

With the shutdown behind us, let's forget about who blinked. SNAP benefits are resuming, federal employees are being paid, and hopefully negotiations will begin on healthcare issues. And let the Epstein files just run its course with the victims finally getting heard. Move on.

I'd like to get into the root cause of what continues to ail us, in simplest terms the widening gap in well-being between the haves and have nots---the affordability issues of sustenance, housing, energy, and healthcare, and the accumulation of wealth. The President is finally trying to address affordability which, up until now, he has considered a non-issue. He is lowering tariffs on some foods, negotiating lower prices with the pharmaceutical companies, and attempting to reduce the cost of producing energy, albeit this latter unfortunately with little regard for the health of the planet. But it will take many years of concerted effort before we make significant progress in reversing the conditions that have taken us decades to create.

Columnist M. Gessen in his November 9 *New York Times* opinion piece "How to Be a Good Citizen When Your Country Does Bad Things" quoted Abraham Joshua Heschel, an American rabbi who opposed the Vietnam War, saying "In a free society, all are involved in what some are doing....Some are guilty: all are responsible."

We're not doing a good job---we are indeed all responsible to a degree. We can make a change. Start by following the golden rule focusing on truly equal opportunity for all, protecting those left behind by optimizing the safety net including making healthcare affordable for all.

And the best way to do it is to first address the character traits of candidates before promoting them and electing them to public office.

Of course, our responsibility starts not just with voting, but with informed voting.

So, what have we learned that will help us when we vote again? And this is confusing. It appears that more than ever the character of candidates is taking a back seat to their or their party's ideology or actions. I contend that only a nation that considers their own leader's character as primary can be a role model and world leader.

Starting at the top, we fail. Regardless of the eventual outcomes of the conflicts in the middle east, neutering Iran and other enemies of both the US and Israel, immigration control at home, crime control in our cities, our battles with the drug cartels, tariff policies and other issues with which our current President has met with some success, does that alone make him a good leader on which we and the rest of the world can rely---apparently not. Our international respect is in tatters, and justifiably so. Our allies across the world, even Canada our closest ally, can no longer count on our support, militarily or economically, and our most threatening opposition, China, Russia and North Korea are more than ever willing to constantly test our resolve with no apparent repercussions. How can any of our allies trust us when we side with practically all of Moscow's conditions for ending the war in Ukraine, to the extent of giving them a portion of Ukraine's sovereign territory even including some still under the control of Ukraine.

Domestically one third of us, MAGA and some other Republicans, consider Trump a good leader. But the rest of us, as evidenced by his approval ratings, don't buy into his denial of the affordability issues of food, housing, energy and healthcare. Many of us might forgive some or most of this as not really being under the control of the President. However, there's something more that is essentially distasteful---his character, as evidenced by his disregard for the general welfare during

the shutdown and his denigrating of those among the general public that he terms less than equal.

He has frequently mocked the military even including John McCain and now Senator Mark Kelly whom he is threatening with a court martial for his comments reminding the military that they do not have to follow illegal orders.

He has denigrated the countries of black women's backgrounds by telling the women to "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came"

He has used terms dog, pig, and horseface describing women, most recently addressing a journalist as "piggy."

He considers journalists as "enemy of the people."

Let's make a comparison with some of his predecessors whom we admire and respect based on demonstrations of their character during or outside of their term regardless of their typical mixture of accomplishments and failures. We need not go back to Washington and other founders or even to Lincoln. When I think of Teddy Roosevelt, for example, I think of his role in creating our system of national parks for the enjoyment of all Americans. Compare that with Trump's creation of the gigantic ballroom attached to the White House---our house incidentally---for the enjoyment of a favored few, or the gold plating of the oval office for the enjoyment of himself.

Or Dwight Eisenhower who, as Commander of allied forces when making the critical decision to proceed with the D Day invasion, wrote a note taking full responsibility in case the mission failed saying "If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone"---and he also said that in the event of success, he would give full credit to the soldiers on the ground. Can we imagine Donald Trump ever "taking full

responsibility” for his failures? No---his first inclination is to blame them on Joe Biden.

Then there’s George H. W. Bush’s exemplary military career including a mission where, after the Avenger he was flying was hit by enemy fire, he continued to successfully drop his bombs on target on the island of Chichi Jima before being shot down in Japanese waters. Jon Meacham in his biography of Bush 41 *Destiny and Power* said “His life was spent in service to his nation, and his spirit of conciliation, common sense, and love of country will stand him in strong stead through the ebbs and flows of posterity’s judgement. On that score--- that George H.W. Bush was a uniquely good man in a political universe where good men were hard to come by---there was bipartisan consensus....”

