

The Warrior Who Was Not

Luke 1:68-79

Our nation has spent the past week paying tribute to the 41st President of the United States, George Herbert Walker Bush. The pageantry and eulogies—both formal and extemporaneous—spoke of a leader who was a war hero in his youth and a remarkable global diplomat in maturity. His legacy includes serving as the US Ambassador to the United Nations under President Nixon, and as the top diplomat to China and then Director of the CIA during the Ford Administration, and as Vice-President under Ronald Reagan. Few Presidents have had such extensive international experience and stature as Bush 41 had before taking the helm in January 1989. He was truly a world leader par excellence.

Though he led a successful multi-national military campaign to oust Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in the first Gulf War, Bush is mainly remembered for his diplomatic wisdom and skill during the collapse of the former Soviet Union—of not gloating or exploiting the opportunity while eastern Bloc countries transitioned into western democracies. He understood the monumental challenges this period presented to Europe and to the untethering structure of the U.S.S.R. and, especially, to the international prestige of its mother country, Russia. The balance of global power was at stake and Bush wisely recognized the cost of going to war over territory or alliances, let alone to impose Washington's will on Moscow. He was a veteran of World War II when both Hitler's ambition and Stalin's arrogance resulted in millions of victims. War is never kind and gentle to life or landscape.

Bush was not a perfect leader, by any means. According to his many critics, he made a mess of things domestically. He also didn't handle the AIDS crisis very well. Neither was the Gulf War a resolved matter, compelling his son's administration a decade later to manufacture justification to charge into Iraq to topple the regime—a decision that many Americans opposed and protested at the time and one that Bush 43 himself ultimately came to recognize as a fateful mistake—something his father warned him about, but advice he chose not to heed. As it stands, Iraq is still a battlefield that has not been effectively silenced to this day, with warring factions fighting for territory and political control. If Iraq is debatable as an example for the cost of combat, then Afghanistan certainly won't be, as it is the longest continual war in American history at seventeen years and counting. As the Pete Seeger song of the 1960s reminds us: “When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?”

Personally, I'm not sure if the elder Bush had a penchant for diplomacy because he was inclined that way or if it was a lesson learned from war. We could likely deduce it was a mix of both. Political leaders without battlefield experience are usually the most dangerous warriors. For them, deploying troops is part of a political game of strategy and success. The threat of battle serves as a coercive means to force the enemy to surrender for the sake of their survival. However, for those who have seen the human toll of combat, their memories alone won't allow them to overlook the dire risks or lasting consequences.

The question becomes, what is worth the cost of going to war? What on earth justifies the devastating loss of life; what objective warrants a lack of control over its eventual outcome? Wars unleash a Pandora's Box of

evils upon every combatant and civilian. Armchair warriors rarely get that, which is why they are so dangerous.

I recall traveling through Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1980s, almost up to the days when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. On those trips, we met with political dissidents, church leaders, and peace activists in many places—Poland, Estonia, East Germany, Ukraine, Belorussia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and various locations throughout Russia. Not a single soul at the time imagined the possibility of such a rapid collapse of communism and Soviet rule.

In May 1989, when I was last there, if I could have predicted the startling events of that coming November, to a person they would have feared it might be bloodier than the Russian Revolution. That's what usually happens when oppressive regimes fall. And despite the theatrics of Reagan's demand ("Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall"), everyone knew such a provocative challenge could have dreadful consequences between warriors. Instead, it didn't turn out to be the threat of American power under Reagan or Bush that brought about the collapse, it was the failure of the Soviet system itself, which had lost its credibility, political value, and moral authority. It no longer was a system to believe in, as Mikhail Gorbachev astutely recognized and President Bush wisely understood.

So, what occurred was quite the opposite: on November 9, the East German government yielding to the growing public protests, opened Checkpoint Charlie and other gates to West Berlin and, with no Soviet response, like a cascade the state powers collapsed, one by one, and gave way to a new era of leaders and a new type of political power throughout Eastern Europe (in Czechoslovakia it was called a "velvet" revolution). It was largely bloodless, because the militant warriors weren't followed;

instead, it was diplomats, intellectuals, writers, and church leaders from democracy movements and civil society who rose up to lead, becoming peacemakers to save their nations—not unlike what Nelson Mandela would do as well in South Africa. From the grassroots, rather than react with retaliation against the corrupt system and its patrons, the people rose up for a better way forward with new leaders in a spirit of selfless patriotism and democracy.¹ Many of the people we met became part of the new governments. To this day, I believe the initial success of the revolutions was because the leaders chose nonviolent ways to transform their oppressive reality.

As I see it, and as the lessons from history often show, warriors usually miscalculate the consequences of opting for war, which invariably are more costly than anyone can predict. Whereas, those who choose the path of wisdom, negotiation, legislation and other nonviolent paths to justice and community-building leave many more options and possibilities on the table to protect human life and to stabilize society, in order to provide a better climate for building a brighter future. It's also common sense: as a rule, people yearn for what they will gain in a peaceful, nonviolent way than what they're promised from the spoils of war.

