

Peggy Noonan

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The Captain and the King

Why Owen Honors had to go, and why a stammering monarch is a movie hero.

The Wall Street Journal: January 7, 2011

At a time of new beginnings in Washington, and as a new year starts, some thoughts on leadership that begin with two questions. First, why is it a good thing that the captain of the USS Enterprise was this week relieved of his duties? Second, why is the movie "The King's Speech" so popular and admired? The questions are united by a theme. It is that no one knows how to act anymore, and people miss people who knew how to act.

Capt. Owen Honors, commanding officer of an aircraft carrier, was revealed to have made and shown to his crew videos that have been variously described in the press as "lewd," "raunchy," "profane" and "ribald." They are. Adm. John Harvey, who Wednesday relieved Capt. Honors of his duties, said the captain's action "calls into question his character and undermines his credibility." Also true.

In a way it's not shocking that Capt. Honors did what he did, because he came from a culture, our culture, in which, to be kind about it, anything goes. Mainstream movies, television, music—all is raunch. To say the obvious, John Paul Jones, Bull Halsey and Elmo Zumwalt likely wouldn't have made those videos, if they could have. More to the point, some average, undistinguished naval captain in 1968 wouldn't have made them either, because he would have had his mind and consciousness formed in the 1930s and '40s, when our culture was more coherent and constructive. It can also be said that Capt. Honors's videos were not extreme by the standards of our day. Even his bigotry seemed self-spoofing, as obviously nitwittish and vulgar as the character he was playing—himself—was nitwittish and vulgar.

But the videos were a shock in that this was a captain of the U.S. Navy, commanding a nuclear-powered ship, and acting in a way that was without dignity, stature or apartness. He was acting as if it was important to him to be seen as one of the guys, with regular standards, like everyone else.

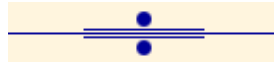
But it's a great mistake when you are in a leadership position to want to be like everyone else. Because that, actually, is not your job. Your job is to be better, and to set standards that those below you have to reach to meet. And you have to do this even when it's hard, even when you know you yourself don't quite meet the standards you represent.

A captain has to be a captain. He can't make videos referencing masturbation and oral sex. He has to uphold values even though he finds them antique, he has to represent virtues he may not in fact possess, he has to be, in his person, someone sailors aspire to be.

A lot of our leaders—the only exceptions I can think of at the moment are nuns in orders that wear habits—have become confused about something, and it has to do with being an adult, with being truly mature and sober. When no one wants to be the stuffy old person, when no one wants to be "the establishment," when no one accepts the role of authority figure, everything gets damaged, lowered. The young aren't taught what they need to know. And



they know they're not being taught, and on some level they resent it. For the past 20 years I have heard parents brag, "I brought up my child to question authority." Ten years ago I started thinking, "Really? Well good luck finding it, junior."



In England this week the story continues to be Kate Middleton, who is not an aristocrat, marrying into the royal family. Meaning she's about to become, in a way, a leader within her culture. Clever people on TV are giving her media advice. Be one of us, they say, lighten and brighten, bring in less formality and stultifying stiffness.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. If any family ever needed to be classed up it is Britain's royals, with the exception of Queen Elizabeth, that great lady. Kate should take her polite and striving middle class upbringing and use it to add dignity and distance to the House of Windsor. They came close to losing public support for the monarchy the past 40 years, in part due to the advice of PR geniuses who told them, in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, to get with it. Stop being fusty, hipper, show your humanity. It seemed reasonable—Britain was exploding with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Cool Britannia. The royals had to catch up. And so they showed their human side, and revealed over the decades that they were not better than anyone else, not more disciplined, serious, patriotic, faithful or self-denying. Intimate public confessions, raucous medieval tournaments in which they rolled in the mud, toe sucking. This is royalty? Then what are slobs for?

The only good advice would have been: Stay boring, strive to appear to be persons of rectitude and high morality, don't be modern, stand for "the permanent against the merely prevalent," love God and his church, don't act out and act up. Be good.

That, looking back, is all Britain needed. But it's what every nation needs, now more than ever, from its leaders. Which gets us to "The King's Speech."

It is England, the 1930s, a time of gathering crises. The duke of York, a shy man with a hopeless stammer, is forced to accept the throne when his brother abdicates. "I am not a king," he sobs; he is, by nature and training, a naval officer. Hitler is rising, England is endangered. The new, unsure king's first live BBC speech to the nation looms.

He will stutter. But he is England. England can't stutter. It can't falter, it can't sound or seem unsure at a time like this. King George VI and his good wife set themselves, with the help of an eccentric speech therapist, to cure or at least manage his condition.

He sacrifices his desire not to be king, not to lead, not to make that damn speech. He does it with commitment, courage, effort. He does it for his country.

He and his wife aren't attempting to be hip, they are attempting to be adequate to the situation. The king is aware of the responsibilities of his position, and demands a certain deference. When his therapist tells him they must work as equals, he stammers, "I'd be home with my wife and no one would give a damn, if we were equals." As for personal style, the great scene is when the king, on the prompting of the therapist, screams every low curse word he knows. It's funny because it's obvious he doesn't say those words. He is a person of restraint, and old-fashioned ways. He doesn't want to be one of the guys.

And audiences love it. The Journal's Joe Morgenstern called the movie "simply sublime," and it is, for some simple reasons. It's about someone being a grown-up, someone doing his job, someone assuming responsibility. It is about a time when someone was taking on the mantle of leadership, someone was sacrificing his comfort for his country.

Someone was old-school. Someone wasn't cool.

What a relief to see it. No wonder at the almost-full 4:45 p.m. showing at an uptown Manhattan theatre on Wednesday, they burst into applause, and some, you could tell, wanted to cheer.

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