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The Reluctant Leader

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Moses, famously, tried to get out of it. When God called on him to lead the Israelites, Moses threw up a flurry of reasons he was the wrong man for the job: I'm a nobody; I don't speak well; I'm not brave.

But the job was thrust upon him. Though he displayed some of the traits you'd expect from a guy who would rather be back shepherding (passivity, whining), he became a great leader. He became the ultimate model for reluctant leadership.

The Bible is filled with reluctant leaders, people who did not choose power but were chosen for it — from David to Paul. The Bible makes it clear that leadership is unpredictable: That the most powerful people often don't get to choose what they themselves will do. Circumstances thrust certain responsibilities upon them, and they have no choice but to take up their assignment.

History is full of reluctant leaders, too. President Obama is the most recent. He recently gave a speech on the need to move away from military force. He has tried to pivot away from the Middle East. He tried desperately to avoid the Syrian civil war.

But as he said in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, "Evil does exist in the world." No American president could allow a barbaric caliphate to establish itself in the middle of the Middle East.

Obama is compelled as a matter of responsibility to override his inclinations. He's obligated to use force, to propel himself back into the Middle East, to work with rotten partners like the dysfunctional Iraqi Army and the two-faced leaders of Qatar. He's compelled to provide functional assistance to the rancid Syrian regime by attacking its enemies.

The defining characteristic of a reluctant leader is that he is self-divided. He feels compelled to do things he'd rather not do. This self-division can come in negative and positive forms.

The unsuccessful reluctant leader isn't really motivated to perform the tasks assigned to him. The three essential features of political leadership, Max Weber wrote, are passion, responsibility and judgment. The unsuccessful reluctant leader is passionless. His actions are halfhearted. Look at President Obama's decision to surge troops into Afghanistan at the same instant he announced their withdrawal date. That's a reluctant leader undercutting himself. If Obama approaches this campaign that way then he will withdraw as soon as the Iraqi government stumbles, or the Iraqi Army fails to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria on the ground.

The successful reluctant leader, on the other hand, is fervently motivated by his own conscience. He forces himself to embrace the fact that while this is not the destiny he would have chosen, it is his duty and he will follow it to the end.

This kind of reluctant leader has some advantages over a full-throated, unreluctant crusader. Unlike George W. Bush in 2003, he's not carried away by righteous fervor. The successful reluctant leader can be selfless. He's not doing the work because it's the expression of his inner being. He's just an instrument for the completion of a nasty job.

The reluctant leader can be *realistic* about goals. President Obama can be under no illusions that he is going to solve the Middle East's fundamental problems, but at least he can degrade ISIS the way we degraded Al Qaeda. Sometimes just preventing something bad — like the fall of the Jordanian regime — is noble enough, even if negative victories don't exactly get you in the history books.

The reluctant leader can be *skeptical*. There's a reason President Obama didn't want to get involved in this conflict. Our power to manage history in the region is limited. But sometimes a reluctant leader can make wise decisions precisely because he's aware of his limitations. If you're going to begin a military campaign in an Arab country, you probably want a leader who'd rather not do it.

The reluctant leader can be *dogged*. Sometimes when you're engaged in an unpleasant task, you just put your head down and trudge relentlessly forward. You don't have to worry about coming down from prewar euphoria because you never felt good about this anyway.

The reluctant leader can be *collaborative*. He didn't want his task, so he's eager to share it. The Arab world can fully trust that Obama doesn't have any permanent designs on their region because the guy is dying to wash his hands of the whole place as soon as possible.

Everybody is weighing in on the strengths and weaknesses of the Obama strategy. But the strategy will change. The crucial factor is the man. This is the sternest test of Obama's leadership skills since the early crises of his presidency. If he sticks to this self-assigned duty, and pursues it doggedly, he can be a successful reluctant leader. Sometimes the hardest victories are against yourself.