



Character and Leadership

by Jonathan Aitken

*If you think some praise is due to him,
Now's the time to tell it to him,
For he cannot read it on his tombstone when he's dead.*

THESE LINES OF VICTORIAN DOGGEREL tumbled out of the attic of my memory when I recently attended a banquet at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C., to honor the founders of the Trinity Forum (TTF). This organization, often succinctly described as a Christ-centered Aspen Institute, has been dedicated for the past two decades to exploring the ideas that connect faith, character, and leadership.

A discussion group that arose from the ashes of the failed Carter administration in 1981 is surprisingly relevant to contemporary presidential politics as Obama stumbles toward the defeat many are predicting for him. For what TTF tries to do is reinvigorate leadership ideals with intelligent readings and arguments set in the context of faith.

Almost every presidential candidate travels some distance along this road. This is because Americans apparently like their leaders to be religious—but perhaps not excessively so. Back in 1954 President Eisenhower caught this mood by declaring that the nation's institutions made no sense “without a deeply religious faith—and I don't care what it is.”

Ike's superficial contradiction caused some chuckles at the time but it concealed a profound truth. From the codifiers of the Constitution to today's voters, the prevailing view of Americans is that spiritual values are important but that they should flourish in a framework of mutual tolerance and respect. It was in that spirit that TTF's charter declared it to be “open to people of all faiths and of none” even though the original creators of the group were all Christian believers.

The co-founder of TTF was Alonzo McDonald, a former CEO of McKinsey Worldwide who became a pivotal aide in Jimmy Carter's administration as trade ambassador and White House staff director. McDonald in those days was a somewhat lukewarm Episcopalian, with none of the born-again certainties of his boss. But he was influenced by Carter's sincerity of faith and thought it would be a good idea to start a discussion group from which would emerge leaders committed to Christian renewal.

This group, TTF, did not have an easy start. “We tried to establish an institution in which, like McKinsey, perfection would be tolerated,” Al McDonald recalled. But he soon discovered that the efficiency standards of management consultants and spiritual discussants are worlds apart.

To make matters more difficult, TTF's initial circle of business and political leaders did not always want to be led. In his entertaining speech at the Corcoran, Al McDonald described how his efforts to found the group were confounded by characters who might have stepped straight from the pages of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. “We had Mr. Vainglory, Mr. False Intentions, Mr. Feebleman, Mr. Flatterer, and Mr. Worldly Wiseman,” observed McDonald, conveniently forgetting that such types can be found in any corporate boardroom or presidential team. “And we soon ran into the Slough of Despond, the Hill of Difficulty, and the Doubting Castle.”

Even the iron will of McKinsey's most legendary leader might have crumbled in the face of such obstacles. But fortunately for the fledgling TTF, McDonald paid a visit to what Bunyan would have called the House of the Interpreter, a.k.a. the home of the sage and Oxford scholar Os Guinness, who was then a vis-

iting fellow at Brookings working as lead drafter of the Williamsburg Charter.

As co-founder of TTF, Os Guinness provided the intellectual firepower to compile anthologies of readings, known as curricula, which have educated and inspired Trinity Forum participants for the past 20 years.

The seminar material he designed is still in frequent use around the world among groups that range from Rhodes Scholars at Oxford to aspiring and actual politicians in Washington. Under the new leadership of Cherie Harder, a former aide to First Lady Laura Bush, TTF is reaching out to a 21st-century generation of elites with fresh curricula and reinvented material from its archive.

To give one example: TTF has just published as its latest biannual reading Tolstoy's short story "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" This beautifully crafted parable on the meaning of money has timely resonance in the age of double-dip recession and global economic crisis.

In his introduction to Tolstoy's story and in the curricula he created, Os Guinness has a genius for finding spiritual gold seams in writings that can captivate and deepen the souls of leaders who find time to ponder on them. But finding this time can be challenging. Guinness feels that the age of the Internet has produced the most distracted, disorientated, and dislocated generation in history. Western civilization, he argues, can only move forward by going back to the first principles of its faith. At the Corcoran dinner he cut through the glitz of Britain's royal wedding by highlighting its deeper messages on memory, monarchy, and church.

SUCH OBSERVATIONS MAY SEEM a long way removed from the clamor of the 2012 presidential election. Yet the mysterious processes of U.S. democracy are already unveiling questions in the political arena that deserve the quieter reflection of a TTF forum. Why, on the Democratic side, is weak leadership so unappealing? After he's delivered so

little, one wonders if Obama has any argument for a second term, apart from an updated political version of Hilaire Belloc's immortal lines:

*And always keep a-hold of Nurse
For fear of finding something worse*

Yet are the "worse" (i.e., Republican contenders) any less appealing than the incumbent? Some of them seem to be making a lot of noise about their faith but that may not be to their long-term advantage, for religious stridency and political electability

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are uneasy bedfellows. Ike, in his muddled way, got it right. Leaders who aspire to govern America need spiritual gravitas but not of the intolerant fundamentalist, dominionist, homosexual-curing type.

The Founding Fathers of the nation, and the founders of TTF, well understood the importance of thoughtful but tolerant spiritual seriousness. This is why TTF has carved out its own distinctive niche with forums and readings that continue to resonate with leaders. Al McDonald and Os Guinness built better than they knew when they started their discussion group and created an archive of intellectual excellence. They deserved their pre-tombstone tributes at the Corcoran. And, if by some miracle their TTF curricula on character and leadership could be made mandatory reading for all 2012 presidential candidates, the quality of the national debate would rise considerably. ❁

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