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Take Three:  
Lessons of Leadership from the Big and Small Screen

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College, Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of National Security Affairs.

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February 13, 2018

Unless you grew up in an environment where you could observe parents or caregivers in their workplace, television and movies were likely your first exposure to leaders. Sometimes they were admirable, sometimes horrible. Media caricatures of leadership in movies and television often provide key insights into the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of leadership styles. We will explore three fictional leaders from the big and small screen that provide positive, but flawed leadership examples and consider how those traits can be found in historical figures. As a framework, we will utilize a non-traditional taxonomy of assessing leadership traits.

Leadership, real or fictional, is about persuasion – persuading others to do things and make achievements that they would not otherwise do.<sup>i</sup> Before we explore fictional leaders, consider the concept of Aristotle’s three modes of persuasion. In his seminal work Rhetoric, Aristotle writes:

“Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the *personal character* of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a *certain frame of mind*; the third *on the proof*, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.”<sup>ii, iii</sup>

In other words, Aristotle’s tenets can be described as the *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*.<sup>iv</sup>

*Pathos* is the appeal to emotion and the human spirit. It is leadership through shared hardship, the assertion that the purpose of an endeavor is realized by the emotional satisfaction in doing it. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates or General Omar Bradley can be considered *pathos*-centric leaders. Our first fictional leader draws on the *pathos*, empathizing with and motivating his followers through the human connection. *Logos* leadership reflects the converse – the rational calculation that something must be done because it will logically lead to a successful outcome. Curtis Lemay or Hyman Rickover are examples of *logos* leaders, and likewise our

second leader draws strength from complete rationality. Finally, the *ethos* leader embodies idealism, that an action must be taken because it advances the greater good; sacrifice is made in aspiration of “something bigger.” Nelson Mandela is perhaps the epitome of an *ethos* leader, and our final leader is soaked in this mode of persuasion, embodying the best of our society and what we strive to be. The imagined leaders we will explore have strengths and weaknesses, and each tells us about ourselves and the dangers of overinvestment in one of the three modes of persuasion. All these characters are persons in conflict – where logic conflicts with empathy, empathy with duty, duty with honor. Finally, we will explore how *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* can join together to create a real-life ideal leader world-renown for his effectiveness.

### **The Pathos: *Bridge Over the River Kwai*’s Colonel Nicholson**

One of my all-time favorite movies is *Bridge Over the River Kwai*, first released in 1957. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson, played by Alec Guinness, is the commander of British troops captured in 1942 in Singapore; he is a leader faced with crushing defeat. His soldiers and officers, demoralized, face an interminable life of misery as Japanese prisoners of war. Though beaten on the battlefield, Nicholson refuses to be defeated by the Japanese commander who presses him to perform manual labor and will not let the British officers supervise their soldiers. Nicholson, citing the Geneva Convention, orders his officers not to cooperate, and personally endures torture and isolation in the name of shared hardship with his troops. He refuses special treatment from the Japanese designed to assuage him, such as food and drink not available to his men.<sup>v</sup> His focus on the well-being of his troops embodies his *pathos* perspective.

Things take a turn when the Japanese commander relents and allows the British officers to supervise their troops without forced labor. Nicholson, flush from his victory, sees a further

opportunity for his soldiers to regain their pride and motivation through a common sense of purpose: building a bridge. In the name of unity and besting the Japanese, he harnesses the talents of his men to build a high-quality bridge over the Kwai – better and faster than the Japanese were capable of building. Nicholson squashes efforts by his troops to delay progress on the bridge, efforts that his troops hope will undermine the Japanese. Nicholson sees this behavior as unprofessional and not “befitting” the character of a British soldier. As the film approaches its climax, Nicholson realizes his efforts to protect his men came at the cost of aiding the enemy: “What have I done?” are his last words in the film before his broken body falls on an detonator that destroys the bridge..<sup>vi</sup>