As distant as the Advent story might appear to be from this historical lesson, in many ways it reflects the heart of it. The birth of Jesus took place in a restless time of insurrection and revolt. Except, as we know, the uprising was against the occupying power of Rome and its co-conspirators

¹ Niels Nielsen, *Revolutions in Eastern Europe*, Orbis, 1991, pp.151-152. "...[T]he change was not motivated simply by idealism...The persecution in Russia was brought to an end in the revolution through perestroika imposed from above. By contrast, in the former Russian satellite countries of Eastern Europe, it has been populist revolt from below, not imposition from above, that has brought about renewed freedom. Even in the peoples' revolutions, however, there were elites who structured mass movements of protest; they were constituted significantly by churchmen as well as literary figures, even reform Communists. When such elites were lacking or proved ineffective, the results were tragic, as in Bucharest..."

within provinces of Judea and Galilee under the rule of Rome's vassal king, Herod the Great. The Warsaw Pact was not unlike Pax Romana—the coercive “peace” that a conquering power enforces. Similarly, the New Testament world was shaped by a Jewish yearning for freedom and self-determination. Much of the language we hear in texts for Advent and Christmas would have translated well into the modern world—whether it be in Eastern Europe, South Africa, or Latin America in the 1980s, the Balkans in the 1990s, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and most of the Arab world in the 21st century.

Zechariah's words today have their context, yet are timeless and relevant to a range of audiences:

...redeem your people...raise up a mighty savior for us...[for] salvation from our enemies and from all the hands of our foes...deliver us from the hands of our enemies...[that we] may serve you without fear...to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

This Advent proclamation in the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel depicts a universal yearning for those who simply want to live in freedom and peace, who dream of being delivered from oppressive regimes that dominate their world, restrict their movement, and impose the cruelties and poverty brought on by military occupation and war. The great yearnings of Advent are not meant to be reduced to serene religious sentiments intended merely for Christmas stories and candlelight services—they represent the passionate, existential, archetypal cry from human souls living under oppression! This is where the messianic dream arises. Oppressed people yearn for a strong deliverer—someone who will secure for them a better place than the present. Messianic yearning for powerful charismatic leadership is very compelling, yet it can also be very dangerous. The strong deliverer can also turn into a tyrant.

There's an old myth in human civilization of the Strong Man, who commands power and authority like no other. It is a myth as ancient as the pharaohs and as current as the tyrants of our time. Despots and revolutionaries alike have embraced this myth in their own ways. Oxford scholar, Archie Brown, explored this in his 2014 book, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*.² I happened upon it while reading Bill Gates' online blog, where he referred to Brown's analysis while reflecting on what makes for good leadership:

Brown's core argument is exactly what his title suggests: despite a worldwide fixation on strength as a positive quality, strong leaders—those who concentrate power and decision-making in their own hands—are not necessarily good leaders. On the contrary, Brown argues that the leaders who make the biggest difference in office, and change million of lives for the better, are the ones who collaborate, delegate, and negotiate—the ones who recognize that no one person can or should have all the answers...Their strength lay in their power to persuade—to convince their colleagues in government, and [among]... people, to understand and support their point of view...

Brown does a wonderful job of showing how the same qualities that seem so appealing in strong leaders can lead, in the mildest cases, to bad decisions—and, in the most extreme cases, to death and suffering on a massive scale [providing examples of various tyrants throughout history]. These qualities can be boiled down to a belief, on the part of the leader, that he or she...is the only one who knows what the country needs, and the only one who can deliver it...³

According to Brown, tyrants make many promises, but they don't change their countries for the better—they lack the leadership skills and vision to do it. They are fundamentally warriors, who look for enemies to scapegoat and defeat. The leadership most effective and transformational is often perceived wrongly as weak and ineffective, as it's one which persuades, negotiates, and diplomatically builds coalitions and communities, rather than one that rules with an iron fist. History proves this to be true time and time again: tyrants fall, shepherds lead.

² Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*, Basic Books, 2014.

³ Bill Gates, "What Makes a Great Leader?", <https://www.gatesnotes.com>, posted December 5, 2016.

As I see it, this Oxford scholar's description of effective leadership is remarkably consistent with the biblical image we have of Jesus, who was not a conquering hero or militant warrior (e.g., Jewish messianic liberator, Judas Maccabaeus), but rather one who was a teacher and sage, who envisioned a restored Israel built on right and just relations in society with an ethical community forming the basis for the realm of God. That explains well why he wasn't perceived as a natural fit for the conventional messianic role, since the belief was that the Son of God would be a larger than life revolutionary—a Strong Man deliverer—a warrior king—like David himself, rather than one who would lead by example, engagement, and spiritual empowerment as did Jesus. Warrior kings seek to destroy their enemies; Jesus taught us to make them into friends by loving them. Yet, Jesus' shepherding leadership style would reflect the transformational model that, according to Brown, is ultimately more effective in changing the world, if history is to be our guide. The Christ depicted by Christendom and eschatology may be portrayed as a conquering warrior figure, but Jesus of Nazareth, on whose life and teachings our faith is based, was not. Jesus was not the mythic Strong Man messiah humans yearn for, but that may be precisely why we still revere and follow him as one who reveals the love of God. Much like the Apostle Paul put it: "When I am weak, then I am strong."

Perhaps, that's also why we have come to appreciate our former President this past week because, unlike others who have worn that mantle, his leadership style was less bellicose, more collaborative, and perhaps ultimately more effective than others. He cared about many people—friends and adversaries alike. George Herbert Walker Bush had the credentials and experience to be a warrior, to be sure, but for most of his

life he chose not to be one. History will debate his legacy, but in an era when bullying tactics and arrogance are cast as the criteria for strong leadership to many around the world, we still can claim the examples of good, decent, and effective leaders who, in my view, have chosen a wiser path toward peace.

More important to our spiritual calling and sensibilities, we come once again to value Jesus' example as a shepherd, with his nonviolent life and moral teachings, as well as his empowering style—all for what it means to be a good leader—to do so by example, with humility and grace and a strong conviction that love, mercy, and justice are indeed divinely-inspired and effective ways to alter the human heart and transform this world from the ways of violence and self-destruction toward a better and more redemptive future for all of humankind.

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