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Interview

Leadership lessons from Mount Rushmore: an interview with James MacGregor Burns

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PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Question: When and where were you born? How did your family impact your life and career?

James MacGregor Burns: I was born in Mellis, Massachusetts, on August 3, 1918. I had an older and a younger brother. My father was the general vice president for sales of a large milk company located in nearby Charlestown. He was, in a way, the consummate salesman — a very pleasant personality that served him in that post in a company that had small units all through eastern Massachusetts and, indeed, eastern New England. My mother did not have formal paid work until her children were grown up. She was a very strong-minded woman. My parents were divorced when I was about eight and my mother, brothers, and I moved to Burlington, Massachusetts. At that time, it was a small, undeveloped rural town that had no high school. We lived in a remote part of the town near the Massachusetts border.

I think that my parents influenced me in that my father was a great role model for how to approach, deal, compromise, and bargain with people, whereas my mother took very strong moral positions. I guess that some of my belief in moral leadership and convictions stems from her.

Question: Are there any particular experiences in your youth that sparked your interest in leadership?

Burns: I would say not in my early youth. I was really a standard grammar school and high school kid, although in high school I blossomed a lot, becoming editor of the yearbook and that sort of thing. But keep in mind that I was growing up in the age of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and even though my family was very Republican and anti-Roosevelt, I was impressed by FDR's leadership very early in life.

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Question: How did your service as a decorated military historian influence your decision to study political science and, ultimately, political leaders?

Burns: My military service did not particularly influence my later career, as such, but being the so-called combat historian in Saipan, Guam, the Philippines, and Okinawa — doing on-the-ground observational history, occasionally having to participate, and so on — gave me a great sense of leadership in the military. I experienced the highly structured leadership set-up and, also, the way it was so often taken on, not by the officers but by sergeants and enlisted men who showed great leadership qualities in battle.

Question: During your doctoral studies at Harvard, were there any professors who had a profound impact on your thinking? If so, who were they and what was their impact.

Burns: At Harvard I think I was especially impressed by Pendleton Herring who did work in administration, Merle Sainsod, who was a very able political scientist, Carl Frederick, who was a Kantian, and Lewis Harts, who was my supervisor. Lewis was so young that we were really friends, and I was much influenced by him and his writings.

Question: Have any particular philosophers, novelists or poets shaped your worldview and scholarship? If so, who and how?

Burns: There are so many people who have influenced my worldview and scholarship that it would be hard to do them justice. I could mention Erik Erikson and Harold Lasswell in my early days, but in recent days I have read so much in so many different books and articles on leadership that it would be hard to pick out key influences.

Question: We understand you once ran for Congress.

Burns: Yes. I took a real gamble in 1958 by running as a Democrat for a seat in Congress that had gone Democratic only once since the Civil War, and that was in the 1890's. I am quite sure that I would have defeated the Republican incumbent, but when he resigned during the Eisenhower administration scandals, a more formidable opponent came into the race. Given the new attractiveness of the race for Democrats, a candidate entered the Democratic primary from a large city and, unfortunately, let his supporters attack me as an atheistic Communist, etc. This was still the age of McCarthyism. This raised the tough leadership question of how you handle such an attack — I did it by directly denying and defying it, and I won the primary. But much of the feeling that had been aroused in the primary spilled over into the general election. Still, I lost to a good man, Silvio Conte, who went on to keep the congressional district Republican for another decade or two. One practical problem for potential leaders is that of a highly partisan district that gives the incumbent a huge advantage; of course, most of our Congressional districts today are not party-competitive. Finally, for a potential leader who really believes in certain policies and goals, the Congressional primary can be a very destructive way of choosing candidates because of the opportunities both for demagoguery and a focus on trivial differences.

Question: Is there anything about political science as a background for studying leadership — besides the individuals used as subjects — that distinguishes it from psychology, sociology, organizational behavior or other disciplines?

Burns: Political science today has become quite quantitative, for one thing, and that distinguishes it from some of those other disciplines, although some of them are quite quantitative, too. Political science is particularly concerned with the role of power — more so, I think, than the other disciplines. But, my main reaction to the question is that political

science needs to work with these others, particularly psychology and sociology as well as history, in order to broaden the study of leadership.