Alec Guinness’ incredible performance aside, Nicholson is a character worth considering for his strengths and flaws, and an example of leadership Contingency Theory – a leader who fits the mold of having a “one best way” in running his organization..<sup>vii</sup> He is a conflicted leader, with an overdeveloped sense of *pathos* so strong that it clouds his judgement and makes him miss the larger strategic picture. His character is an important lesson that solidarity and shared hardship can motivate your team to achieve almost anything, but at a cost. In the real world, Robert Gates, one of the most highly respected Secretaries of Defense in U.S. History, (and considered a contingent leader)<sup>viii</sup> admitted himself that his commitment to the well-being to the troops (a sense of *pathos*) clouded his judgement. In his memoirs, Gates writes:

“Signing the deployment orders, visiting hospitals, writing the condolence letters, and attending the funerals at Arlington all were taking an emotional toll on me... I realized I was beginning to regard protecting them – avoiding their sacrifice – as my highest priority. And I knew that this loss of objectivity meant it was time to leave.”<sup>ix</sup>

The overall mission and goal must remain in focus alongside the needs of your team. One cannot practice persuasive leadership through *pathos* alone.

## **The Logos: *Star Trek*'s Mr. Spock**

As a fan of *Star Trek*, Spock is my favorite character. Spock as portrayed by Leonard Nimoy is a leader. Second in command of the U.S.S. Enterprise, he is the critical advisor to the captain and is frequently called upon to assume command. For Spock, logic dominates and guides his decision making. However, *logos*-based approach magnifies when logic must dominate decision-making calculus, and when it shouldn't.

An interesting case study for Spock's leadership is an earlier episode of the series, titled *The Galileo Seven*. Spock is leading six crewmembers when their small shuttle unexpectedly is forced down on an inhospitable planet. Dr. McCoy, the series' foil for Spock, is also on the team, and in private presses Spock on how he intends to lead:

McCoy: "It will take more than logic to get us out of this."

Spock: "Perhaps, doctor, but I know of no better way to begin. I realize that command does have its fascinations, even under circumstances such as these. But I neither enjoy the idea of command, nor am I frightened of it. It simply exists. And I will do whatever logically needs to be done." <sup>x</sup>

For the damaged shuttle to leave the planet, it must become 500 pounds lighter, requiring three of the seven remain behind on the planet. In discussing the situation with the crew, Spock coldly explains that his choice on who would remain would be a logical one, which does little to reassure or motivate the crew. As the company starts to take casualties from primitive natives, Spock shows no empathy for the loss of two shipmates, but rather analyzes the adversary's capabilities following the attack. However, realizing the needs of his emotional crewmates, he shows growth beyond *logos* by risking his safety to recover a fallen crewmate.

As the natives close in, Spock becomes paralyzed with analyzing the circumstances and potential options as the crew begs him for inspiration and action..<sup>xi</sup> Ultimately, Spock's scientific knowledge and expertise allows the crew to lift off, but he dampens the mood by reminding them

that the odds of success are very low. In the finale of the episode, he risks everything by spontaneously burning the shuttle's remaining fuel to successfully signal a rescue, an impulsive act rooted more in *pathos* than *logos*.<sup>xii</sup> Spock's logic was adequate to solve the leadership challenge that required technical proficiency. However, *logos* was insufficient to both motivate his crew and deal decisively with the threat from the natives.

Spock goes on to face more adventures while in command and realizes that a logical approach cannot solve every problem. As the exemplar of a *logos* leader, Spock teaches us that logic has the power to solve complex problems. He shows cold logic is often required to make life or death choices in a crisis. In the real world, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was often accused of being a "robot." During one of his trips to Vietnam in the 1990s, he expressed "[h]uman welfare requires that we avoid conflict. I try not to let my human emotions interfere with efforts to resolve conflict."<sup>xiii</sup> To the uninformed, this could masquerade as a quotation from Spock at any moment in the series. McNamara was overinvested in his sense of *logos*, and eventually realized the *pathos* and *ethos* also play a role in decision making. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is another *logos*-based leader with a tremendous rational intellect, but such a logical approach also has a sinister side. When considering authorized interrogation methods, Rumsfeld wrote: "I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing [as a detainee interrogation technique] limited to four hours?"<sup>xiv</sup> Like Spock, McNamara and Rumsfeld show us the *logos* of persuasive leadership gives only a partial answer to leadership challenges and the limits of cognitive approach theory.<sup>xv</sup>

