Timeless Lessons in Leadership

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Thank you, Dr. Bolton, for the privilege of addressing graduates of a department and university I cherish — and, also, for the opportunity to acknowledge the huge debt I owe to the engaged and engaging history professors at UNC-G, who guided me on a fantastic journey through time, while imparting very relevant and contemporary lessons in life and leadership.

Thirty six years ago – in the spring of 1973 – I sat where you now sit, anxiously anticipating graduation to a “real” world, one transfixed at the time by the Watergate hearings and the war in Southeast Asia.

As an aspiring journalist, I chose to major in history believing it would provide me with the background to better understand and interpret the world I would be writing about. In the years since, as I have traveled and worked around the globe – from Haymarket Square in Fayetteville to Moscow’s Red Square – the historical knowledge I gained here of various cultures and countries has served me exceedingly well.

But as I advanced through the professional ranks – from reporter to editor to business executive – I came to appreciate another advantage: History teaches us about leaders – born leaders, as well as reluctant ones – and about opportunities for leadership, those earned and those thrust upon us. In doing so, the study of history prepares us to step forward and lead, when the opportunity arises, as it inevitably will, whatever professional path we take.

While, for centuries, historians have been fascinated with leaders, other disciplines have been slower to acknowledge the nuanced, multiple, and often conflicting, demands, of leadership. It wasn’t until the latter half of the 20th century, for example, that most prestigious business schools began teaching this qualitative skill, alongside the quantitative ones. Even today, the case studies and texts used in business school classrooms are almost entirely focused on contemporary leaders.

So, this spring, when I developed a graduate-level course for business and journalism students entitled “Leadership in a Time of Change,” I decided to supplement the traditional curriculum with some historical perspective. I asked each of the students in the seminar to pick a book about a pivotal historical event or figure and report back to the class on relevant leadership skills for the 21st century.

After some eye-rolling and joking about the assignment, the procrastinating students finally began reading the history books over spring break (just before the assignment was due), and reported back that they couldn’t stop reading. It was for them a transformative and eye-
opening experience. Like you and me, they’d come to appreciate that the study of history could be entertaining, engrossing and, most important, enlightening.

In establishing the commemorative fund that supports this ceremony, the family of Dr. Richard Bardolf, legendary history professor and department head, asked that commencement speakers “put forth a charge to graduating students to use their education and critical thinking skills to improve society.”

So, in preparation for this address, I asked five of my students – seniors and graduate students just like you – to identify one “aha” moment or insight from their all-too-brief encounter with history that they would carry with them as they graduate.

As I run through the list, I’d like to ask each of you to reflect on what timeless and valuable lessons in leadership you’ve learned from your study here at UNC-G and how you might carry those lessons into the world beyond the campus.

In honor of Dr. Bardolf, who had a lifelong scholarly fascination with the American experience, these five lessons were culled from books recounting pivotal turning points in our history, starting in 1776 and ending in the 1960s. And in the true American spirit, the lessons learned come as a result of the actions of the well known – George Washington – and the little known -- GI Joe.

So beginning chronologically:

**Lesson # 1: Listen to criticism – no matter how hurtful -- with a discerning ear for the truth.**

From a 21st-century perspective, knowing the outcome, we tend to view the year 1776 as a triumphant one that culminated in the Declaration of Independence and the birth of our nation.

But, as Pulitzer Prize-winning author David McCullough describes in his book *1776*, it was a year fraught with peril, uncertainty, divisiveness and numerous defeats and retreats for the young, rag-tag American army.

In November of that year, smarting from defeat in New York and leading his retreating army across New Jersey, George Washington accidentally opened a letter that he thought was intended for him. In fact, it was a communiqué between his most trusted confidant and his second-in-command -- a scathing critique of Washington’s “fatal indecision of mind which in war is (worse) than stupidity.”

