THE HEROIC LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

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THE HEROIC LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

How Leaders Inspire and Mobilize Change

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CONTENTS

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Scott T. Allison is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Richmond where he has published extensively on heroism and leadership. His other books include *Heroes, The Romance of Heroism, Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership, Conceptions of Leadership*, and *Frontiers in Spiritual Leadership*. 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 was a recipient of the Richmond's Distinguished Educator Award and the Virginia Council of Higher Education's Outstanding Faculty Award.

George R. Goethals holds the E. Claiborne Robins Distinguished Professorship in Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. His research focuses on heroes and presidential leadership. His books include *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them; The Romance of Heroism and Heroic Leadership; Heroic Leadership: An Influence Taxonomy of 100 Exceptional Individuals; Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership; Presidential Leadership and African Americans: "An American Dilemma" from Slavery to the White House; Realignment, Region and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity*.

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PREFACE

The word *imperative* has always fascinated us. It suggests that something – some vital course of action – *must* be undertaken. Where there is an imperative, there is an urgency, a call, a mandate. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines imperative as "an obligatory act or duty." The idea of a heroic imperative was first described by our friend and colleague Olivia Efthimiou, who argued that our well-being is a "personal and collective heroic imperative" (Efthimiou et al., 2018, p. 15). The imperative in this instance refers to the necessity of engaging in heroic practices aimed at promoting our well-being as individuals and as members of our communities. We dare not avoid the hero's journey that calls us, heals us, and transforms us into our best selves. Nor do we dare sidestep the necessary practices of self-care that fuel the heroic journeys of the larger collectives to which we belong. Efthimiou et al. concluded with an intriguing thought: Perhaps both heroism and well-being are both best "understood as a means to and ends of *wholeness*" (p. 15). Please keep that word "wholeness" in mind as you read this book.

In this current volume, we use the term *imperative* to describe another aspect of heroism, namely, the phenomenon of heroic leadership. It is our contention that any leader who aspires to change the world has the "obligatory duty" to satisfy three types of needs of followers. The first type of follower needs, which we call individual-level needs, refers to

the needs of every distinct human being, ranging from basic needs such as food and water to higher-level needs such as esteem, love, and – you guessed it – "wholeness." Whereas Efthimiou and her colleagues focused on everyday laypeople's heroic well-being as an imperative, we argue in this book that it the imperative of heroic leaders to move and mobilize followers by taking steps to meet a set of very specific needs of followers. Notice that we're not necessarily saying that it is the imperative of heroic leaders to ensure the well-being of followers. One might think that "meeting needs" and "ensuring well-being" go hand-in-hand, but it turns out that meeting needs and promoting well-being are independent goals. Consider Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. During this decade, he moved and mobilized his followers by meeting their important psychological needs of belongingness, individual self-esteem, and national pride. But we would never say that Adolf Hitler was the architect of his country's well-being. Achieving "wholeness" was hardly the goal of the Third Reich. Wholeness is a state of utmost well-being in which all the parts within an individual or within a society are integrated. Hitler's Final Solution was the antithesis of wholeness and well-being. The Fuhrer met some key needs of German citizens while actually *poisoning* their individual and collective well-being.

From these considerations, it is important to keep in mind that when we speak of leaders who aspire to transform and mobilize followers, we could be referring to a heroic leader such as Martin Luther King, Jr, or villainous leaders such as Jim Jones, Adolf Hitler, or Kim Jong-un. Although the term "heroic leadership" appears in the title of this book, we know that history has taught us that many of history's most egregious villains have also sought to move followers and change the world. And yes, those villainous leaders have the same imperative of meeting the three types of needs of followers if they wish to achieve their evil aims. The title of this book

contains the phrase "heroic leadership imperative" because we prefer to focus on the positive application of these three secrets of game-changing leadership. The world desperately needs heroic leaders who answer their call to both meet followers' needs and promote their well-being. As we will demonstrate in this book, *wholeness* may be the key. It is a central human need, identified decades ago by Carl Jung (1951) and by humanists such as Abraham Maslow (1954). Wholeness, we argue, may occupy the hub of well-being for individuals and groups, and thus is pivotal to understanding the heroic leadership imperative.

