THE ROMANCE OF HEROISM AND HEROIC LEADERSHIP

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BY

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For over a decade now we have tried to penetrate the complexities in the way people choose and perceive their heroes. At the same time, we have tried to outline carefully how people go beyond the ordinary to transform themselves in heroes. This books represents our efforts to integrate these two elements of heroism science. What constitutes and defines heroism, and how do people construct larger than life images of and stories about the extraordinary people they deem to be heroes? In attempting to answer these questions we have been supported by many colleagues, family, and friends. We are grateful to Dean Sandra Peart of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies and our fellow faculty members Kristin Bezio, Peter Kaufman, and Terry Price at Jepson and Karyn Kuhn, Camilla Nonterah, Matt Lowder, Kristjen Lundberg, Lisa Jobe-Shields, Karen Kochel, and Laura Knouse in the Department of Psychology. Elizabeth DeBusk-Maslanka has been exceptionally helpful in all aspects of editing this volume. She has been a source of wisdom and great generosity. Stephanie Trent helps in many ways to make it easier to do our work, and we are grateful.

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Scott T. Allison is Professor of Psychology at the University of Richmond. He has authored numerous books, including *Heroes* (OUP, 2011) and *Heroic Leadership* (Routledge, 2013). His other books include *Heroic Humility* (American Psychological Association, 2018), *Reel Heroes & Villains* (Agile Writer Press, 2015), *Conceptions of Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), *Frontiers in Spiritual Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), and the *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership* (Routledge, 2016). His work has appeared in *USA Today, National Public Radio, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, Slate Magazine, MSNBC, CBS, Psychology Today*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. He has received Richmond's "Distinguished Educator Award" and the Virginia Council of Higher Education's "Outstanding Faculty Award."

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE ROMANCE OF HEROISM

In the last decade, an exciting new field of study has emerged. Its subject is heroes and heroism. It is fast growing, multidisciplinary, and international. There is now enough of a corpus of scholarship to warrant referring to these various studies as constituting a scholarly discipline of heroism science. One manifestation of this new domain of study is the new journal, *Heroism Science*. Two other signs are new special issues on heroes and heroism in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and in *Frontiers in Psychology*. Another is the 2017 publication of the *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. There is also a new biennial conference series in Heroism Science, the first held in Perth, Australia, in 2016, and the second in Richmond, Virginia, USA, in 2018. We have been privileged to be part of this new research endeavor.

Heroism Science includes a sprawling set of theoretical and empirical explorations of who heroes are, how they develop, what they do, and what they're like. In short, these studies explore what makes heroes tick. Two illustrative studies from this vast domain of research are Walker's (2017)

exploration of the moral character of individuals who step up as heroes and Franco's (2017) work on heroic leadership in times of crisis. Another, smaller body of work examines how people think about heroes. Who comes to mind when people are asked to name heroes? What traits do heroes have? What do people believe heroes do? For example, scholars have explored how perceived heroes inspire or motivate the people who admire them (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017), how groups identify moral heroes (Decter-Frain, Vanstone, & Frimer, 2017), and the way people construct heroic images of underdogs (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Michniewicz, 2017).

Our own work has considered both sets of questions. Who are heroes, what defines heroism, and how do people think about heroes? However, most of our writings have focused on the latter set of questions, questions about how people construct perceptions of heroes. In taking this approach, we have perhaps stubbornly resisted defining what heroism is. We do note that many of the heroes people name are fictional. Some of them are so-called superheroes, while others are characters such as Arthur Conan Doyle's "consulting detective" Sherlock Holmes, or the protagonist Rick Blaine in the classic 1942 film *Casablanca*, played by Humphrey Bogart. While the array of fictional and real people, from the past or still living, who are named as heroes is immense, there are two central attributes of these perceived heroes. They are almost always highly moral, and they are generally very competent and effective. These qualities are central to the "great eight traits" of heroism that emerge from our studies. Heroes are seen as Smart, Strong, Selfless, Caring, Charismatic, Resilient, Reliable, and Inspiring. These findings have prompted us to assert that heroism is in the eye of the beholder. Again, we resist specifying the defining qualities of heroes ourselves, or naming people as heroes.

Consistent with this approach, we think, we do mention our own heroes in the dedications of our books. In our first book, we acknowledged our grandmothers, but clearly do not believe that anyone else is likely to regard them as heroic. We dedicate our second book to the memory of much better-known heroes, the baseball player Roberto Clemente, and US President Abraham Lincoln. In calling Clemente and Lincoln heroes in the preceding sentence, we must note that they are heroes in our eyes. That doesn't make them heroes in any objective sense. We can make a case for their heroism in terms of morality and effectiveness, but others might disagree. We are well aware that in our home city of Richmond, Virginia, capital of the Confederate States during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln is perhaps a villain to many. So while we do not designate on the basis of scholarly expertise particular individuals as heroes, we cherish our own heroes.

