

## “All the World’s a Stage...” acting and the art of political leadership

### **Original Publication by Thomas E. Cronin**

In *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008) 459-468

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This essay is about how a successful political leader must master the skill of acting. Citing examples of leaders, such as Eisenhower and Reagan who made use of this skill, Cronin states that a political leader must act, put on a performance, to inspire and gain support. Like actors, politicians must appear heroic and flawless, yet human at the same time.

Cronin examines the different tools that are indispensable for good politicians, as well as, good actors: connecting with the audience, understanding and exploiting symbols, listening empathetically, improvising, radiating confidence, projecting discipline and toughness, as well as honesty.

*Connecting with the audience.* Actors and politicians must understand and reach their audiences. The latter connect by finding out what their audience (the electorate) wants and promising to deliver it. An example is of Martin Luther King’s, Jr., “I Have a Dream” speech.

*Understanding and exploiting symbols.* Actors and politicians use symbols that are meaningful to the audience to appeal to them and remind them of their shared culture and beliefs. For example, the U.S. presidents deliver their State of the Union addresses on Capital Hill in front of a huge American flag. Mahatma Gandhi used salt and cotton as symbols of Indian nationalism to appeal to the Indian masses. Symbols can also, however, be misused – for example, “weapons of mass destruction”, “mission accomplished”.

*Listening empathetically.* In a democracy it is very important for a leader to listen to his or her followers, as understanding their needs is the key to success. The leader must also be attentive and make his or her followers feel significant and valued. Similarly, an actor’s success depends on satisfying the audience. They must, therefore, listen to other actors and the crew, as well as the audience. Neither are solo acts.

*Improvising.* An actor must learn the art of improvisation to make his character real, give it a personality, one that the audience can relate to. Similarly, politicians must be prepared to show the electorate the real, unrehearsed part of themselves. Political leaders are often put on the spot in debates or in times of crises. These are crucial times when they must stay confident and ready to respond.

*Radiating confidence.* Leaders must have a positive presence, “the charismatic personality” about which Max Weber wrote, and exude confidence, optimism, and a

feeling of shared vision. They must appeal to their followers at the time and embody the characteristics they desire. For example, Obama's image as a symbol of hope and change appealed to the electorate at a time when the international, political, and economic climate was worsening. The importance of a confident personality is shown by the magnetic and striking personalities of Churchill, DeGaulle, and Franklin Roosevelt, among others, who are still remembered.

*Projecting discipline and toughness.* Cronin quotes playwright Arthur Miller on the fundamental theme of power, "The ultimate foundation of political power...has never changed...it is the leader's willingness to resort to violence should the need arise." People want a political leader who is willing to be tough and violent in times of crises. A leader must then appear powerful and even threatening when needed. Cronin likens this to acting by quoting Arthur Miller's praise of Marlon Brando.

*Demonstrating honesty.* People want a political leader whom they can trust. The actor and the political leader, therefore, share a dilemma: they must perform their parts skillfully, but be genuine and honest at the same time. The actor's performance must be believable, he must become the character. The politician must appear honest, as the audience should be able to trust him and see him as an ethical decision maker.

Cronin has shown us that "political leadership is part theater." Both politicians and actors hone their communication skills. Let us hope that our politicians act ethically even though we often judge them on performance.