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THE HEROIC LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE



*How Leaders Inspire
and Mobilize Change*

SCOTT T. ALLISON *and*
GEORGE R. GOETHALS

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How Leaders Inspire and
Mobilize Change

BY

SCOTT T. ALLISON

University of Richmond, USA

AND

GEORGE R. GOETHALS

University of Richmond, USA



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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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 is 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.