

America is seduced by 'leadership bling' and lacks true leaders

By **Nancy Koehn**

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Trump touts election win with tweet of photo 00:52

Story highlights

We wait -- seemingly in vain -- for honorable, courageous leaders to step onto national stage, writes Nancy Koehn

Koehn: How did we come to have a president who has sacrificed virtually all moral authority?

Editor's Note: Nancy Koehn is a historian at Harvard Business School and the author of the new book, "[Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times](#)."

(CNN) — Only a little more than 10 months into Donald Trump's tenure, a significant majority of America's citizenry view their 45th president as a kind of anti-leader, encouraging the worst elements at home to commit bad actions, undermining his own diplomats, [ham-fistedly comforting](#) bereaved service widows, downplaying his staffers' [Russian connections](#), and sowing discord and instability wherever he goes.

Never before have so many in the country worried that White House "minders" in the President. And it's not just POTUS -- he of the [self-described high I.Q.](#) -- who administrative departments and agencies, not to mention the halls of Congress,



Nancy Koehn

Amid the dizzying turbulence of this moment, we wait -- seemingly in vain -- for honorable, courageous leaders to step onto the national stage. As we wait, we ask ourselves, how did we come to have a president who has sacrificed virtually all moral authority? How did we elect a Congress in which only a handful of our representatives speak out on behalf of the principles America intrinsically stands for, and against ongoing assaults to our fundamental civil liberties? How did our national public discourse become so base and, at the same time, so devoid of humanity, kindness, and empathy?

As critical as these questions are, they beg an even larger one: what are we to do about it?

I've been studying the history of leadership and coaching present-day executives, managers, and entrepreneurs for more than 25 years at the Harvard Business School. From this vantage point, I believe that one of the central problems of leadership today is that we the people have mislaid our ability to discern the qualities that make leaders capable, prepared, decent, and good.



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We can identify effective leaders when we see them in our communities -- teachers working overtime to educate our kids; nurses caring for cancer patients; grief counselors in Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs, Texas, comforting the victims of senseless violence.

We recognize that what ma
leaders is that they put othe
face of disappointment and



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this broader end.

Too often, we've assumed that aggression, charm, and charisma are part of a natural-born leader's character and personality. We forget that courageous leaders aren't born; they're made. This "making" flows from an individual's dedication to constantly better him or herself -- first from within, and then in relation to the larger stage.

Courageous leaders ask more of themselves every day. They continually strive to master the issues and actively seek to fill gaps in their emotional awareness, knowledge and skills.



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themselves to discover resilience and to summon renewed commitment.

We understand all this about the leaders we encounter in daily life. But when it comes to supporting men and women seeking greater power and national political office, we've misplaced such discernment.

On a national level, many of us have been seduced by "shiny new objects" -- what I call "leadership bling." Too often, we're dazzled by personal ambition, reasoning that a person who was born hard-charging and who followed his or her self-interest all the way to enormous wealth, celebrity, or authority has to have accumulated great wisdom.

Yes, many of our best leaders displayed great personal ambition. For example, Abraham Lincoln was, in his early years, a dynamo of self-improvement, alchemizing a relatively small amount of formal education into peerless verbal proficiency, and he tried and failed -- more than once -- to gain national political office before eventually winning the presidency.

And Rachel Carson, whose book "Silent Spring" warned of the threat of pesticides and whose environmental advocacy headed off certain crisis, bucked the norms of her time to become educated in the sciences. In middle age, she continued working doggedly at her writing despite the twin burdens of supporting several family members and coping with badly declining health.

Yet, ambition and raw self-interest took them only so far. As they embraced a larger purpose, one inexorably connected to serving others, each found strength and validation in the mission itself and subsumed his or her personal aspiration to

We must recover the intrinsic sense of what constitutes a great leader, what he or she should be. But how do we make the turn? Where do we start?

In selecting among aspirants to public office particularly, perhaps we should pay less attention to ambition and material success, and instead look to aspects of a person's character and character, including the extent to which

Perhaps we should ask, "Did this person grow wiser and more compassionate over time or of their self-interest?" Other lessons does this person's I

children to learn them as they prepare to make their own life

journey?"

Many years ago, American writer David Foster Wallace offered a [compelling definition of real leaders](#). They are people, Wallace wrote, who "help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fears and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own."

We need such leaders right now: men and women who'll make us feel good about ourselves, our fellow citizens, and our national destiny -- rather than progressively more uncomfortable. We simply must have leaders who'll raise our standards of decency, service to others, and collective possibility rather than continually lower them.

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The responsibility for such leadership falls not only on Washington, but on us. On the people of this great country rests the obligation to place in power those who will build bridges, not hurl insults or cast out those who respectfully protest -- individuals who recognize that our common humanity binds us all and is essential to navigating the current turbulence.

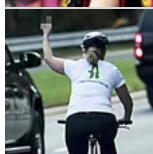
As we look to the 2018 elections -- a set of contests critically important to our nation's future -- it's time to change the questions we ask in appraising office-seekers. Meeting the daunting challenges ahead will depend on electing, rather than anti-leaders, people who inspire us to do the hard things that the past tells us we're capable of.



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▲

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▼

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You libbies, like the mainstream media just dont like it when Trump throws your attacks back in your face.

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[@LibsRnuts](#) [@HalcyonMantra](#) [@raul isodo](#) we love it, the more he squeals like a little porker heading for slaughter the louder we laugh...he lies and we make him look like a fool...so he lies some more and we make him look like the fool he is again...and the ones who voted for him look and feel just as foolish...we're having a great time tearing him and the GOP apart.

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