Lessons for Today’s Leaders from Bold Decisions That Changed History
FOREWORD

LEADERSHIP MATTERS.

Leadership is arguably the highest leverage ingredient driving the outcomes of virtually every human endeavor—and has been throughout the ages and across the globe. Effective leaders have harnessed the potential of populations to accomplish the greatest of human achievements and unleashed the depths of human depravity. Speaking for myself and apart from the important outcomes of effective leadership, I also believe that leadership matters because the people I lead matter.

There are literally thousands of books written on the subject. Most practitioners of leadership, including myself, have read dozens of them and attended multiple leadership courses during their careers. Yet I have found through my own experiences as a leader—from the boardroom to the battlefield—that the vast majority of leadership books should be placed gently in the trash can where they belong. Leadership is fundamentally about people, and people are messy creatures. Deterministic leadership “recipes” promising desired outcomes if only you effectively carry out prescribed steps or credibly exhibit desirable behaviors are, quite simply, hogwash.

LEADERSHIP IS INTENSELY PERSONAL.

Leadership is dependent on the leaders themselves, those who would be led, and the context. Every year I host a weeklong seminar for mid-career officers selected for the Air Force’s biggest leadership test—Squadron Command. Throughout the week, they experience storytelling from a number of leaders and hear the expectations the Air Force has of them as they are
entrusted with America’s sons and daughters, various leadership tools, and
the national security context we all face.

When it is my turn to speak to them directly, many are at first sur-
prised—and then somewhat relieved by the advice I give. I do not focus
on what worked for me so they can follow suit. I do not even attempt to
provide a definition of a “good” Squadron Commander. Of all the time they
will spend in preparation for command, I urge them to spend the most time
learning who they really are as a leader—not who they think the Air Force
wants them to be. The Air Force does not look for “Squadron Commanders”
from among the people we have; we look for the right people and make
them Squadron Commanders.

There is no one successful leadership style or set of behaviors, and you
cannot be someone you are not. You can, however, become more effective as
a leader given who you are. The real value of studying other leaders is not in
attempting to become more like them. The value in studying other leaders is
in deepening your understanding; your understanding of leadership, yes—but also your understanding of yourself.

**LEADERSHIP IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION.**

Experienced leaders will want to read *Time to Lead* more than once and
seek to understand why they made the decisions they did in various lead-
ership settings. I have noticed in my own leadership journey that there
are many similarities, or at least common threads, in how I approached
decisions and situations. These similarities are mostly explained by my own
dominant leadership style. The vivid examples within each leadership style
and the self-assessment instruments provided by Professor Steenkamp
will help cement that understanding. Perhaps even more useful, however,
is understanding why you chose vastly different approaches in different
leadership situations. Professor Steenkamp’s careful selection of case stud-
ies across cultures, situations, and time will help you understand why you
applied elements and artifacts of other, non-dominant, leadership styles to
different settings. Even the most experienced and successful leaders can,
and should, improve.

Through my own journey of self-reflection, I have learned from my suc-
cesses and failures as a leader. I have also learned as much or more observing
other leaders—both good and bad. Within my context as a senior military leader, I have had the honor to lead men and women who have made personal decisions to serve their nation and to serve a purpose higher than themselves. Through the successes, I have always believed the values and quality of the people I lead gives me an unfair advantage—an “ace in the hole.” For all my shortcomings as a leader, I have found the people entrusted to my care incredibly forgiving. Yet with the sense of service they share, they consistently demand two things from me or any leader—competence and caring—and you can’t fake either one! I have also learned in the organizations I have led, whether in an office setting or a combat zone, that there is a critical social contract between the leader and the led. Loyalty is owed, trust is earned, and the leader trusts first!

YOU ARE IN FOR A TREAT.

I had the honor of meeting Professor Steenkamp and his wife during one of my visits to the Kenan-Flagler School at the University of North Carolina (UNC). We immediately hit it off, diving right into discussions of leadership and how proud we both were of the Air Force officer students I had entrusted to their instruction and mentoring. To this day, however, I know more about Professor Steenkamp and his wife through the positive impact they had on my officers, Lieutenant Colonel Karen Landale and Major Dan Finkenstadt, who successfully completed their Ph.Ds studying under the Steenkamps’ leadership. Both Karen and Dan are brilliant officers and leaders in their own right, yet I can see Professor Steenkamp’s fingerprints on them—both in terms of the agility and discipline of their thinking and in the sense of indebtedness and endearment both officers feel for the Steenkamps. I have encountered few scholars like Professor Steenkamp. Not only does he understand leadership as a theoretical construct of styles and traits and behaviors, he has a rare intuition about leadership within the context of history as an interpersonal pursuit that can be forged and honed and deepened experientially if properly examined.

In Time to Lead, Professor Steenkamp actually practices effective leadership himself to guide us; not simply on what to think about leadership, but how to think about leadership. He leads us to consider singular decisions that changed the course of history—decisions made by 16 leaders applying
their own dominant tendency of the seven leadership styles presented within a full diversity of contexts—time, culture, followers, situation, and leader identity. In this way, Professor Steenkamp leads us to optimize our own “sense-making” ability. His disciplined storytelling within a well-conceived theoretical framework produces a vivid mental map to deepen our understanding of who we really are as leaders. This book will give you the tools to deepen your wisdom, clarify your thinking, and improve your outcomes as your own story of leadership unfolds. Enjoy!

—Major General Cameron G. Holt
Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force,
Washington, D.C.