In our previous book, called *The Romance of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, we argued that everyday people harbor a deep longing for heroes in a troubled world that so urgently needs them. This hunger for heroism leads people to fill in the gaps of their understanding when there is an incomplete picture of whether heroism is present. We tend to romanticize heroism, seeking it or seeing it when ambiguous circumstances call for heroism. For example, in a crisis we may observe someone who *somewhat* fits our mental schema for heroism or who checks *some* of the boxes for heroism. This target of our perception may be tall and rugged, suggesting a physically heroic person. Add an element of mystery to that person, such as their being new in town or sporting unusual garb, and Paul Simon's song lyrics kick in: Our "sweet imaginations" run wild with possibilities. Yes, these possibilities include our manufacturing of the idea that the mysterious stranger could be a hero or a villain, depending on what information is primed, salient, or made most personally relevant to us. Our *Romance of Heroism* book reviews many research studies and real-world events that point to the conclusion that heroism is psychologically constructed, and that human motivational forces can lead to the mental construction of both heroes and villains. The cognitive identification

of people as heroes and villains can certainly explain how and why human beings allow good and bad people to take the reins of leadership.

We thus contend that our romance with heroism fuels the heroic leadership imperative. An astute leader is able to use people's romantic hunger for heroes to wield powerful influence over followers. Heroic leaders know intuitively about how to most effectively harness human drives and motivations for control, esteem, group identity, and even transcendence. This latter idea of transcendence may be the most mysterious human need, yet also its most powerful. We argue in this book that people possess a deep transcendent need to become part of something bigger than themselves, something vast, eternal, and brimming with existential meaning. Our most iconic heroic leaders and notorious villainous leaders are deft at tapping into their followers' deep-seated need for transcendence. There is more than mere leadership ability at work; it is a leadership imperative. We hope you enjoy our attempt at unraveling the psychological dynamics of this imperative.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before we embark on our exploration of the heroic leadership imperative, we wish to acknowledge the help, guidance, love, and support from a number of individuals who are very important to us. Foremost, we owe an incalculable amount of gratitude to our wives and life partners, Connie and Marion, without whom we'd be bereft of ideas about psychological wholeness and communion – two themes of this book that derive from the heroic leadership imperative. These two remarkable women are indeed our better halves in every conceivable way. Our imperative is to try to give back to them as much as they've given us.

Next we thank our many friends, companions, allies, and mentors. Barak Obama once said, "You didn't build that," and he may as well have been talking directly to us, because there is no way we could have written our impenetrable books and articles on heroism unless we had the camaraderie, the inspiration, the affection, and steadfast companionship of so many good compatriots. Scott T. Allison specifically thanks his amazing daughter Heather and his wonderful friends Dominic, Brook, Nick, Jannequin, Mike, Tim, Guy, Ed, Les, Greg, Julie, Jim, Monti, and Dan. He is also indebted to his eighth-grade teacher who believed in him when no one else did, Mr John Yockey, where ever he is right now. Scott T. Allison's other mentors deserving of thanks include his mother, Sara Allison, and his grandmother, Claire Bergvall;

his undergraduate mentor, Ebbe B. Ebbesen; his graduate school advisor, David M. Messick; his various faculty mentors, Andrew F. Newcomb and David E. Leary, especially. Last but certainly not least deserving of the highest praise and thanks is George R. Goethals himself, the second author of this book, who has collaborated with Scott T. Allison in producing many articles and books spanning over three decades. To say the least, this collaboration has been fun, stimulating, and surprising in so many deeply rewarding ways.

George ("Al") Goethals also expresses his gratitude and appreciation to many people, places, and things. He conveys his heartfelt thanks to his longtime friend and co-author, Scott T. Allison and to his fellow "Cracks of Dawn" runners. Al Goethals also acknowledges the beauty and importance of Raquette Lake, New York, and his many friends, family, and support systems there. He would also like to acknowledge the unsurpassed wonder and awe of the James River and its Park System here in Richmond. In addition, Al Goethals thanks his Jepson School of Leadership Studies colleagues, including faculty, staff, and students; his numerous Goethals and Nevin relations; and especially Tennyson Rose, her father Jefferson, her mother Meagan, Tito Andrew and Tita Vanessa, and Rosie.

Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't thank a particular dining establishment and its staff for making all of our collaborative work possible. For 15 years, the two of us have had the pleasure of dining out for lunch, on a bi-monthly basis, at a wonderful little diner called *The Tavern*. This pleasant little eatery, located a mile from the University of Richmond campus, has provided the perfect atmosphere for our many thoughtful conversations about heroism and heroic leadership. We can tell you the exact table we sat at in 2008 when the idea of writing our first heroes book occurred to us. We would be lying if we didn't acknowledge the fabulous

service and terrific food at *The Tavern*, all made possible by the pleasant and efficient wait-staff. This local eatery has given us the ideal environment for enjoying countless conversations about heroism – and other very nonheroic topics. We are grateful to have had such a perfect setting for brainstorming ideas, planning various writing projects, and celebrating occasional successes.

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1

FIRST IMPERATIVE: MEETING INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL NEEDS

Not long ago the city of Memphis installed the *I Am A Man* mural by Marcellous Lovelace in a public park. The mural commemorates the Sanitation Workers Protest March of 1968. At the time, Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis to support the workers' strike. A few days later, in that same city, King was murdered. The phrase "I *am* a man" was a dramatic assertion of pride and self-respect. Not only did the marchers want economic justice, they wanted recognition as deserving human beings who had earned fair pay and decent working conditions, but just as importantly, who merited being treated with dignity, being listened to, and, in a word, respect. More recently, the idea of wanting and demanding respect is captured in the Black Lives Matter movement, and all that it entails, materially and psychologically. Similarly, Gay Pride events are about respect, self-respect, and respect from others, as the term "Gay Pride" itself implies. One particularly moving dramatization of the craving for respect and self-respect appears in the 1954 movie *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954). An iconic film that won Academy Award Oscars for Best Picture and for Best Actor, it contains a famous scene where

Marlon Brando's character, Terry Milloy, wrenchingly pleads with his brother Charlie to acknowledge having let him down. Charlie had pressured Terry to take a dive on behalf of fellow mobsters who were fixing a boxing match. It ended his career as a fighter. Nearly wailing Terry cries, "I coulda had class, I could've been a contender, I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am."

Terry Milloy is not alone in craving to be "somebody." The need is universal. It is satisfied in complex ways, integrating an individual's own assessment and the implications of his or her relationships with others. Among the most influential of those relationships are ones with leaders and heroes. It is common to hear people who have met charismatic leaders, such as John F. Kennedy or Bill Clinton, describe the feeling of being held in the president's gaze, his only having eyes for you, and making you feel elevated, that you are "somebody."

This chapter explores the myriad ways that the leader–follower dynamic and our relationships with heroes engage people's needs for positive self-regard. Among other things, we note how these dynamics give leaders great power. As we shall see, leaders' capacity to gratify or frustrate esteem needs can be used for good or ill. We begin by considering how esteem needs relate to other important human needs. Then we explore the various treatments of those needs by important psychologists and leadership scholars, highlighting how leaders and heroes relate to those needs. We will see how leaders can arouse and gratify esteem needs on an individual level. For example, we will explore the impact of a hero recognizing the contribution one makes to a moral quest. Chapter 2 considers some of the same processes at the group level, for example, the impact of a leader of a social movement convincing his followers that they are a special group, deserving power and recognition. In Chapter 3, we look beyond the need to have positive self-regard on an individual level or group level and

explore how the need to feel part of something larger than ourselves or our group, part of some larger scheme of things, can generate powerful feelings of awe and wonder, ultimately making us feel that life itself is meaningful.