Jimmy Carter, while generally ranked as a below average president, primarily perhaps by the failure of his well-intentioned attempt to free the hostages, will go down in history as a man of great faith and character for decades after his term based on The Carter Center promoting human rights and his leading role in Habitat for Humanity.

Now, to be sure, I have cited extreme examples of honorable character that very few people could possibly match, but I do so only to show the type of example that all should try to emulate, albeit perhaps in much less prominent ways---that should motivate all of us including our elected officials throughout our lives.

How do we define good character. And on what basis are each of us qualified to judge the character of others? We can only go by our own definitions, varying from one to another based on our backgrounds. Most would agree that good character encompasses virtue, morality, compassion and selflessness.

Looking for guidance on the importance of good character, I referred to the latest book written by General Stanley McChrystal aptly titled *On Character – Choices that Define a Life*. In it he quoted James Stockdale, the naval aviator who served a seven-year brutal captivity in North Vietnam. Stockdale in a PBS interview said, “Those who study the rise and fall of civilization learn that no shortcoming has been surely fatal to republics as a dearth of public virtue, the unwillingness of those who govern to place the value of their society above personal interest.” And McChrystal himself echoed this when he referred to America’s founding fathers as “a gifted but often thin-skinned collection of patriots---claimed to be guided by an ideal of character but also masterfully constructed a system of governance that accounted for a lack of it.”

Amid the fight over SNAP during the longest government shutdown in history, President Donald J. Trump spent the weekend at Mar-a-Lago, where he hosted another extravagant dinner party complete with scallops, beef filet, and ice sculptures---the optics of so many suffering hardships while he was spreading luxury to so few apparently didn’t occur to him. But this is common with him.

On Veteran’s Day, he used the occasion of the traditional solemn address at Arlington Cemetery to exult over a “very big victory” in the Shutdown, thereby exposing the armed forces to traditionally prohibited partisan politics.

Removing ACA subsidies thereby depriving millions of Americans of healthcare to him was a “very big victory.”

Even when reality was headed in the right direction after the First Circuit refused to stop the lower court order requiring full payment of SNAP benefits, he requested the Supreme Court to freeze those benefits!

He pledged to pursue tougher homelessness policies, yet he has cut 2026 HUD Continuing of Care funds for permanent housing for the homeless by two-thirds.

Look at it this way. Can you imagine the proud owner of a productive company selecting a president for his company so singularly lacking in character? Well, we, the owners of America, have done just that. Why do we support a bully whose prey included Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the president of our ally Ukraine, whom he ridiculed in a meeting in the oval office. Why do we put up with a braggart who campaigns to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize or to have his face on a 250th anniversary coin---or a liar whose continuing falsehoods far exceed anything we've experienced with his predecessors. Listen to any of his press conferences and read the fact checks that follow. This is a man whom we would never put up with in our schoolyard, our company, or our social organizations---a man who denigrates our country by insulting our ex-president in front of both our allies and enemies, going so far as to include a mocking image in place of a portrait of the ex-president on the wall of the oval office where domestic and foreign dignitaries are received ---who rolls out the red carpet for some of the most heinous characters in the world Putin, Natenyahu, and MBS, the former two with international arrest warrants out for war crimes, and the latter also with severe criminal accusations.

It's old news, but those who worked with Trump in his first term commented on his character---former chief of staff John Kelly describing him as a person "who has nothing but contempt for our democratic institutions, our Constitution and the rule of law"---his attorney general Bill Barr said "He will always put his own interest and gratifying his own ego ahead of everything else, including the country's interest---and in the words of James Mattis, retired four-star Marine general who served as defense secretary, "Donald Trump is the first

president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people---does not even pretend to try.”

He continually whips up hatred. As Frank Bruni said in his September 16 *New York Times* article, he has smeared his political opponents as the “enemy from within,” “Marxist, fascist, and communist tyrants who want to smash our Judeo-Christian heritage,” “a sick nest of people,” “thugs, horrible people, fascists, Marxists, sick people,” “vermin” and “radical left lunatics.”

Trump’s attempts to divide us transcend any specific accomplishments which many if not most of us support.

So, in considering candidates for 2026 or 2028 elections let’s look at individuals whom we think possess the character that we would like to see leading us, who, for example, would have at the top of their to do list domestic general welfare, sustenance, shelter and healthcare, and the compassion to follow through to make their platform promises a reality---in plain terms reflecting good citizenship.

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