YOUR LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Question: Of all the books you have written, you have referred to Leadership (1978) as your most intellectually important book. Has your thinking on the nature of leadership evolved since its publication? If you could revise the book, what would be the principal changes?

Burns: Since writing *Leadership*, I have done a lot of rethinking and am presently working on a new book on leadership that will use the previous one as a jumping-off place, not repeating its ideas. I have become even more impressed by the role of values in the study and exercise of leadership; more impressed by the role of conflict, which tends to be downplayed in much of the literature by people who are more interested in consensus; and more interested in creativity, in leaders as creative persons. But I retain my basic interest in the psychological work that has been done on wants and needs by people like Maslow and Kohlberg, both of whom I reference in the 1978 book. Indeed, I feel that some of the more recent works on leadership do not sufficiently exploit the pioneer work done by thinkers such as Maslow.

Question: You have defined leadership as “the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers.” (1978, p. 425) Would you like to reframe or elaborate on this definition?

Burns: I really cannot elaborate much on that definition without doing a long lecture on leadership. I think that the definition really does sum up the crucial elements that interest me, for example, the notions of competition and conflict, leaders and followers, the reciprocal process, mobilization — all of those are part of my work on leadership. I think the definition should stand as is.

Question: You refer to transforming leadership as moral leadership. How does this differ from ethical leadership? Does the private behavior of leaders affect their ability to exert moral leadership? Is it appropriate to separate their public and private lives?

Burns: I am glad you asked this question because I make a major distinction between moral leadership and ethical leadership and, indeed, between those two and what I call virtuous leadership. Taking ethical first, to me it means serving as a role model and practitioner of ethical behavior, especially in the professions, business, community, and perhaps even in marriage. The ethical leader observes standards that are well known: you do not cheat, you are honest, you show professional responsibility in whatever field you are in, and so on. If you are a scholar, you show that you do not steal from other people’s works and that you give people credit for what you do use. The legal profession is, of course, completely saturated in ethical standards, or tries to be, as are others.

To my mind, that kind of ethical leadership — that is, people standing for ethical behavior and, hence, serving as ethical leaders — is quite different from what I call moral leadership, which is leadership that lives up to the highest values of the country. Moral leadership does not so much relate to personal behavior as to where one stands on the

Enlightenment values that are represented, in America, by documents such as the *Bill of Rights*, Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms*, and Roosevelt's so-called *Economic Bill of Rights*. The spread of these values has culminated worldwide in an incredibly impressive document (that not many people seem to know much about), the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It has been signed by many nations — although, of course, they do not always observe it — and it sets the moral standard.

As for virtues, to me these are the Biblical virtues, or the Boy Scout virtues, of not abusing other people, being kind, and all the rest. Usually, today, virtue is discussed in relation to sexual behavior, being unfaithful to one's wife and that sort of thing. To my mind, these virtues are important and fundamental to life but they are quite different from the ethical and moral levels of conduct. This means that a leader can be moral, holding crucial values, and yet violate canons of virtue. We have seen this in recent cases of political leadership.

Question: You use the term heroic leadership to refer to "not simply a quality or entity possessed by someone [but] a type of relationship between leader and led." (1978, p. 244). How is this different from the notion that charismatic leadership is an attributional phenomenon?

Burns: I think that the nature of charismatic leadership — and heroic leadership, which is one form of it — is one of the central problems in the field of leadership studies today. There is a great emphasis on the study and practice of charismatic leadership, both by itself and in relation to transformational or transforming leadership. I feel that it is an unknown and perhaps unknowable area. Here, we are operating in very cloudy areas of hero worship and psychological reactions to leaders, and the leaders' reactions to the psychological reactions of the followers. While it is obviously an important aspect of leadership, I do not think we have really got a grip on this subject because of its many complexities. So, I tend to make my theory of transforming leadership include those elements of charismatic leadership that seem to me to be the most relevant. Obviously, there is an irrational or emotional or intuitive aspect to leadership that goes beyond rational calculation but pinning that down has turned out, in my view, to be very difficult. Still, in my current work, I am certainly paying a lot of attention to the systematic and often very brilliant work others have done in the study of charismatic leadership.

Question: Is leadership a quality of a person, a condition of the environment, or a characteristic of the relationship between the leader and the led? Is there a causal sequence to the connections implied by your formulations?