We can all empathize with Washington – and feel the hurt and sense of betrayal he must have felt in one of his darkest hours. But instead of lashing out, he simply resealed the letter with a written apology for opening it – and sent it on its way. Later, when the confidant approached him about his indiscretion, Washington admonished him, not for the criticism, but for failing to communicate his reservations directly to him.

In college, the pathway to success is well defined. On the first day of class, we look over the syllabus, seeking a clear notion of what it takes to earn an “A.” In real life, there is no similar roadmap. Even the most successful leader endures numerous setbacks, even defeats.
In your darkest hours, you will most likely be barraged with all sorts of helpful, and hurtful, “suggestions for improvement.” The key will be separating the helpful, from the merely hurtful advice offered by jealous -- rivals or superiors.

In Washington’s case, says McCullough, “the charge ‘fatal indecision of mind’ hurt deeply.” But, “Washington knew it to be true” and, in the weeks, months and years ahead, tried to learn from his mistakes.

McCullough concludes, “He was not a brilliant strategist or tactician, not a gifted orator, not an intellectual. . . . But he learned steadily from experience.”

And in his darkest hours, he listened to criticism graciously, with a discerning ear for what is truthful and therefore, in need of correction.

**Lesson # 2: Lead by example, in defeat, as well as in victory**

This second lesson comes from *April 1865*, written by University of Maryland scholar Jay Winik. A congressional advisor and staff member of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee in the 1980s and 1990s, Winik witnessed numerous civil wars, including Cambodia, Yugoslavia, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Many ended quite badly, planting the seeds for a resurgence of more violence, death and instability in the months and years ahead. Why, he wondered, was our civil war different?

April 1865, he writes, is “a month that could have unraveled the American nation. Instead, it saved it” – beginning with “Lee’s reluctant yet dignified surrender to Grant at Appomattox, accompanied by Grant’s equally dignified, and largely unprecedented, handling of his fallen foe, a masterful act that set the tone for the rest of the war and the peace to come.”

Even after his death, Lincoln’s vision of reunification was realized because others – from General Sherman to Secretary of War Stanton – led by example in victory during this crucial month.

Since we are in this historic church that pre-dates the Civil War, I thought it might be appropriate to offer up one more example – of leading in defeat – that occurred in another historic church in the South.

“It was a warm Sunday at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and an older man who had spent the last four years at war was sitting in his customary pew. As the minister was about to administer Holy Communion, a tall, well-dressed black man sitting at the western gallery unexpectedly advanced to the communion table. Usually whites received communion first. This one small act, then, was like a large frontier separating two worlds, the first being the ante-bellum South and the second being post-Civil War America. The congregation froze. . . .

“Slowly, the white man (sitting in his customary pew) arose and walked quietly up the aisle to the chancel rail. His face was a portrait of exhaustion, and he looked far older than most people had remembered. Yet these Richmonders, like all of the South, still looked to him for guidance. No less so now as, with quiet dignity and self-possession, he knelt down to partake of the communion, along the same rail with the black man.”

Watching Robert E. Lee, private citizen, the other communicants followed.
So, remember there will be unanticipated opportunities for you to lead. Even in defeat, you can still lead by example.

**Lesson # 3: If you want people to follow you, you need to first walk in their shoes.**

Often we equate charisma with leadership without appreciating that you can be a leader without being charismatic. History books are full of quiet leaders who are appreciated only with a distance of time. But regardless of whether or not they are charismatic, all great leaders have an ability to make an emotional connection with their followers – to walk in their shoes, so to speak, and to understand their fears, hopes, needs and aspirations.

In *The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, Jonathan Alter describes the paradox of this very privileged man’s ability to connect with the lowliest and most downtrodden.

He writes, “When asked about the impact of polio, Eleanor’s standard answer was that without it, ‘he would certainly have been president, but a president of a different kind’-- less sensitive to those handicapped by poverty, disease, or ignorance.”

If you are very lucky, you will achieve many successes in life, and survive all your setbacks. And in doing so, you will come to appreciate the adage that you learn more from your failures – or setbacks -- than your successes.

