

“No man can stand on top because he is put there.”

- H. H. Vreeland

Alfred Nobel's will, on which the Nobel Foundation bases its award every year, stipulates that the prize be given to an individual or organisation that successfully promotes *“fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congress.”* A mere 18 years after Nobel's death, the world faced the first of two world wars that would be the bloodiest wars the world had ever experienced. In the end, the 20th century, despite being an age of rapid technical and societal advancement, was also the century marked by the most war casualties in human history. To determine whether a singular individual can affect world peace, one has only to look at the list of laureates since the award's inception in 1910. This begs the question: if these leaders have been influential enough to earn a Nobel Peace prize, why have we yet to attain Nobel's dream? Can one person really affect world peace?

The impediment to a world peace that should exist – based on the sheer number of award winners – lies in the inherent ambiguity of the word “affect”. Arguably, Adolf Hitler's effect on world peace was greater than that of many Nobel prizewinners' combined. Given the power to lead, the decisions of leaders regarding the application of their power are of paramount importance. One has only to examine history to see that one leader can leave an indelible mark on the history of the world, be it progress or retrogression. The key, therefore, to reaching world peace lies in society supporting these leaders. Though leaders are the ones who ultimately make decisions, it is the masses who decide who those leaders are.

Since antiquity, powerful people have arisen as figures of great leadership. Great leadership is widely understood as the capability to mobilize masses towards a common goal, a definition that does not, notably, discern in terms of motivation. The factors that enable one person to have such a gripping influence over thousands have been extensively studied, and have been determined to be a combination of personal character traits and their suitability for the societal environment from which the leader emerges. Winston Churchill has been hailed as one of the most eminent wartime leaders of history, but he did not lead as effectively as a peacetime Prime Minister. His charisma, energy, and tenacity served him well during the Second World War, but made him an overly forceful peacetime negotiator. The times select the leader; the most memorable leaders arise when naturally gifted commanders are faced with a cause that impassions them and is suited to their skill set.

History has proved that given the opportunity, great leaders will arise who can change the course of history, for better or for worse. Great leadership does not regard righteousness or the

nobility of the cause it is furthering; it is simply a means to an end. Adolf Hitler is the most emblematic example of such a scenario. Raised to public prominence by war-torn Germans crippled economically by the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler went from a little-known politician to the Chancellor of Germany, a position that he used to foster conflict in Europe and ultimately draw the whole world into one of the bloodiest wars of all time. Today's modern society cannot fathom what would drive a people to elect such an obvious authoritarian, who began abusing his power as soon as they elected him to office. Hitler's charisma and skill as an orator were legendary, but they would have been benign had his speeches fallen on deaf ears. Unfortunately, the population of post-World War One Germany was waiting for just such a leader as an answer to their grievances. His take-charge leadership style resonated with a population frustrated by an ineffective, fledgling democracy, and his commitment to German nationalism gave meaning to a people whose self-esteem had reached an all-time low.

Hitler was a natural-born leader, but he would never have garnered the degree of power he did without significant support from the outset. For every story of power entrusted and abused at the expense of peace and human rights, however, there are instances of great leaders who have likewise emerged from desperation, but have taken a markedly different approach. Non-political leaders have arisen to oppose dictatorships and unilateral rule. Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a leader for the Indian independence movement, advocating pacifism and non-violence as the means to that end. He not only peacefully forced the colonial regime to quit India, he quelled civil strife after India's partition by compelling warring factions to reflect on their common humanity, rather than what divides them. Peace-promoting leaders can also rise in opposition to a current regime. Nelson Mandela, for example, despite the controversial beginnings of his political career, was elected to the presidency by the South African people, who voted not for revenge, but for progress. Mandela delivered by making his presidential mandate one of truth and reconciliation, with a focus on abolishing hunger and inequality in South Africa. History has a way of righting itself; in cases like these, leaders who are real representatives of the people rise to oppose dictatorial and unjust rules.

Throughout history, leaders emerging as the hope of a demographic have chosen to administer their power in different ways. Though it is easier for society to place the responsibility for global conflict solely on leaders, political or otherwise, choices are, in reality, our collective burden. Conversely, it is unrealistic to attribute advances in world peace solely to a leader, because it is society that allows a leader's vision to self-actualize.

When the first Nobel Peace prize was awarded to Jean H. Dunant and Frédéric Passy in 1910, the world population was 1.75 billion. Now, with a world population of 7 billion, the concept of one person significantly influencing world peace is even more unfathomable, and impossible without the support of a critical mass. World leadership is naught but a means to an end, a means of effectively representing a societal sentiment. Whether that sentiment is amenable to the advancement of world peace depends on the society from which it springs. This is the great ambiguity of leadership: It is a powerful tool, but its application is dependent on the

environment that fosters it. In any situation of adversity, a leader will arise. It is, however, up to us, the people, to back the right leader to advance world peace, rather than hinder it in our own self-interest. No man is “put”, in Vreeland’s sense of the word, in a position of power; he is instead ushered in by humanity in need of a leader. How leaders affect world peace is as much a reflection of the society that empowers them as the leaders themselves.

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