## **The Ethos: *Clear and Present Danger's* Jack Ryan**

Tom Clancy's bestselling series of books featuring CIA analyst Jack Ryan were bestsellers that became blockbusters on the big screen. With Jack Ryan, we have an "everyman" character thrust into a wide range of national security crises, an embodiment of a situational leader..<sup>xvi</sup> Ryan is not a commander of troops; he is a classic influence leader who shapes decisions of senior leaders up to the President through his steady dissection of the situation and ability to take action. Foremost, he is a patriot who is fully vested in his duty to his family, his organization, and his country. Harrison Ford's portrayal in *Clear and Present Danger* depicts a leader soaked in *ethos*, the ideal we hope all Americans in national security live up to.

Consider the leadership challenges Jack Ryan faces in *Clear and Present Danger*. At the start of the film, Ryan is a senior intelligence analyst in the CIA. Following the drug cartel-related murder of an associate, the President of the United States launches a clandestine, illegal war against cartels using special operations forces operating in Colombia. The knowledge of this program is kept to a small circle of the national security team, which does not include Ryan. Over time, he pieces together the illegal activities taking place..<sup>xvii</sup>

Ryan's duty is conflicted between the value of fighting the cartels and the illegal activity of the CIA, the National Security Advisor, and the President. Ryan, ignorant of the program, unknowingly lies to Congress when asked if the Colombia aid package included troops. In the end, Ryan's *ethos* exposes the violations of U.S. law over the rationality of fighting the cartels. He reveals the illegal activity and brings the perpetrators to justice, but in so doing exposes the special forces still operating in Colombia. Realizing his actions in the name of ethics and justice jeopardized American lives, Ryan races to Colombia to rescue them. Ryan admits to the sole surviving soldier that the team's destruction was ultimately his fault. The film's epilogue depicts



Ryan about to willingly testify before a Congressional committee that will illuminate the administration's illegal war..<sup>xviii</sup>

This character offers interesting perspectives on leadership. Ryan's absolutist view of right and wrong is challenged by the needs of a relativist approach to both fight the cartel and save the troops in Colombia. It is also a textbook case of situational leadership, as he is thrust into a leadership role he did not seek, and takes on a range of tasks in difficult circumstances in the name of patriotic duty - the personification of *ethos*. Ryan is a character betrayed by those who would take advantage of his idealism. Considering a real-world figure very different than the Ryan character, one can reflect on whether Lee Kuan Yew, who had the highest of ideals and motivation for the development and success of Singapore, was also overinvested in the *ethos*. Lee's idealism and strong *ethos* changed Singapore, but his lack of *pathos* resulted in human rights violations..<sup>xix</sup> A reliance on *ethos* alone can cause a leader to lose sense of their surroundings by being overly focused on mission success.

### **From Fiction to Fact: Persuasive Leadership that Balances Logos, Pathos, Ethos**

Through our observations of Colonel Nicholson, Mr. Spock, and Jack Ryan, we can conclude persuasive leadership relies on the balance of the *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* modes of persuasion. It is difficult to find a fictional leader in television and movies who successfully balances all three traits – such a “super character” is probably uninteresting to watch, or might seem unbelievable. Drama is about conflict, and conflicted leaders facing difficult choices are interesting to watch. If we consider a leader that is able to successfully balance the *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*, Dwight Eisenhower is a shining example.

Eisenhower, though not known as a field commander, was able to connect with the soldiers in his command. He made extra efforts to visit his troops and personally engage with them, most famously just before the Normandy landing. Eisenhower was a leader with high emotional intelligence, able to work with a wide range of personalities who had conflicting interests.<sup>xx</sup> As perhaps the most respected soldier-diplomats of all time, Eisenhower embraced the *pathos* mode of persuasion with allied forces to achieve results.

As the commander of hundreds of thousands, Eisenhower had to be governed by cold calculations of forces and probable losses ahead of the Normandy landings. He had to deliberately and logically weigh the optimal time of the landing, the size of force to be committed, and the number of casualties the landing force would likely sustain. Eisenhower ordered the Normandy attack knowing that thousands of troops would die in the attempt, and that even with these assured casualties, the outcome would be uncertain. To lead effectively, Eisenhower had to leverage the *logos* above his sense of *ethos* and *pathos*. A hesitation over casualties would have appealed to his sense of *pathos* but would have risked failure. An overinvested sense of *ethos* to quickly open a second front against Germany as political leaders demanded would have resulted in military disaster. Eisenhower's ability to harness *logos* at the decisive moment led to allied victory.

