

Leading with a Smile by Dennis Payton Knight

There are many things that go into making a leader. Courage is one, intelligence another. Charm, humility, speaking skills and setting good examples are important assets, but first comes a simple, genuine smile. It is a natural expression that comes from the ability of a leader to laugh at himself.

That ability to disarm with self-effacing humor has been a mark of many successful leaders. "The day after I was elected," Ronald Reagan said, "I had my high school grades classified Top Secret." President George W. Bush might have been channeling Reagan when he said, "To those of you who received honors, awards and distinctions, I say, well done. And to the C students, I say, you too can be president of the United States."

His father, President George Herbert Walker Bush, had a self-effacing side as well, admitting, "I have opinions of my own, strong opinions, but I don't always agree with them."

Abraham Lincoln was tall, gangly and by his own admission a rather homely fellow, but it was useful to him in a political debate. "If I were two-faced," he would retort, "would I be wearing this one?" Teddy Roosevelt of 'speak softly but carry a big stick' fame likely had a lesson in leadership in mind when he said, "If you could kick the person responsible for most of your trouble in the pants, you wouldn't sit for a month."

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born into wealth. He wasn't embarrassed by that, nor did it make him feel superior. In his 1960 campaign, he flashed his big natural grin and told his audience, "I just received the following wire from my generous Daddy: 'Dear Jack, Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide.'"

Upon winning the presidency he appointed his younger brother Robert as Attorney General, defending the nepotism in his typically disarming way. "I see nothing wrong," he said, "with giving Robert some legal experience as Attorney General before he goes out to practice law." On a state visit to France, Kennedy introduced himself to an audience, "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it."

A couple of years into Kennedy's presidency, a young comedian named Vaughn Meader showed a spot-on ability to mimic the president. His album, "The First Family," won a Grammy, and Kennedy loved Meader's satire. He played the album before cabinet meetings, sent copies as Christmas gifts, and once opened a Democratic National Committee dinner with, "Vaughn Meader was busy tonight, so I came myself."

There is a style of executive authority that is associated with building oneself up by putting others down. Someone like that leads not with a smile, but a smirk. Leadership is about much more than self-effacement, but the person who rises to high office who can't first laugh at himself before ridiculing others will never get the last laugh.