



## AMERICA AND WORLD LEADERSHIP

—ROBERT GREENLEAF

*In January 1976 I attended an International Symposium on Leadership Development. In responding to the charge of arrogance by Americans, I made the following statement.*

Our African friend has said that we Americans are arrogant. It hurts—but I accept the charge.

Our arrogance stems, I believe, from the fact of our great power. In the years that the British were the great power, they were seen as arrogant. When the next shift comes, the nation that emerges into that unfortunate spot will quite likely be seen as arrogant. Civilization, it seems, has not advanced to a point where, as a natural gift of grace, either individuals, institutions, or governments are likely to be both powerful and humble without some basic changes in public thinking that are not yet evident. Some may make it, but the odds are against it.

In this conference I have learned from Father Benjamin Tonna of Malta that humility in the more powerful is ultimately tested by their ability to learn from and gratefully to receive the gifts of the less powerful. It is in my experience to know this, but sometimes one needs to be taught before one understands one's own experience.

When I retired from my active business career twelve years ago, I was asked by an American foundation to take an assignment for it in India. The first school of administration to be set up there after independence in 1947 was a close copy of an English model that, by 1964, had proved not to be a sound idea for India. And the foundation had been asked to give technical assistance and a grant of money to help develop a new program for that



school that would better serve the development needs of India. I took on the staff work on that project and made four long visits over the ensuing four years. I found the top cut of Indian society with which I dealt, both in and out of government, to be highly sophisticated. Yet I was treated as if I had a level of expertise far beyond what my old colleagues at home who knew me well would concede. This is heady stuff, a fertile breeding ground for arrogance, and the several thousand who participated in aid programs in India, both private and governmental, in the heyday of technical assistance, were all exposed to some measure of it.

By the usual standards of judging a consulting engagement, mine was successful. A new program for that school of administration did emerge, and it has been sustained. Also, in this period, I believe I learned something about the steps that needed to be taken in India to develop a new leadership to recover that great nation from the deprivation of three hundred years of colonial rule during which the Indians had been educated for, and participated extensively in, routine administration, but they had not been allowed to learn such essential skills as goal setting, negotiation, or institutional design. These had all been done for them by their colonial masters.

In 1970, I made my last visit to India. This time I went only to New Delhi to confer with the foundation staff that was based there about the new conditions they faced in India and how the foundation might best serve while it still had the opportunity. It was then clear that the future of that country was not likely to accord either with Gandhi's dream of a village-based nation or Nehru's classical socialist aim of an industrialized one. Rather, it seemed that they were embarked on their own evolutionary path on which they would move forward, much as the rest of the world does, not according to an idealistic plan but by responding creatively to world conditions and the current state of their own society. And I felt that there needed to be a new concept of how things get done in India under these new conditions, both for the benefit of the Indians in building their new institutions and for the guidance of those whom they might choose to advise them. Otherwise, these advisors would have to learn for themselves, the hard way



as I did, how things get done there—if, indeed, they ever learned. But, alas, it was a tardy suggestion. The opportunity for the foundation to give that kind of service in India was very soon to be gone. The advice was twenty years late.

In 1971, when I signed off on this foundation relationship, I had some things to say in my report that have a bearing on the question of how those in a position to lead can best lead, and why Americans who try so hard at it are seen as arrogant by so much of the world. But, first, I want to comment on the Indian view of aid when I first went there, while Jawaharlal Nehru was still prime minister, a post that he held for the first seventeen years after independence.

Nehru was Oxford educated and Western in outlook. Furthermore, he denigrated both Indian religion and culture, and he welcomed technical assistance the way I, and many others like me, were prepared to give it as one of the means for helping India to take a fast course into the family of advanced (Westernized) nations. This was 180 degrees off the course that Gandhi had charted for them and prompted Nehru in his autobiography to make such comments as: “How very different was his [Gandhi’s] outlook from mine. . .and I wondered how far I could cooperate with him in the future.” “He has a peasant’s outlook on affairs, and with a peasant’s blindness to some aspects of life.” “In spite of the closest association with him for many years, I am not clear in my own mind about his objective. I doubt if he is clear himself.” Part of the confusion about goals that I sensed there stems, I believe, from this very basic conflict in outlook between Gandhi, who gave the masses of common people a great dream of their own good society, and Nehru, who headed the first government and led them in quite another direction.