Nevertheless, Eisenhower was a leader steered by his sense of *ethos*. Through this perspective, he recognized the need to sacrifice self-interest, and at times American interests, in pursuit of the common good and allied victory. He is probably the most admired and respected U.S. general of the Second World War, known for his calm, reassuring demeanor. He was not a “showy” general when compared to MacArthur, Patton, or Montgomery – service before self

was his touchstone. The strength of *ethos* in Eisenhower manifested itself in his eventual election as President of the United States.

## **In Reflection**

In assessing each fictional leader, it becomes clear that Aristotle's ideas of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* must be balanced to lead effectively. When we apply the taxonomy to both fictional and real leaders, we observe strengths, but also tremendous flaws when the modes of persuasion are imbalanced. Nicholson's devotion to troops compares with Secretary Gates; while well intentioned, each leader's sense of *pathos* came at a price. Spock embodies the logic and intellect of *logos*, but he lacks the emotional intelligence to motivate and inspire, not unlike McNamara and Rumsfeld. Jack Ryan committed himself to the *ethos* in his drive to "do good," but this approach also requires critical thinking, as an over-commitment to *ethos* can have a darker side, as observed with Lee Kwan Yew. With Eisenhower, we see how the *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* can balance to produce incredible results.

All of us should consider how each of us balances our *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* of decisions that impact our teammates and organizations to produce results. In my personal experience, I faced decisions that caused tension between the three modes. As a company commander in 2003, I had to hand-pick eight soldiers to unexpectedly deploy, forcing me to decide between the skills needed for the mission with some critical personal family issues – causing tension between my inner *logos* and *pathos*. At the Pentagon, I observed senior leaders focus on the mission, but seek workarounds in a legal gray area, acts which challenged my inner *ethos* against the *logos*. In reflection, perhaps the hardest decisions a leader must make are the

very decisions where the pathos, logos, and ethos come into conflict. Our legacy as leaders rests on how we are able to rebalance them for personal, organization, and mission success.

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<sup>i</sup> Nick Morgan, “Leadership is all about emotional persuasion,” *Forbes*, February 2, 2010, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

<sup>ii</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 350 B.C., Translated by W. Rhys Roberts, Book II, [www.classics.mit.edu](http://www.classics.mit.edu).

<sup>iii</sup> Italics are added by the author of this essay for emphasis.

<sup>iv</sup> John Zimmer, “Ethos, Pathos, Logos – The Three Pillars of Rhetoric.” Presentation Guru. May 23, 2016. [www.presentation-guru.com](http://www.presentation-guru.com)

<sup>v</sup> *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, directed by David Lean, (1957, Colombia Pictures), DVD.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Mary Raum, “Ideas about Leadership: A Short History and Description of Modern Leadership Theories,” Newport RI: Naval War College Faculty Paper, August 2012, Page 10.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, Page 16.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert Gates, *Duty*, United States: Random House, 2014. Page 594.

<sup>x</sup> *Star Trek: The Galileo Seven*, directed by Robert Gist, (1967, Culver City: Desilu/Paramount), DVD.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> David K. Shipler, “Robert McNamara and the Ghosts of Vietnam,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 10, 1997. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>xiv</sup> Tom Malinowski, “The Logic of Torture.” *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2007, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

<sup>xv</sup> Mary Raum, “Ideas about Leadership: A Short History and Description of Modern Leadership Theories,” Newport RI: Naval War College Faculty Paper, August 2012, Page 32.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, Page 22.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Clear and Present Danger*, directed by Philip Noyce, (1994, Paramount Pictures), DVD.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Roger Ducey, “Lee Kuan Yew,” Newport, RI: Naval War College Faculty Paper, July 2015.

<sup>xx</sup> Albert Shimkus, “Eisenhower: The Right Man in the Right Job at the Right Time,” Naval War College Faculty reading, August 2010, Revised March 2016, Page 20.