

The Role of Justice in the Making of a Statesman

Early in our exploration of statesmanship, I proposed four leaders I consider to have been Statesmen during the past two and a half centuries: **William Wilberforce, Abraham Lincoln, George Catlett Marshall, Nelson Mandela.**

Recently, we reflected on the importance of justice to the Statesman. As I have reflected further, I realize that what made each of these four into Statesmen was one characteristic: their fight for justice. What made these four into Statesmen was, in reality, their commitment to justice and their extraordinary fight for it.

William Wilberforce committed himself to the highly unpopular goal of abolishing the slave trade, and ultimately slavery itself. He invested his whole political life pursuing this. Year after year, he submitted bills to Parliament aimed at abolishing the slave trade, which were overwhelmingly defeated if even brought to a vote. He sacrificed his own political career to fight for this noble cause. In 1833, just days before he died, Parliament finally voted to abolish slavery. He never became Prime Minister, but I submit to you that he made a far greater impact than could be expected as Prime Minister. His fight changed not only his own nation but the course of history. It was his fight for justice for those without the power to fight for themselves that made him the great figure in history.

Similarly, Abraham Lincoln invested all of his political capital into the abolition of slavery. It was the vision of Lincoln to raise the dignity of all people, an unpopular idea even among many of his supporters. The British historian Lord Charnwood said of Lincoln:

We may regard, and himself regarded, the liberation of the slaves, which will always be associated with his name, as a part of the larger work, the restoration of his country to its earliest and noblest tradition, which alone gave permanence or worth to its existence as a nation.

Seemingly, neither the Emancipation Proclamation nor passing of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution were politically or militarily necessary in the short-term to the larger effort to hold the fractured nation together. However, Lincoln did not believe there was hope in the long-term for a U.S. that would maintain slavery.

What made Nelson Mandela a Statesman was his commitment to justice – overcoming the injustice resulting from European invaders subjugating the original citizens and relegating them to second-class status, depriving them of the rights bestowed by their Creator. He fought to overcome the injustice of apartheid, whereby 90% of the members of South African society were deprived of the same rights taken by the 10% that were descendants of those European invaders.

During 27 years in prison, he clung to a vision for his nation that was not quenched by the injustice he experienced. While imprisoned, he displayed the character that instilled a confidence among his persecutors that they could trust him to protect the rights of all parties – including both oppressed and oppressors as his nation moved toward a more just society – one that was not based upon one race dominating another but rather everyone experiencing the full benefits of being a human being.

When we remember that justice needs to be understood as fairness, we realize that we must include George C. Marshall. Marshall did not use the word “justice” as motivation in

his original proposal for his reconstruction plan for Europe after World War II, which he presented in his address at Harvard University 5 June 1947. However, fairness is clearly a motivation. Through his efforts, Marshall sought to help Europeans overcome the injustice caused by a morally corrupt leader and followers who viewed some of God's creation as more entitled than others, leaving many without even the right to life.

All four of these went beyond what was required of them to fight for justice for others who were in a vulnerable position.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the driving force for the justice that drove these leaders. It was especially well expressed by Wilberforce as he embarked upon his crusade:

God Almighty has set before me two great objects — the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.

In digging deeper into his thinking and motivation, he clearly understood that our Maker created every human being with equal dignity and opportunity to reach our full potential. It was clearly this same understanding which drove Lincoln and Mandela, and apparently Marshall.

If we wish to make an equivalent contribution as Statesmen in the 21st century, we would do well to meditate on the dignity of the human being as imbued by our Creator, which caused Thomas Jefferson to declare:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

God has instructed us:

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him (Genesis 1:27).

This alone should be enough to severely warn us against depriving any human being of the immense dignity of being created in God's sacred image.

As we continue examining these four heroes' lives, their character and their values, we will learn valuable lessons for our own lives, leadership and service.

Personal Application. In applying the issue of justice to our own leadership, and the pursuit of everyone experiencing full potential as human beings, we may ask:

Do I have the passionate commitment to justice demonstrated by each of these four Statesmen?

Do I need to increase my understanding of the dignity of God's creation to be able to make the kind of contribution these Statesmen did?

What holds back our people from reaching their full potential as human beings? What can I do to ensure that they overcome any injustice hindering them from reaching their full potential?

Are there any groups lacking the capacity to access the full quality of life our Maker intended for them? Do we need to protect the sanctity of life, including for the unborn and elderly?