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Real leaders learn, adapt

Experience is ever their rigorous instructor

Thursday, November 26, 2009

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By Richard W. Rahn

Courageous leaders are not afraid to change course when what they are doing is not working, and then make alterations until they find what succeeds.

Americans might not be celebrating Thanksgiving this week if it had not been for a courageous leader, William Bradford, who was elected governor of the Plymouth Colony in the spring of 1621. Bradford and the other Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth, Mass., in December 1620 and were ill-equipped for the harsh winter that lay ahead. Half of the Colonists died that first year, including Bradford's wife, and his predecessor as governor.

Bradford was able to rally the survivors and make peace with the local Indians, who had suffered enormous losses due to a smallpox epidemic (acquired from European explorers) in the years just prior to the arrival of Mayflower. (The Pilgrims were fundamentalist Calvinists who had separated from the reformist Anglican Puritans.)

In the fall of 1621, the roughly 50 survivors of the Mayflower Colonists and 90 Indians joined together for a feast now viewed as the first Thanksgiving. There was no feast the next year because the Colony was suffering from starvation, largely because of the collective farming that had been employed. The collective (i.e., socialist) farming scheme destroyed the incentive to work in the fields because there was almost no correlation between work effort by any individual and how much food he or she received.

Bradford recognized the mistake, reversed course and instituted private ownership of land. The journals from that time, including Bradford's, describe how, immediately, men and women became diligent in tending the fields, which resulted in a food surplus and the reinstatement of the annual harvest feast. During the many years Bradford was governor he consistently displayed the ability to learn from earlier mistakes. He, more than anyone, was responsible for the ultimate success of the Plymouth Colony.

George Washington, in his almost half-century of being a public figure in America, consistently showed the ability to learn from mistakes and to make necessary changes, which is why, at the time of his death, he was the most famous and revered man in the world. He, like Bradford, was not filled with hubris and narcissism that characterizes so many of today's leaders. After his initial defeats in the Revolutionary War, Washington learned he could win the war by inflicting more pain on the British in narrow battles than his own Army would suffer.



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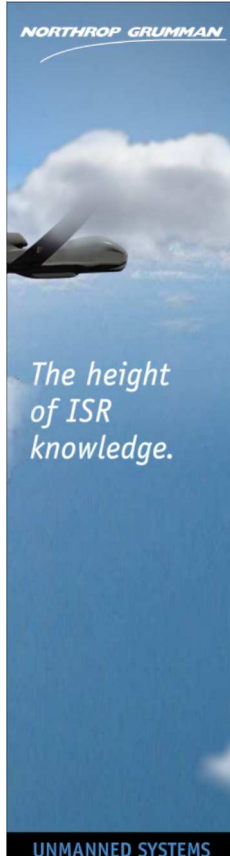
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extensively about its significance, but was the most ardent entrepreneur of any of the Founding Fathers. By the time of his death, he was a major landholder, chairman of a Potomac canal company, and the biggest whisky distiller in America. (For you teetotalers, in the late 1700s, water in many places was unsafe to drink and hence cider and whiskey were ironically the safer alternatives.)

One does not necessarily have to be a human rights-protecting democrat to exhibit characteristics of a courageous leader. Deng Xiaoping, despite running a totalitarian regime in China, had the courage to shuck off much of the communist economic hokum, which was clearly leading to even more misery, and institute partial market capitalism (heresy for the time). This, in turn, has enabled a couple of hundred million Chinese to enjoy a Western standard of living and, at least, has given hope to those hundreds of millions in China who have yet to enjoy capitalism's beneficence. China is still a repressive society, but much less so than the hard and bloody totalitarianism of Mao Zedong's time.

Two current European leaders are showing courage in standing up to the increasingly discredited conventional wisdom. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is pushing for income tax cuts, rather than further increases in government spending, to revive the German economy (shades of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan), which makes her a subject of ridicule by the economic know-nothings who now lead most Western governments and, of course, the ever economically ignorant mainstream press.

The other leader is Vaclav Klaus, the president of the Czech Republic, who has had the singular courage to stand up to the extreme environmentalists with their destructive "solutions" for global warming. Mr. Klaus is a Ph.D. economist who understands both cost-benefit analysis and considerable environmental science. He is author of a fine book on global warming, "Blue Planet in Green Shackles" (Competitive Enterprise Institute, 2008), which is filled with facts and logic rather than much of the ideological nonsense that passes as "science" these days. Rather than debate Mr. Klaus' evidence and arguments, many of political and media class have resorted to personal ridicule.

Rhetoric is no substitute for courage - as America and much of Europe are learning to their despair.

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and chairman of the Institute for Global Economic Growth.

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