This general perspective informs the current approach that we call *the romance of heroes*. Merriam-Webster defines the *noun* form of romance as an emotional attraction, or special quality or feeling that comes from a person, place, or thing. The *verb* form of romance is to exaggerate or invent detail. This book explores these processes as they operate in our human perception of heroism. We assume that people are motivated to actively construct reality from incomplete information. There is a long history of theory and research in social perception and social cognition to support this idea (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). We also assume, based on our own research, that people are motivated to have heroes (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Our contention in this book is that our love of heroes is so strong that we could call it a romantic longing. Merriam-Webster reminds us that this longing is a strong emotional attraction that may cause mental exaggeration or invention. Our desire and drive to designate people as heroes may be subject to distortion and to motivated perception

under conditions of uncertainty. We'll also explore how this tendency to exaggerate or invent in response to strong motives can contribute to our construction of villains as well as heroes.

From our review of the Heroism Science literature, we find only one other scholarly article regarding how people may use uncertain and ambiguous circumstances to create heroes. Kinsella, Igou, and Ritchie (2017) proposed a model of meaning-making in which they argue the following: "When events or affective states threaten or reduce a person's sense of meaning, psychological processes are mobilized to serve the goals of meaning maintenance and meaning reestablishment" (p. 1). According to Kinsella et al., one specific state that triggers a search for meaning is a situation with high uncertainty. The authors argue that uncertainty leads people to seek heroes who will provide such meaning. In this book, we extend Kinsella et al.'s ideas by exploring in considerable detail how ambiguity begets heroism − and villainy as well. It may sound strange that people are as driven to construct villainy as they are for heroism from uncertainty, but there is a wealth of social psychological research pointing to our strong need to resolve ambiguity at all costs − even if it means distorting the world by seeing it as darker than it really is.

Our second chapter on "Mystery and Meaning" explores how basic processes of social perception, cognition, and motivation operate in people's processing of limited or ambiguous information about individuals, groups, or circumstances. We focus on the perception of individuals who might be heroes or villains. Our third chapter on "The Three Kings" centers on three men who had a profound impact on American culture in the late twentieth century: Martin Luther King, Jr, Elvis Presley, and Muhammad Ali. Here we describe how Americans' motives shifted from initially seeing these men as

villains to eventually seeing them as heroes. Our fourth chapter on "Heroic Transforming Leadership" explores the ways that leaders activate and elevate followers' motives and morality to achieve group goals. We discuss Donald Trump as an example of less morally developed leadership. Finally, our fifth chapter on "Heroic Transformation" examines how people transform into heroes. Here we describe the psychological processes responsible for people's metamorphosis into their best, most heroic selves.

There are two conceptual threads uniting all these chapters. The first main thread is the manner in which people tend to weave together a story of heroism or villainy from incomplete information in their social environments. The second thread is that there exists a transcendent type of leadership that we call *heroic transforming leadership*. This highest level of leadership plays a crucial role in guiding people through these states of social uncertainty. We hope you will appreciate as much as we do how the machinations of the mind can produce our most prized heroes as well as our most abhorred villains.

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CHAPTER 2

MYSTERY AND MEANING: AMBIGUITY AND THE PERCEPTION OF LEADERS, HEROES, AND VILLAINS

In Arthur Conan Doyle's classic Sherlock Holmes novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Dr Mortimer reads aloud the lengthy manuscript describing the huge canine that years before had ripped out the throat of Sir Hugo Baskerville at the conclusion of a night of debauchery. The manuscript was written by one of Sir Hugo's descendants as a warning about the curse that still seems to haunt the clan. It concludes "Such is the tale, my sons, of the coming of the hound which is said to have plagued the family so sorely ever since. If I have set it down it is because *that which is clearly known hath less terror than that which is but hinted at and guessed*" (Doyle, 1901, italics added). This passage is but one of many in fiction that seem to illustrate that the unknown or partially revealed can be terrifying. Often they suggest villainy. But not always. We wish to argue here that depending on context, mystery can arouse either thoughts of frightening danger and

villains, or positive, hopeful expectations and images of wonder, awe, and heroic leadership. We will explore theory and research on the cognitive and motivational elements that combine with mystery to make meaning, often resulting in cognitive constructions of heroes or villains, security or threat, and good or evil.

Mystery is perceived uncertainty or ambiguity resulting from partial information about a person, object, situation, or event. It is experienced in people's minds. Mystery may be ignored or suppressed, but often it generates arousal, positive or negative, fear or hope, and the search for answers. In this way, such arousal and uncertainty can stimulate meaning-making (Kinsella, Igou et al., 2017). Sometimes this occurs automatically, following principles well-defined by perception and social cognition research. Or, it may be undertaken deliberately, through vigilance and information seeking, perhaps through one's own individual inquiries, or through some kind of informal social communication or social comparison. Thus a hint, suggestion, or clue may lead people to construct mystery or ambiguity resolving answers in the form of images, beliefs, or conclusions, with or without the acquisition of new information.

In many cases, the mystery and its cognitive resolution may involve leaders or potential leaders, who are also potential heroes or villains. A further example from fiction provides an illustration of mystery surrounding a frightening potential villain whom social comparison information reveals to be a hero. The classic Western song *Big Iron* (Robbins, 1959)[1] describes a mysterious figure who rides into town holstering a large gun. Then people talk and rumors spread, as townspeople strive to get a fix on the mysterious individual, before it turns out that the outsider is an Arizona lawman out to get a vicious killer, and he becomes transformed by local residents into a hero, himself in grave danger