Burns: I hate to take the easy way out but the answer is, I think, that leadership is all three. The causality of leadership is, to me, the most crucial question and I think we can find answers to it in history, political science, economics, philosophy, sociology, and the other disciplines.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Question: What does it take to be a great organizational leader today?

Burns: I do not pretend to be an authority, or even deeply informed, on organizational leadership aside from reading some of the work that has been done in this area. This work is especially impressive because of the huge amount of research that has gone into it; it offers tremendous possibilities for doing comparative research.

Question: You wrote, “To the extent that bureaucracy is in practice the simple application of authority from the top down, it is not leadership. To the extent that it exemplifies conflict, power, values, and change in accordance with leader–follower needs, it embodies leadership.” (1978, p. 298). Can transforming leadership be practiced in a bureaucracy or rigidly hierarchical organization? How does this argue for or against the alternative organizational structures that are emerging in the modern economy?

Burns: I would stand by this 1978 statement and would expect that transforming leadership cannot easily be practiced in a bureaucracy or rigidly hierarchical organization unless there is a strong internal movement or tremendous pressure from outside. I think that the development of organizational leadership — to the extent that it wishes to also be transformational leadership in theory or practice — argues against alternative organizational structures emerging in the modern economy. On the other hand, one can argue that the study of transformational or transforming leadership might offer some lessons to highly entrepreneurial persons, even in bureaucratic environments, implying that they could shake up or tremendously alter the bureaucratic environment.

Question: In *The Crosswinds of Freedom*, you wrote that the great leaders who founded this country were “well-bred, well-fed, well-read, well-led, and well-wed.” (1989). Does this imply that individuals must be trained at an early age to assume leadership roles? If so, is this at odds with the American ethic that one can become anything one wants to become?

Burns: Thank you for mentioning my favorite little quote. The framers of the Constitution had a very special educational background, many of them being influenced and trained by tutors in what we might call ideal class contexts, the class often being one-on-one. But their leadership training involved more than this; it also went back to the families in which they grew up, the communities in which they lived and, especially, the dominant value system that was in their time taking the form of Enlightenment values. I do not think that the circumstances of this very special era and very special group of men relate much to the question of whether today one can become anything one wants to become. In contrast to those olden times, we have opened up the educational system to a vast number of people, though, of course, not always successfully. I think that today with all the help that able students receive from their families, colleges, grants, and peers, most Americans — but by no means all — can become anything they want to become; this turns also on many factors of a social, political and psychological nature.

Question: What do you see as the most significant challenges facing business leaders today? What can we in academia and the consulting business do to support them?

Burns: Again, I am not the most appropriate person to answer this question but I do think that business leaders could learn a lot from the academic or analytical study of leadership in general as well as from specific writings about their own particular industries. I think that the best way we can support them and that they can support us is to have interchanges between academics and business thinkers.

Question: What lessons does the life and work of Franklin D. Roosevelt hold for business executives?

Burns: Business leaders could learn from FDR’s great political success that political leadership and business leadership may be very different in analytical content and practice. FDR took a fling or two in business, very unsuccessfully. Interestingly, some of his business

ventures were very imaginative but did not pay off, whereas many of his political innovations worked well. I think that business leaders could learn something from FDR about what a government must do in a depression and about the need for government services and agencies that help sustain business initiatives and security. Business leaders also might learn from the FDR experience that sheer hostility to everyone who believes in political reform will, in the long run, hurt business as well as the community. Some people argue that Roosevelt “saved capitalism.” I would say that a lot of people saved capitalism but that Roosevelt certainly kept the country from moving in a highly socialistic or populist direction, for good or for ill. In general, it seems to me that business is much more tolerant of activity now. This is in part, of course, because it benefits from much of that governmental activity but also because business seems to recognize that its own endeavors will not be very successful except in the context of both government support and regulation.

LEADERSHIP EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Question: Can leadership be learned? Put differently, is leadership born or bred; that is, is there value in teaching leadership and, if so, what can we do to facilitate the development of leadership potential? Are there particular knowledge or skills that can be transmitted?

