

Excerpt from *The Leader's Bookshelf*

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Leadership is certainly not learned solely from reading books; but a personal bookshelf – or even a library of thousands of volumes – can be critical to developing the ability to inspire others in the pursuit of worthy goals: which lies at the heart of what all leaders seek to accomplish in the challenging but rewarding tasks they take up.

Are the very best leaders born or made?

Over the course of my career and life, both in military operations and in the civilian world of academe, it has gradually become clear to me that some gifts of leadership are indeed bestowed at birth: high emotional intelligence, a pleasing appearance, a smooth and soothing voice, a commanding physical presence – these are all helpful attributes. Some aspects of leadership are in fact “present at the creation” of a woman or man.

But the *best* leaders, in my experience, do not spring forth fully formed -- instead, they are forged through a combination of parenting, teaching, training, educating, and undergoing vibrant real world experiences – effectively *practicing* to be a better leader. That which shapes us along the road of life matters deeply in the formation of an effective leader.

In other words, *both* heredity *and* environment matter in creating good leaders.

But I have come to believe that throughout all of those important developmental steps, perhaps the single best way a leader can learn and grow is through reading.

In this rapidly globalizing 21st century, our nation and our military are out competing in a marketplace of ideas. Indeed, so are all the elements of our society, from media to business to medicine to tech and everything else. We live in a 24/7 news cycle with near instant reporting and widespread dissemination of stories. It is a teeming, tumultuous, and exhausting marketplace. There has been a tremendous push for professionals to understand, quantify, and assess our ability to compete in this arena. On all fronts, we must excel at strategic communication— the ability to get our message out to the right audience, at the right time, with the proper effect, and in all media.

Each of us has a clear obligation to contribute to this effort, to be a part of the conversation, to help our ideas compete – whatever our particular niche or level in any profession. This is what leaders do.

Our nation was founded on ideas that just could not be repressed—those of freedom and liberty. In 1776, we launched these ideas into a world ruled by a different system. Our ideas faced stiff competition, and throughout the years we have even suffered wars to defend them—wars like today’s struggle against extremists who use terrorism as a weapon, often to suppress freedom of expression. Our second President, John Adams, a founding father and one of the iconic American leaders, once wrote that the best way to defend our ideas was

through using our minds: “Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore, the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write.”

So, wherever you are on the road to becoming a leader, dare to begin to read and develop your understanding. Carve out the time to think and form new ideas. Dare to speak out and challenge assumptions and accepted wisdom if your view differs from them. Have the courage to write, publish, and be heard. Launch your ideas and be an integral part of the conversation.

Why? Because it makes our nation and your profession – whatever it is – vastly stronger. In the end, no one of us is as smart as all of us thinking together. Leaders are deeply influenced by all that they read; but reading is only the first step on the path to thinking, writing, and publishing. The best leaders are constantly willing to share their ideas and wisdom with the widest of audiences. Be that kind of leader.