Our concluding chapter attempts to bring all three levels of the heroic leadership imperative together into a coherent conceptual package. Historically, the world's most powerful heroic leaders – and villainous leaders, too – have skillfully appealed to our individual needs (Chapter 1), to our social relational and collective needs (Chapter 2), and to our more mysterious yet extremely powerful need to become part of something big, something heroic, something that will live on long after we have died. We call this transcendence. Let's begin with an examination of that first level of needs, those that are the most basic individual level. Here we see that people, as animals, strive to have their most fundamental physiological needs met and look to leaders to make this happen. But as we shall see, unlike all other creatures on the planet, once humans have basic physical needs met, they strive for much, much more out of life and from their leaders. We begin with the fundamental human drive to attain positive self-worth.

THE QUEST FOR SELF-WORTH

The need for self-esteem exists in complex relationship to other human needs. William James (1892) listed 37 human instincts including imitation, jealousy, love, modesty, pugnacity, resentment, shame, and sociability. These instincts nod to the complexity of our relationships with others. We want to be with others, we love and emulate them, and feel shame when we don't measure up. But we also experience jealousy, resentment, and hostility. Many of these needs connect to feelings of value or worth in one way or another. We'll see

later that resentment in particular relates to our feelings of value, and that leaders sometimes use our need to feel better about ourselves by stoking James' resentment instinct.

Following James, Henry Murray (1938) identified several broad need domains including ambition, affection, status, and power along with a very specific need to conform to avoid blame or ostracism. We see these needs play out in two fundamental dimensions of interpersonal behavior identified by Timothy Leary (1957). First, our behavior shows varying amounts of love, affection, friendliness, and agreeableness on the one hand, versus hostility on the other hand. Second, we also behave in ways which claim high status, or dominance, on the one hand, versus on the other hand actions that submit or yield to others. When Franklin Roosevelt established the polio rehabilitation center at Warm Springs, Georgia in the 1920s as part of his own effort to recover from polio it was said that he wanted to be one of them, that is, one of the patients, but he also wanted to be "the number one" of them, that is, to claim the highest status position in the group. He combined the warmth and inclusiveness of being "one of them" with being "the number one" by declaring himself the *Vice President in Charge of Picnics* (Burns, 2014). This blending of warmth and friendliness with dominance and assertion was noted earlier when he was in college. As editor of the *Harvard Crimson* student newspaper, he exerted what one fellow student called a "seamless command" (Barber, 1992). This is just one illustration of the way each individual combines friendliness, hostility, dominance, and submission in complex ways. However, they do so, we see the playing out of many of the needs identified by James and Murray, particularly love and status.

An elegant and more straightforward theory of human motivation is set forth in Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Although the model has been expanded and revised

by Maslow and others over the years, the basics remain the same. The hierarchy consists of five levels. At the base are physiological needs for air, water, and food. These are needs we share with other animal species. Physiological needs are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy because these needs must be satisfied before other needs can be engaged. Unless one's basic life-sustaining needs are satisfied, other needs are simply irrelevant. The next level up is safety needs. Once one's essential life needs are met, people, and other animals, want to be safe. Safe from the elements, safe from predators, and safe from enemies. Franklin Roosevelt again provides a helpful example. In his famous 1941 Four Freedoms speech, Roosevelt identified freedom from want (physiological needs) and freedom from fear (safety needs), along with the freedom to worship as one chose and the freedom of speech and expression.

Maslow went on to argue that once physiological and safety needs are met human beings focus on belongingness and inclusion needs. They want to be part of a group and to have significant relationships. Social psychologists' recent research on belongingness needs underlines people's urge to "form social attachments … and [to] resist the dissolution of existing bonds." Furthermore, such studies make clear that "the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497).

The next step up in Maslow's hierarchy is esteem needs. We want to feel good about ourselves. As we shall develop later in this book, a great deal of the leader–follower dynamic revolves around leaders and also heroes arousing and gratifying esteem needs. Feeling good about ourselves, and satisfying our esteem needs is an exceedingly complex process. Before exploring the role that leaders play in this process, or these processes, we note the capstone motive in Maslow's original

hierarchy of motives: self-actualization. Maslow claimed that after our Physiological, Safety, Inclusion, and Esteem needs are satisfied, people are motivated toward self-actualization, broadly speaking, to realize all their potentials, to be all that they can be, and to be significant. Again, we shall see that leaders play an especially important role in engaging this need. In fact, the best and most effective leaders, whether heroic or villainous, are adept at surveying the degree to which their followers' needs are being met at all the different levels, from the most basic physiological needs to the highest and most transcendent needs. A large component of the heroic leadership imperative involves attracting followers by identifying any gaps in those needs and by letting followers know that those gaps will be filled.