With the perspective of my own experience in India and much reading of its history and biographies of its leaders, I made the following comment in my final report to the foundation that employed me:

Anyone who has spent even as little time as I have in India cannot help having views about the whole aid-giving, aid-receiving relationship. . . It



does not seem to me to be a sound basis for a relationship for one nation to be aid giver and another aid receiver for a long period of time. A one-way flow of aid is all right for an emergency or a short period of readjustment, but not as a long term thing—and twenty years [the time this foundation had been working in India] is a long period. I believe, further, that, on balance, the Indians have as much to give us as we have to give them (different things, perhaps, but just as much). And it seems presumptuous, over a long period of time, for us to assume that, because we happen to have a surplus of money, the giving should be one way. Therefore, I believe that if we want to continue to be useful to the Indians, we should use our resources as much to learn from them as to facilitate their learning from us.

By a quirk of fate, in the years that I have been available to do it, I have served as a consultant to several foundations, both large and small. In addition, I was a trustee for some years of a middle-sized one, so I have had a rather concentrated immersion in the field of giving, and I have had a good deal of occasion to reflect on the role of giving. Recently I have summarized this experience in two articles in *Foundation News*, the journal of philanthropy (see chapter 6 herein). In one of them I made this observation:

Those who have been deeply involved in foundation staff work, particularly in a large foundation, are aware of the incessant pressure of grant requests. They know how difficult it is to judge the merit of a request. And they know that many meritorious ones must be turned down. Sensitive people have referred to this as “corrupting work” because grant applicants, no matter how prestigious and powerful they may be, approach the foundation as supplicants. Communication is warped to the extent that a feeling of omniscience is a serious occupational disease of foundation staff work. Not all who are exposed contract the disease, but the incidence is high. An early foundation officer recommended a ten-year limit of tenure to reduce the liability.

In his book *Private Money and Public Service*, Dr. Merrimon Cuninggim, former president of the Danforth Foundation, takes a more theological



view when he suggests that “giving is a potentially immoral act.” He continues:

Its danger lies in its assumption of virtue by the agent, of the virtue of agency, with an accompanying train of unvirtuous assumptions. The relatively innocent desire to help is so thinly distinguished from wanting to be the helper. But the latter is capable of all sorts of distortions: wanting to be well known as the helper, wanting to dictate, to paternalize, to manipulate. It is not likely that a foundation, any more than a person, will escape these faults by thoughtlessness or accident. Only by being conscious of the danger is there a chance to escape. In other words, a foundation must believe in the potential immorality of giving.

Out of reflection on my own experience, and particularly in the context of this conference where the arrogance of power has been so sharply highlighted, Dr. Cuninggim’s admonition to the giver to be conscious of the danger and believe in the potential immorality of giving seems not enough. We in the United States who are placed in a position of power by our massive surplus (relatively) for giving, from both public and private resources, will not escape the opprobrious label of “arrogant,” nor will we have a chance to achieve that possible wholeness of existence, as individuals and as a nation, simply by being aware—unless that awareness opens the way to a new basis of relationship between aid giver and aid receiver, both among individuals and institutions in our country and between our nation and others, particularly the developing nations.

In this regard I see no middle ground between arrogance and humility. One may not safely give unless one is open and ready to receive the gifts of others, whatever they may be. Scripture holds that it is more blessed to give than to receive. But if one has the great power of affluence in modern terms, a condition which the writers of scripture may not have foreseen, this may be a questionable generalization, because *receiving* requires a genuine humility that may be uncomfortable and difficult to achieve, whereas *giving* poses the risk of arrogance, which, unfortunately, is easy to come by—and some seem to enjoy it.



An important dimension of leadership within a nation that has the substantial power of affluence, such as we in the United States have, will be the ability to persuade those who are in a position to give, whether an individual, an institution, or the nation, that they should reach out for, gratefully receive, and help pay the cost of the giving to themselves by the less favored.

In the contemporary world it is at least as blessed, especially for the powerful, to receive as to give—and much harder to do.