



"We must now reckon with this fact: human history is the bumbling about of self-deluded and incompetent doinks. Surely you are not going to deny that. It is nothing so much as a series of pratfalls by inept leaders and the suckers who follow them toward doom. Their incompetence is a historical force in the lives of each and all of us."

- Crispin Sartwell,

"History, Totally Destroyed,"

The New York Times

, 11/11/17

Yes, "doinks" caught my attention too. The word has many meanings, here essentially referring to morons or goofs. Sartwell's gritty column got me thinking about leadership, a topic we hammered in grad school and one I've thought about ever since.

Inept if not horrible leaders have indeed been a thematic thread in world history, often enough dragging - if only gently - their followers to a doomed future. Leadership is a matter of encouraging people to do things they probably wouldn't do otherwise, so in that sense it's politically neutral. Hence we have outstanding leaders, awful leaders and everything in between. Left and right.

Perhaps my favorite leader is Franklin Roosevelt. FDR led the Greatest Generation through the Great Depression and then the Allies through World War II, and he did it from a **wheelchair** after succumbing to a crippling bout with polio in his late thirties. He had been a physically vigorous sailor and fisherman, among his many hobbies, and suffered mightily with a disease for which doctors at the time - 1921 - had little help to offer patients. So one of our greatest presidents had to deal with two of the most ghastly events in history while unable to walk normally or get in and out of bed without help. Calling Dr. Stephen Hawking!

FDR had many opponents, none more demonic than Adolph Hitler, once you get past Japanese Prime Minister and warlord Hidecki Tojo and Russia's Stalin. Hitler wasn't just a political monster of a leader, he was a psychological monster. The full scope of his roiling evil emerges panoramically in Volker Ullrich's *Hitler: Ascent 1889-1939* (2016, Vintage Books).

Bubbling underneath the surface and oozing over the exterior of Adolph Hitler's egomania, extreme paranoia and grinding narcissism ("I will go down as the greatest German ever!") was hysterical racism and relentless cruelty. Some scholars, such as psychiatrist Fritz Redlich in *Hitler: Diagnosis of a Destructive Prophet* (1998, Oxford University Press) have argued that Hitler showed numerous pathological symptoms, yet likely was not mentally ill in the classic sense. In many respects he functioned efficiently and in almost all cases he knew exactly what he was doing and why. He hated Jews (like so many of his countrymen) beyond all boundaries and believed Germany needed vastly more "living space," hence the urge to conquer Europe.

Hitler's grip over his followers ("base") was astounding. As one of them, Lieselotte Schmidt explained, "He is more than a statesman . . . he is an executor of a higher will. A genius before whom everyone ultimately will have to bow." Hitler's profound acting, speaking and performance skills were so highly developed that he regularly whipped his huge audiences into frenzies the likes of which few have ever witnessed. Even fewer pierced the veil he created enough to detect his profound insecurity over his humble beginnings and limited education. As an army soldier in WWI, he never exceeded the rank of private.

But how "normal" could he appear periodically? In one example, according to Ullrich,

"As soon as Hitler arrived, the atmosphere changed drastically. The guests suddenly tensed up and tried visibly to make a good impression . . . His overall appearance had "something civilian, even sedate." He kissed the hands of the ladies, including his secretaries, and shook hands with his other guests, asking everyone how they felt . . . Hitler placed great emphasis on flower arrangements." He also liked children and loved classical music, art, architecture, sweets and dogs. Sound like anyone else you know? Uncle Hal? Aunt Doris?

Then we have America's current congress. If ever we were at the mercy of a den of thieves, liars and prevaricators, it is now. Not all of them are so repellant, of course, but far too many. Not to mention our president, distinguished by being broadly pilloried in the press daily. In truth he's well earned it, as apart from his overt incompetence and vulgarity, he lies perpetually;

during his first 300 days in office, fact checkers have verified over 1,600 false or misleading claims: 5+ per day and it's not letting up. As Mark Salter, senior advisor to Senator John McCain explains, "Like everything else Trump touches, he hijacks it with his chronic dishonesty and childishness." He has infused our "intense, angry and largely ignorant tribalism afflicting our politics with a psychopath's inability to accept that social norms apply to him." In short, our *president*

(!) is a lousy human being with no political or military background who serves as our commander in chief. Who wrote this screenplay? Stephen King? The American public largely isn't buying it, as 54% are more likely to believe the media as opposed to Trump to tell the truth about something important; 34% trust the president more.

Grim stuff, eh? But better days often seem to lie not far ahead. Startling new inventions and technology come along with dazzling frequency. These include, quite recently, more advanced drones, "healthy" ice cream, surgical and diagnostic breakthroughs, amazing new apps. Not long ago, even "smart" guns that can only be fired by their rightful owners. All of these developments, even those spawned in garages, depend on effective leadership. Perhaps not the soaring kind, replete with compassionate tears and transcendent rhetoric demonstrated by Winston Churchill as he guided Great Britain back from the brink in defeating Nazi Germany, but essential and life changing nonetheless. And we can't overlook the relatively unsung leadership excellence reflected in scout troupes and classrooms around the country.

With Thanksgiving receding into our rear view mirrors we have - as always - much to be thankful for. Whatever leadership propels Amazon and Alexa is high on my list. At the risk of fantasizing overreach, I can imagine the day when Oprah Winfrey's "favorite things" initiative explodes. One simply asks Alexa (go ahead and drop the \$100 or so) to "shop Oprah's favorite things" and get recommendations of her favorite products (how about a 25-pack of Julep lipsticks?), including why she picked it and a purchase option. But here's the rub. This nearly pie in the sky gig needs something akin to a superior leadership app, perhaps one compatible with everyone's smart phones, which would provide everyday guidance on how to demonstrate excellent leadership in real life . . . without incurring the astronomical costs associated with, for example, getting a Harvard MBA. No offense, Cambridge.

As long as I'm fantasizing, consider this. Are there a few brilliant genetic scientists or bioengineers available who can put their heads together (I'll spring for the pizza or leftover turkey sandwiches) and clone another Roosevelt or Churchill? Surely someone, someplace (a museum?), has a strand of hair or a discarded cigarette of Roosevelt's or a Churchill cigar stub with a little of their DNA remaining. Is that too much to ask? We could also feed our wizards Wheaties, "breakfast of champions," to jumpstart their mornings. Couldn't hurt.

Better Days

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Well, I'm just wondering. In the spirit, of course, of Thanksgiving.