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Heroes for the Times: Fire Chiefs, Not Politicians

In the early winter of 1933, Franklin Roosevelt took a fishing vacation off the coast of Florida. After returning to Miami, he went to a park, where, seated in the back of an open touring car, he spoke to some thousands of people, one of whom was Anton Cermak, the Mayor of Chicago. Cermak stood close to the President-elect and thus was in the direct line of fire when an assassin took aim at Roosevelt. As the Mayor fell to the ground, grievously wounded, the Secret Service shouted at the driver to get the President-elect the hell out of there, but F.D.R. stopped them. And then Roosevelt—a man who could not walk, let alone run, unassisted—swung open the touring-car door and, with arms made strong from years of crutches, took hold of Cermak, pulled him into the car and then, cradling the wounded man, ordered the driver to go to the nearest hospital. Courage.

Or there is the example of Abraham Lincoln, repeatedly warned not to appear in public, who told his bodyguards that their protecting him could not be allowed to interfere with his connection to the people who had chosen him to lead them and the nation. Courage.

And then, lack of courage. George W. Bush. Four days later, he arrives in New York. Couldn't get there sooner because they were targeting Air Force One. So take another plane. This man is so much the captive of his security janissaries they had a by-invitation-only memorial service at the National Cathedral. Leaders take chances. Leaders expose themselves to dangers. Let's rename Air Force One the White Feather Special.

This panicky escape—from Florida to Louisiana, then a disappearance under a desk in Nebraska—was the flight of a confused, frightened man. At the same time he vanished, the news announcers were assuring us that the Vice President was safe in his cave, the Speaker of the House was safe in his cave, and the members of the cabinet were safe in their caves. For practical purposes, the federal government, with New York and Washington under attack, had become invisible. The highest good was saving themselves so they could live to lead us on another, safer day. Cowardice in the face of the enemy?

For most of Tuesday, the de facto leader of America was Rudolph Giuliani. He was the only elected official in the United States to be seen, the only one giving encouragement, the only one enjoining hope and the only one performing the duties of his office, in the face of immediate danger. (George Pataki also was at his post, gaining honor by his conduct.)

So it turns out that as George W. Bush and that shabby bunch he calls his team played the part of the poltroon in Washington, the ordinary people of New York were extraordinary. Our firefighters, our police officers, our men and women from the building trades and from medicine and every occupation showed us what heroes do. In an epoch accustomed to seeing the big shots send the little shots to their death, the fire chief led his people to the immortality which only great deeds and great sacrifice confer. Has there ever been a day like Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, a day of such mass murder, of such grief, of such hugeness of heart? Not in the four centuries since Europeans came to Manhattan island.

When the danger had abated, the politicians, like slugs after a rainstorm, came out from under to resume their accustomed places in front of the TV cameras. The braying jackasses in Congress lined up on the steps of the Capitol to sing "God Bless America" and then, no doubt, went back into their respective chambers to "commend" each other for their "leadership." Seldom have those subprime less-than-mediocrities shown themselves in a worse light.

They were not able, however, to underdo the President, this little man who is too small for his suits. Him with his stumblings, his swarm of meaningless phrases, his *make no mistake about it*'s. Make no mistake about it, this shrimp, this sea urchin is not up to the job. If he had *any stature*, he'd quit—but if he had the stature to quit, then he'd have the stature for the job.

Think of the Presidents of the last half-century who might have led us on this day of criminal human sacrifice. The best would have been Dwight Eisenhower, who knew about death and killing. His Presidency was the last during which policy in the Middle East was argued frankly and openly, the last before dissenting opinion became afraid to say out loud what it thinks.

We might have had Richard Nixon. If it takes a wily one to catch a wily one, he'd have snagged Osama bin Laden, of that you may be sure. You cannot imagine a Lyndon Johnson getting on television after 5,000 of our people were murdered and having nothing to say worth listening to. Bill Clinton would have been equal to the job. When the news came in, he'd have told the girl, "Get up offa your knees, I got work to do," and he would have done it well. For that matter, so would Warren Harding, on most historians' lists as the worst President in the last 100 years—but he did have a sonorous kind of vapidity which deceived his auditors into briefly thinking they'd heard real thoughts. You don't even have the illusion with Mr. Bush.

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He could speak of Osama bin Laden, the evil genius who has thousands of lesser geniuses around the globe, the full match in power and brains of the United States of America. Who is this bin Laden character who has brought off every ambush, every bushwhacking, every bombing for years? Is he real, or is he the Professor Moriarty of what we optimistically call the "intelligence community"? Moriarty–bin Laden gets away every time, disappearing into the waterfall, a man (or monster) of such wicked talents that not even Sherlock Holmes could catch him. Is this or is this not comic-book stuff? Does Moriarty–bin Laden exist, or is he necessary for politicians who dare not talk plainly about the underlying issues, and for the incompetents in the C.I.A. and F.B.I. whose quotas of drunks, traitors and simple jerks must be protected by weaving fairy tales about the superhuman Old Man of the Mountain who knows all, sees all and kills all.

Let us hope that Mr. Bush will someday talk about this catastrophic defeat which occurred because the responsible people in the federal government didn't do their jobs. The Federal Aviation Administration failed. Anybody who has taken a plane in the United States in the last 15 years knows that the only function being served by the security set-up, other than torturing innocent passengers, was to provide leaf-raking jobs for somnambulant and/or rude persons of brief authority.

As for the intelligence—or shall we call it the low-intelligence—community, countless billions have bought us nothing. Whenever challenged, their stock answer is, "You only see the times we failed; you don't see how often we've stopped terrorists." But that ain't good enough, bub. Would we accept the same answer from the people who run atomic-power plants? Foiling nine out of 10 plots is not a passing grade when the 10th results in the death of thousands of people. You could talk about that, President Bush.

And one day soon, our leading people will have to talk about the land which has become the tomb of so many good, dear people. Some will say that the towers should be rebuilt. I hope that there'll be others who say that they should never have been built in the first place, for it isn't only fundamentalist assassins who have long looked on those towers as an assertion of unseemly pride and the shameful hauteur of those who believe money confers virtue. They were as ugly as they were disproportionate, and in their place there should be erected something which speaks of the better America, which is more closely connected to the woman who stands close by in the harbor, her torch still lit in this dark space of time.

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