

ICI VIEWPOINTS

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Jon Meacham's Leadership Prescription: Curiosity, Humility, and Empathy

A lunchtime crowd of nearly 1,500 at ICI's 60th annual General Membership Meeting sat rapt as Pulitzer Prize-winning author and presidential historian Jon Meacham dove deep into what he sees as three virtues that have defined America's best eras, and that are "essential to any given hour in the republic, both at the top—and for all of us."

Today's divisive, contentious environment threatens those virtues, Meacham began, but not because of the division and contention themselves, which he said have been part of America and its system of government from the beginning. The real heart of the problem is that today's partisanship is *reflexive*—meaning we oppose what the other side has said simply because they are saying it—rather than *reflective*, where we process the other side's perspective, analyze it critically, and then form our own view.

Getting back to a reflective approach will "go a long way toward making our era in history something to look back on not with anxiety or regret, but as something to emulate," he explained. But whether we get there, he said, depends on our ability to apply those virtues to the present moment.

Enlightened Values

The first virtue he examined is curiosity. "Our greatest presidents have been intellectually voracious," he told the audience. "They wanted to understand not just the politics of a given moment, but the broad currents shaping civilization as an era."

For example, "when Thomas Jefferson sat down to write what became the most important sentence in the English language—'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'—he had been in touch with the broad ideas across the world, including the Enlightenment in Europe, that helped lead to the establishment of the United States."

Jefferson realized that, up until the late 18th century, all of world civilization had been "vertical"—where people were given power as an accident of birth. A more horizontal structure, Jefferson reasoned, would free people to choose their own way forward.

Jefferson's curiosity paid off. The American Revolution, Meacham said, "is the best manifestation of Jefferson's view—a view that continues to shape the world and one that we still haven't fully grown into."

Learning from Mistakes—and Avoiding Disaster

Meacham's second defining virtue is humility—the ability, in his words, to admit a mistake

and then to learn from it. To explain this virtue, Meacham turned to President John F. Kennedy, whom he said sought advice from the person he least wanted to—predecessor Dwight D. Eisenhower—after Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs invasion went so disastrously wrong.

After asking extensive questions about the lead-up to the fiasco—a demonstration of his natural curiosity—Eisenhower reasoned that Kennedy’s mistake was that he never held a full meeting with all his relevant advisers in the same room, which would have enabled Kennedy to compare their ideas in real time. Instead, he had met with them individually—meaning that they weren’t forced to exchange ideas with others, deliberate, and defend against challenges to their own ideas.

Kennedy took Eisenhower’s counsel to heart during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Facing an existential threat, Kennedy held what, at 13 days, became the longest executive committee meeting ever—enabling the United States to get through the crisis, Meacham said. His ability to admit he made a mistake and to learn from someone who had been his political opponent was a big reason why the world didn’t descend into a nuclear war.

Peace Through Understanding

Meacham’s third virtue is empathy. “Without the capability to put yourself in others’ shoes,” he warned, “statesmanship is deeply circumscribed.”

George H.W. Bush had just that capability, Meacham said—a capability reaching back into his early life, when the former president, a star athlete at his high school, helped free a classmate who had gotten stuck in a barrel on an obstacle course and let him finish in a tie in a race that Bush would have won easily.

Meacham recalled that when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, President Bush applied the same empathy. He refused to travel to Berlin “to rub his success in the face of the Soviets,” despite the advice of his counselors, who saw such a move as a political win.

Instead, Bush—realizing that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was himself stuck in a kind of political barrel, facing opposition in Russia for his decisions—knew that making a scene of US victory would only embarrass Gorbachev and harm him politically. By giving Gorbachev “room to breathe,” Meacham explained, Bush “helped lead to the end of the Cold War.”

A Transforming Responsibility

After Meacham’s remarks, ICI President and CEO Paul Schott Stevens joined him on stage for a few questions, first asking whether the historian thought we “have chosen the best among us as presidents.”

“We’ve been incredibly lucky,” Meacham replied, adding that “you never know how a man is going to react in a position of authority. You have to do a lot of praying. That’s why we have checks and balances and three articles” in the Constitution.

“The best presidents have been transformed to some extent by the fact of their national election,” he continued. For example, “when Lyndon Johnson, a senator from a segregationist state, became president, he decided he would pursue civil rights without changing a comma.”

Stevens countered that Johnson’s leadership also had a dark side—America’s increasing involvement in Vietnam, a war Johnson knew the United States couldn’t win—asking whether all US presidents were a combination of good and bad qualities.

Meacham agreed and expanded on this point, applying the concept more broadly. Johnson, he said, “got some things right, he got some wrong. Ultimately, it’s up to historians to look back and figure out the long-term effects of a president’s actions.”

On a broader scale, though, he reminded the audience that “the ‘American Soul,’ as I call it, is immensely complex, and we get things wrong as often as we get them right. There’s room in the American soul for Dr. King and the Ku Klux Klan. Every era in our country is shaped by which sides wins out. No victory is absolute, and no work is totally finished.”

Ultimately, Meacham said, it’s up to each individual American to help move the country forward. “The republic is only as good as all of us,” he explained. “We must remember: to whom much is given, much is expected.”

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