FROM MOTHER GOOSE TO DONALD TRUMP: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-ESTEEM

Both our need for self-esteem and our capacity to build it, in part all by ourselves, have been on full display throughout much of human history, from Mother Goose to Donald Trump. In Mother Goose, Little Jack Horner puts his thumb in his Christmas pie, pulls out a plum, and crows "what a good boy am I." The comment is a non-sequitur, and like many such self-appraisals, not really reality based. In the same vein, many years later, US president Donald Trump declared himself a "very stable genius." Later he added that he was also good-looking. Whether anyone else believes Horner or Trump, or whether they believe it themselves, the remarks are not atypical. We are challenged, then, to try to understand the psychological and behavioral consequences of our incessant esteem needs.

In addition to mere self-delusion, there are two fundamental interpersonal processes that shape our self-concept and

thus our self-esteem. The first involves the way individuals assess themselves by measuring their perceptions of themselves against their evaluations of others. We evaluate ourselves through social comparison processes initially described by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 (Festinger, 1954). His theory of social comparison focused specifically on the ways we evaluate our opinions and our abilities but later research expanded that perspective by developing the core idea that social comparison processes are about our overall feelings of self-worth or self-esteem. Furthermore, later work also developed the idea, again implicit in the original statement, that comparison processes are more aimed at self-validation than objective self-evaluation (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Our esteem needs are so great that they often overrule disinterested appraisals of our opinions, our abilities, and other self-defining qualities that may be relevant for an individual such as their looks, their morals, or their health.

The second process involved in self-evaluation is reflected appraisal, that is, feedback from other people, whether that is explicit or implicit. Reflected appraisals from many people affect our self-esteem, but what leaders think of us is particularly meaningful, either in making us feel good about ourselves, or in shaking our confidence. Leaders have status and they often represent the opinions of other followers. Therefore, what they think of us, and what that means about what our group as a whole thinks of us, matter greatly. However, not only leaders' opinions matter. William James classic chapter on "The Self" notes that we even care about the opinion of "some insignificant cad" (James, 1892, p. 185).

The self-concept itself is complex and multi-dimensional so that our overall self-feeling is affected by social comparison and reflected appraisals along a number of dimensions. As noted, Festinger discussed the evaluation of opinions and abilities. We also mentioned that there are many other dimensions

of self-appraisal. In his classic book on self-presentation, Erving Goffman describes the fictional character Preedy putting on a performance at the beach, acting self-consciously so as to make himself noticed and admired in a number of specific ways: Kindly Preedy; Methodical and Sensible Preedy; Big-Cat Preedy; Carefree Preedy, after all; and finally, Local Fisherman Preedy. Broadly speaking, all those qualities have to do with competence and morality (House & Shamir, 1993). We want to feel effective and we want to feel worthy. We want to be consistent. Elliot Aronson's discussion of cognitive dissonance theory made the fundamental point that we want to avoid feeling stupid and avoid feeling guilty.

Psychologists began exploring self-esteem when the study of psychology was born. The founder of psychology in the United States was William James, noted earlier. His two volume *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, is still a highly readable classic. Along with such chapters as Habit, Memory and the Will, James wrote about "The Consciousness of Self." For our purposes, there are three relevant elements. First, as noted James emphasized the strength of the need to think well of oneself. Even before psychology as a formal field of study got off the ground, James explored what Maslow called Esteem Needs. On the social comparison side of self-evaluation, he noted that "we cannot escape" the emotion of "dread" if we compare poorly to others. Nodding to the reflected appraisal process he noted the "innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably." If this need is frustrated "a kind of rage and impotent desire would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief" (James, 1892, p. 179).

James also noted the complexity of self-esteem by famously claiming that we have "many different social selves" and that each one is dependent on groups or individuals "whose opinion" we care about (p. 179). Given these multiple social