and Ridge in turn would have Schweiker as his running mate.

For seven years before Ridge left to head the nation's homeland security effort, Schweiker performed his duties without fanfare and without controversy. Always the loyal soldier, he supported the governor's agenda - to this day no one knows whether his policy views differed from Ridge's, if they did at all.

Pundits of all stripes did, however, take their shots. He was dull, not a genius, and not very articulate -- were some of the words used to describe him. Just not ready for the big time. His decision to retire from government, leaving him to serve out his days as a lame duck and not seek election as governor was a one-day story.

Those who knew him well knew differently. Schweiker's innate ability was mostly masked by exuberance and enthusiasm, which in normal times could appear cheerleaderish, but was ready-made for crisis leadership.
Schweiker's now highly rated handling of the Quecreek disaster says much about the real qualities of crisis leadership. First, for the past seven years he coordinated the work of the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, so he was familiar with disaster procedures. He was comfortable and knowledgeable with rescue operations, and though he fumbled for words at times in the frequent, hastily called press briefings, and sometimes gave inconsistent answers, no one doubted who was in charge.

No one also doubted that every thing humanly possible was being done to save the lives of the nine miners. But imagine, no focus groups, no speechwriters, and no scripted responses -- just a man in blue jeans laying out the facts, undiluted and undigested.

Second, the governor was on the scene, not for a transitory visit, but throughout the whole ordeal. No shuttle in and out, and then back to the comfort of the governor's mansion. He participated in virtually every phase of the operation. No delegation of authority here.

Third, Schweiker's sunny disposition and optimism, and a belief that all things were possible, were a ready-made prescription for keeping the spirits of the anxious mining families high. In short, he cared and he believed the rescue would be successful - a belief that came through time and time again.

Real leaders inspire and make believers of their followers.

Through the ordeal, Schweiker was completely and unambiguously himself, a genuine "aw, shucks" Jimmy Stewart-type character who, ironically enough, had his day not far from Jimmy Stewart's hometown of Indiana, Pennsylvania.

But the newly reported recognition of Schweiker's talents also raises a troubling question: Why is Schweiker's type so rare in public life today? Although not exactly a political accident, Schweiker is not really a career politician in the usual meaning of the words. And as he made abundantly clear, he doesn't plan to remain a permanent part of the political system beyond the end of his term.

This question in turn evokes one of the eternal mysteries of American political life: Why don't we have more "real leaders?" Why doesn't the system produce more Schweikers? Or maybe better put: Why does it take a crisis for us to recognize genuine leadership?

Schweiker himself provided part of the answer last fall with his unequivocal decision to retire from public life at the end of his term. Family considerations weighed heavily, as did a sense of loyalty to political associates and friends who had already backed another candidate.

But one also gets the impression that after seven years up close and personal with the political system, he didn't want any more of it. And who can blame him. The endless fundraising, the perpetual political infighting, the growing public cynicism, and the lack of anything that can be called privacy or a personal life have driven many from public life.

It is very hard to be a political leader today - perhaps so hard that ordinary people of ordinary ambitions increasingly eschew public office, leaving the field to those with huge pocketbooks, outsized egos, and not altogether healthy obsessions with the pursuit of political power.
More Mark Schweikers are not seen in politics today because they usually don't seek lifetime careers in politics. And, if on rare occasion, they do run, they often lose because the system is heavily rigged against them. And if they occasionally win public office, many quickly retreat to the sanity of private life as Schweiker intends to do.

Meanwhile, across Pennsylvania there are probably only two people happier than the rescued miners and their families: Republican Mike Fisher, who didn't have to run against Schweiker for the GOP gubernatorial nomination, and Ed Rendell, who won't have to run against him for governor his fall. The rest of us can be overjoyed about the rescue, but maybe not as overjoyed as we might otherwise be -- because the guy who led it won't be around much longer.

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