

Leadership Beyond the Bush MBA

by Henry Mintzberg

George W. Bush is the first American president with an MBA, granted by the Harvard Business School in 1975. In 2004, I published *Managers not MBAs*, a book about how such programs develop hubris in the name of leadership. It was not about this president, but it may help to explain an important aspect of his presidency, and perhaps of contemporary America as well.

Has there been much public discussion at the Harvard Business School about the possible effect of its education on the conduct of this presidency? I wonder. Any more, say, than discussion in the American press about why there was so much support to go to war in Iraq, and so little questioning of this in its pages? Introspection does not appear to be a strong characteristic of today's America. Without it, problems tend to fester, with a growing inclination to throw oil on them as they burn. So perhaps a little introspection on one issue—George W. Bush's leadership as influenced by America's prevalent form of leadership education—may be in order.

Good managers are decisive, and so good management students must take a stand. That is a key premise behind the case study method, which has dominated Harvard Business School's pedagogy for almost a century. The student reads a 20 page case one day and declare on the next what the company should do. Refuse to do so with the claim that this is a superficial exercise and you are shown the door.

George W. Bush was not shown the door. So it may not be coincidental that his decision making about Iraq has resembled a case study exercise. Certainly no-one has accused this president of lacking decisiveness.

Consider these cases. They typically contain a great deal of statistics but not much history. The reader of the case is expected to have no first-hand knowledge of the company, the products, or the people. Wisdom is not conveyed, encouraged, or developed in such an exercise. To quote Harvard professor J. Sterling Livingston, writing about this method in 1971: "Fast learners in the classroom often become slow learners in the executive suite" because the students are not taught how "to learn from their own firsthand experience."

Strategy is a popular topic in these case discussions, at least one aspect of it: formulation. That is easy to teach in a classroom where everybody can pronounce on a company's future. But how do you teach implementation when no-body can be implementing anything?

The consequence of this was discussed in a *Fortune* magazine article in 1999 about failed chief executives, many of them with MBAs. Charan and Colvin pointed to "bad execution" as a key explanation: "Keeping track of all critical assignments, following up on them, evaluating them—isn't that kind of...boring?... Yes. It's boring. It's a grind. At least, plenty of really intelligent, accomplished, failed CEOs have found it so, and you can't blame them. They just shouldn't have been CEOs." Judging by his execution in Iraq, New Orleans, and elsewhere, George W. Bush seems to be one of those CEOs.

"Confidence" is a word that appears repeatedly in reports by MBA graduates about the benefits of their education. These programs certainly boost confidence. But do they

boost competence? Put differently, can a manager, let alone a leader, be created in a classroom?

The Harvard Business School website answers yes, repeatedly. My book argues no. Management is not a science, nor a profession; it is a practice, rooted in experience. Claiming that management and leadership is being taught to barely experienced students sitting still in a business school for a couple of years is quite simply a sham.

Confidence without competence breeds arrogance, another word frequently associated with MBAs. If the business schools were really doing their job, were truly creating leaders, their graduates would be known for their humility, not their arrogance.

The United States now graduates about a million MBAs every decade, most with little first-hand knowledge of customers and workers, products and processes. Yet they expect to get on a “fast-track,” to manage people who have gained that knowledge through hard work. Should anyone be surprised that America finds itself facing a crisis of leadership?

Of all the claims emanating from the business schools, none is more flagrant than that this degree in business administration enables its holder to manage anything. MBA programs certainly do an effective job of teaching the business functions, such as marketing and finance. But how that carries into other sectors of society, especially government where the needs are so different, constitutes a leap of faith that business schools have yet to explain.

Governments have, nonetheless, bought it. As a result, much of the public sector now ambles around like an amnesiac pretending to be business. When an official of the Bush White House staff was questioned in September 2002 on a belated start to a

propaganda offensive for action against Iraq, he replied, “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.” War has become a new product! When that administration named its secretary of the army, he promised to bring in “sound business practice.” He came from Enron.

America’s preferred solution to its current problems is more leadership. Maybe it is time to stop throwing the oil of leadership on the fires of the country’s burning institutions. A little more introspection might be a better idea.

Henry Mintzberg is Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies at McGill University, and faculty director of its International Masters for Health Leadership (www.imhl.ca).