From:
James MacGregor Burns, *Transforming Leadership*. Pages 27-29.

THE POWER OF VISION

If you're teaching a class in leadership and want to fire up a lively discussion, try posing this old chestnut of a question: "Was Adolf Hitler a leader?" The last time I tried this, in an honors class, a woman student vehemently answered, "YES." Evil though he was, she declared, he mirrored the hopes and hates of the German people, he won elections, and he fulfilled his promises by changing Germany along the lines his followers wanted—so how could he not be called a leader? She had the class all but convinced and almost had me, too. Almost.

It was not, of course, that she was in any way pro-Hitler, who stands as perhaps the most universally detested man in all of human history. The

problem is confusion not about Hitler but about the essence of leadership. Is leadership a neutral thing, a mechanical process or power potential available equally to a Hitler and a Gandhi? Or should it be defined as a *good* thing? According to Joanne Ciulla, a leading authority on the ethics of leadership, the "question of what constitutes a good leader lies at the heart of the public debate on leadership."

I see three types of standards or norms as they relate to leadership. Virtue refers to the "old-fashioned" norms of conduct—habits of action—such as chastity, sobriety, cleanliness, honesty in personal relationships, self-control. These normally develop early in life, especially in the home, under, as child psychologist Robert Coles has insisted, exemplary parental leadership. Children learn the rules and sometimes take them quite strictly, turning them back on parents with the cry, "but it's not *fair*!" and so provide a little leadership themselves. Ethics reflect modes of more formal and transactional conduct—integrity, promise keeping, trustworthiness, reciprocity, accountability—supremely expressed in the golden rule. In leadership terms, as leadership scholar Joseph C. Rost has written, ethics are the criteria for "the ways leaders and followers interact as they attempt to influence one another and other people." By transforming *values,* I mean such lofty public principles as order, liberty, equality (including brotherhood and sisterhood), justice, the pursuit of happiness.

Politicians all too often offer vivid examples of the distinctions among virtues, ethics, and public values. Franklin Roosevelt as a young man transgressed the virtue of marital fidelity and later as president violated a cardinal ethical value when he lied to the country about the extent to which the American navy was aiding British ships against Nazi submarines, at a time when the United States was supposed to be neutral. Bill Clinton was roundly criticized for his unvirtuous conduct with a young White House intern. Still, he was found more gravely at fault—and was impeached—for lying about it. In this case the American public seemed to understand the difference between virtue and ethics.

Did FDR's and Clinton's lapses in virtue trump their transforming values? Many say that leaders' failings in virtue and ethics send wrong messages and can even influence people's behavior. Others argue that these messages are superficial and ephemeral, that the real test of presidents' values lies in their degree of success as leaders, in their realization of public values, in the good they did for the country. FDR led in the transformation of American government and society. Could Clinton rightly claim

that his own leadership was successful enough—produced changes that benefited the people—to neutralize his failings? We can wait for historians with longer perspectives to deal with that question.

So *was* Hitler a leader, even a transforming leader? Certainly he "transformed" Germany! But by what standards could his rulership be measured? Clearly he would not be described as virtuous or ethical except by Nazi standards. His own "higher" vision was to restore order in the increasingly turbulent Germany of the early 1930s and then create a "Greater Germany" that would dominate Europe if not the world. In fact he left his country in defeat and devastation, so he was a terrible failure measured even by his own standards. If we test him instead by Enlightenment values of liberty and equality, he was a fanatical enemy of both. Nor did Hitler achieve another of what I call transforming values, one that perhaps embodies the others: he failed—utterly—to create for the people of Germany lasting, meaningful opportunities for the pursuit of happiness. My answer, then, to the question I put to my students: Hitler ruled the German people, but he did not lead them.

Transforming leaders define public values that embrace the supreme and enduring principles of a people. These values are the shaping ideas behind constitutions and laws and their interpretation. They are the essence of declarations of independence, revolutionary proclamations, momentous statements by leaders that go to the core meaning of events, that define what is at stake, such as the Gettysburg Address. Such values are not ordinarily part of the daily discourse of the citizenry. But at testing times when people confront the possibilities—and threat—of great change, powerful foundational values are evoked. They are the inspiration and guide to people who pursue and seek to shape change, and they are the standards by which the realization of the highest intentions is measured. Transforming values lie at the heart of transforming leadership, determining whether leadership indeed can be transforming.