Burns: Can leadership be learned? Yes, it can be. Is leadership bred? No, it is not bred in the genes, as far as we know, but it is bred in the sense of being brought up in a family that is educated, publicly oriented and has the right values for moral leadership in this century. The best training for moral leadership, and leadership in general, is a liberal arts education that emphasizes the key disciplines including philosophy and, perhaps, theology as a basis for moral leadership.

While it is difficult to educate people for leadership — though it is absolutely necessary — it is less difficult to educate them for what I will call leaderships (plural); that is, for exercising leadership in a particular context such as business, education, politics, or the arts. There is a huge literature in this area and a lot of it is quite good. Training in these specific areas — or leaderships — probably takes the form of training people for what we call transactional leadership, that is; everyday give-and-take bargaining and negotiating relationships among people in that particular leadership context. This can be taught because it involves lots of specific skills and special knowledge of the field.

But, when we get back to the question of training for moral, or even political, leadership the situation is much more complicated. Clearly, we can train political skills, but since a young person interested in politics may not know what political arena or context he or she will be involved in — for example, an urban area with urban problems or a rural area with other problems — teaching specific skills becomes more complicated. I think we can teach a lot of the simpler political or campaign arts such as publicity, dealing with media, running polls and the like. But, again, things become more complex in terms of training for moral leadership. The latter demands special qualities of compassion, knowledge and strong values. For preparation, again, I would place my bet on a really good interdisciplinary liberal arts education.

Question: What, if anything, can we as educators — who encounter students in their early or mid-adulthood — do to help them develop the capacity for moral leadership?

Burns: I do not know, as I suggest above, that there is any easy way to teach moral leadership; it depends so much on the idiosyncrasies and personal character of people interested in leadership that generalizations are difficult. I think that an education in the Western Enlightenment, and the spread of its ideals around the globe, would be a good formal background. Among the Western democratic peoples of today, it is the basis of the creed or ideology embracing the values that are laid out, for example, in the American *Declaration of Independence*, the *Bill of Rights*, and other great political utterances. The same holds true in many Western countries and, now, in nations of the East, such as Japan, and throughout the world.

This question also raises the issue of what we writers on leadership should stress, to the extent that we reach a wider readership and leadership scholars themselves. There was a debate for some years as to whether leadership was a term that should be reserved for behavior that was essentially moral in terms of basic Enlightenment values. There has been increasing agreement among leadership scholars, I think, that leadership, as a term, should be reserved for behavior that is at least ethical and, in my view, moral in relation to the very broad values mentioned above. The more we emphasize the moral aspect of leadership in our writing, the more chance there is, at least to a small degree, that leadership will be viewed as not just power wielding but as an expression of our highest values.

Question: Your most widely quoted thought is that “leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.” (1978, p. 2). What specifically should modern scholarship be doing to better understand this crucial, yet elusive, phenomenon?

Burns: I think we have a wide-ranging debate on this subject among a large number of leadership scholars who are pursuing independent work on their own but are keeping in touch with other scholars through some excellent journals, writings and articles. I do not know if there will ever be a final breakthrough in the study of leadership, with its complicated elements and nuances, but I think we are making progress in pinning down what you call this “elusive phenomenon.” Perhaps the problem will be less a matter of making new discoveries or developing new concepts than of trying to achieve greater agreement among leadership scholars who presently have a lot of differences. However, I think these differences are very useful as well as inevitable and can make all of us into more creative scholars.

Question: What do you see as the most exciting and potentially fruitful avenues of leadership research today and why?

Burns: Excuse my bias, but I think that the most exciting and potentially fruitful avenue of leadership research today lies in the study of transformational or transforming leadership. I use both terms because transformational leadership is the general term developed by Bernard Bass, which I have used, but transforming leadership is the term I use to emphasize the reciprocal relationship between leader and follower. Bernard Bass, of course, has written extensively about this subject in his *Handbook* and other scholarly publications; he and his associates have applied much of their theory to practical, human situations.

I think that the most exciting aspect of the study of transformational leadership, again, relates to the role of moral leadership in transformation. But, the simple reason I am interested in transformational leadership is that, to me, the great test of leadership is to bring about what I like to call real, intended, comprehensive, and billable change. We live in a world of change

but much of it is rudderless, not anchored in basic values but simply responding to the pecuniary needs of hosts of investors and developers. So, I would say that a better understanding of the causes of planned change would be the most exciting and rewarding goal of the further study of leadership.