So it was with FDR. “Suddenly,” says Alter, “he was flat on his back with nothing to do but think. He began to read, he talked, gathered people around him –his thoughts expanded, his horizons expanded. He began to see the other fellow’s point of view.”

So, take advantage of the setbacks you’ll inevitably encounter by trying to see the world as other have seen it and experienced it. Use this as an opportunity to walk in the shoes of others more disadvantaged than you.

**Lesson # 4: Don’t overlook the leadership potential of even the lowest ranking person on your team.**

Sometimes you will earn a leadership position, other times it will be thrust upon you. Stephen Ambrose has written volumes on the surprising leadership displayed by the GIs who hit the beach at Normandy 65 years ago and liberated Europe. *Citizen Soldier* takes up where his opus, *D-Day*, ends and details the thousands of unsung, unheralded moments of heroism and plain old Yankee ingenuity shown by American soldiers as they pushed across the European continent to Berlin.

Early in the book, he recounts this exchange between a division relieving units of the 82nd Airborne Division a month after D-Day:

“We asked them: ‘Where are your officers?’ and they answered” ‘All dead.’ We asked, ‘Who’s in charge?’ and some sergeant said, ‘I am.’”

In the fall of 1996, Ambrose was a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin, teaching a course on World War II to some 350 students. He writes, “They were dumbstruck by descriptions of what it was like to be on the front lines. They were even more amazed by the responsibilities carried by junior officers and NCOs, who were as young as they. Like all of us
who have never been in combat, they wondered if they could have done it – and even more, they wondered how anyone could have done it."

How did they do it? They understood the mission, held themselves accountable to one another and stayed together, working as a true team – with every member understanding that he had a vital role to play, even if that meant stepping into an unwanted leadership position.

In both politics and corporate America today, it’s fashionable to extol the virtues of teams. If you are leading a team, make sure you understand the unique set of experiences each member brings to the effort.

**Lesson #5: Know the difference between intelligence and wisdom. True wisdom is the product of hard-won, often bitter experience.**

This fifth and final lesson is really a cautionary tale and comes from the Camelot administration of John F. Kennedy, who in his inaugural address acknowledged that “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war. . . proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has been committed.”

In *The Best and The Brightest*, journalist David Halberstam, writes of Kennedy’s desire to put together the most intelligent and well-educated cabinet ever. But though the team he assembled – many of them alumni of Ivy-League institutions -- exuded “abstract quickness and verbal facility” it failed, time and again, to recognize the yellow warning flags in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

“For all their brilliance and hubris and sense of themselves, they had been unwilling to look to and learn from the past,” writes Halberstam. “And they had been swept forward by their belief in their sense of power and the glory of America in this century.”

Cabinet meetings became little more than rubber stamps for proposals from very intelligent men who failed to:

- Listen to criticism (Lesson #1),
- Lead by example (Lesson #2),
- Walk in another’s shoes (Lesson #3), or
- Value the leadership potential of the lowest member of the team (Lesson #4).

So here are five “Timeless Lessons in Leadership” from five students like yourself, but relative neophytes to the study of history.

Dr. Bardolf’s daughter Ginny Haskett, who is with us tonight, says her father “had an abiding faith that history can reveal who we are and illuminate present perils by our understanding of the past.”

As a history major, you enter the real world with a distinct advantage and head start on those who major in other disciplines. You have spent the last several years studying leaders and leadership. No doubt, you have a much more profound and nuanced understanding of leadership than students who may be reading a history book for the first time.
Whose example will guide you? How will you lead?

Will it be with the humility of George Washington?
The quiet dignity of Generals Grant in victory and Lee in defeat?
The empathy of FDR?
Or the resilience of GI Joe?

Whether you follow in these footsteps or others, remember Lesson # 5: Education can take you only so far. Wisdom comes from experience.

Congratulations on choosing a major that will serve you well throughout life, no matter what path you travel. The next step is all yours.