Question: Who do you think we will remember 50 years from now as great leadership theorists?

Burns: I think that Bernard Bass and his associates will be remembered 50 years from now as great leadership theorists or, if they feel that “theory” might sound a bit grandiose, as great leadership conceptualists. To go beyond that would involve me in mentioning scores and scores of impressive thinkers on leadership and would be invidious, especially to those who were left out.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Question: Looking back, what gives you the most satisfaction and pride in your career?

Burns: There are many things that give me satisfaction in my career. Even though I was very unhappy, like most GIs, in the Army, once I was overseas, had a definite job and was able to do military history closeup, I took great satisfaction in it. Then, I taught at Williams College, where the students tend to be of exceptional quality and the classes were small enough for me to develop very close relationships with many students, and that was very satisfying. In terms of my writing, I suppose the experience of working in the archives on Franklin Roosevelt and publishing two volumes about him — he remains my hero despite certain failings — was tremendously gratifying. But, I must say that the most satisfying aspect of my life was switching from political science, biography, and history to the study of leadership, which, of course, still involves the study of those subjects. Going to the Jepson School at the University of Virginia was tremendously rewarding because I could watch — and have a little role in — the establishment of an undergraduate major in leadership. Then, best of all, I moved on, after three very fulfilling years in Richmond, to the Center for the Study of Leadership at the University of Maryland, to watch and take part in the growth of this institution. To summarize, becoming interested in and writing about leadership, and learning from many others working on leadership, is *the* most rewarding aspect of my professional life.

Question: Tell us about the establishment and function of the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland.

Burns: I joined this organization when it was the Center for the Study of Leadership, as indicated above. In recent years, it has been transformed, if I might use that word, into an academy with, it seems, a very special status on the University campus. The development of the Academy is an academic “rags-to-riches” story, the story of Georgia Sorenson, as a young academic working for her Ph.D., getting the idea of establishing a center for leadership studies and persevering in this effort for many years. Increasingly, she won the confidence of her colleagues and of the University of Maryland leadership so that they evidently gave her a great deal of leeway in working out the best organization and program for the study and practice of leadership. Keep in mind that, even though there are other leadership centers, some of which were established before

the Academy, her challenge in developing this organization was undertaken at a time when we knew far less than we do, perhaps, today about how leadership studies can be set up in the context of a liberal arts institution. She persevered through thick and thin with strong support, as I said, and now the Academy of Leadership is a well-organized and, in my view, highly successful program that addresses many aspects of leadership. These include both education and research, as reflected in the Center for the Advanced Study of Leadership and in the many grants to scholars like Ron Walters, Robin Gerber and Scott Webster, who are working there. It is a very lively institution intellectually, composed of people who are reaching out to broaden the activities of the Academy, and a thriving operation, in my biased view, a great tribute to the leadership, also, of the University of Maryland at College Park.

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COMMENTS FROM COLLEAGUES AND PAST STUDENTS ON THE IMPACT, PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL, OF J. M. BURNS

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In the classroom, James MacGregor Burns leads by inspiring emulation. He does not instruct and tell students what they should know so much as he suggests and lets them realize what they think. I was a student of Professor Burns in 1972 at Williams College. I had already decided that preppy Williams was not the college for me — a public school product from the Midwest farm belt — and had been admitted as a transfer student to the University of Michigan beginning the next semester. For my last term at Williams, as a rising sophomore, I decided to take Professor Burns' senior course in political leadership. My idea was to go for the best, no matter what it cost me in my grade.

From the very first, Professor Burns was an inspiration. I had already abandoned political science for history due to the excess of model building in the political science courses that I had taken. Here was Professor Burns, president of the Political Science Association, and clearly one of the most respected scholars at Williams, telling us about American political leadership through stories, anecdotes, and history. He even confided in me one day, as I explained (at his request) my decision to leave Williams and political science, that he would have opted for history over political science if he had anticipated the turns those fields would take. And he invited me to his home for Thanksgiving dinner when he found out that I would be left in Williamstown during the holiday break. He became known for having the entire class into his home to watch the election returns. In 1972, he claimed victory because of McGovern's win in Massachusetts and predicted that "the crows would come home to roost during Nixon's second term."