

Personal Responsibility

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“Victimhood” may be the most insidiously disempowering phenomenon in our culture. One of the disturbing themes of 2020 seems to be our collective tendency to blame others. And it shows no signs of slowing down. We’ve taken whining and scapegoating to a new level.

This is a stain on our collective character. We embrace victimhood like a security blanket. While seemingly providing comfort, the reality is that it severely hamstring us in our efforts to improve and progress as human beings. To flourish. We’ve developed a, “cultural addiction to blame”.

I like to read, mostly non-fiction. It is a habit I picked up, ironically, after I graduated college. I’ll often reread books that offer insight for a particular point in time and find that some of them are timeless. Three such books, published in the last couple of years, are worth a read.

Crisis of Responsibility by David L. Bahnsen

Bahnsen gives structure and context to this victim mentality that relentlessly plagues us, “...what has emerged in our culture is a ‘scapegoatism’ run amok – a victim mentality that is dangerous to all, regardless of political affinity or socioeconomic class.”

Bahnsen warns, “...the one perspective that has the potential to destroy us all, and which must be unilaterally rejected if we are to stave off the coming authoritative backlash, is embracing victimhood. To reject victimhood, we must first understand *how* and *why* so many hot-button issues are being framed as scapegoat issues, reasons for someone to blame somebody for something.”

The usual scapegoats include the always popular “Wall Street”, “big government”, China, Mexico, trade, technology (automation, artificial intelligence, digitalized economy), the media, educational institutions, and other bogeymen.

Bahnsen explains our cultural addiction to blame in the financial crisis of 2008. Of course, there is the ubiquitous and annoying demarcation along political lines. The left blames big banks, lack of regulation, etc.; the right blames social policy underlying the housing market, etc. But Bahnsen makes a compelling case that, “no financial crisis of any kind

could have taken place without the envious and covetous irresponsibility of the people living on good old Main Street, USA”

Here are a few startling facts supporting his case for the “unravelling of virtue”:

- Over the last 25 years, there has been a **108% increase** in working-age Americans living off a government disability check.
- The FBI estimates that during the first decade of this century, mortgage fraud increased 1000 percent (**one thousand percent**); 70% of defaulted mortgage applications contained “blatant misrepresentations”.
- “At the heart of the financial crisis were millions of people who could afford their home payment, but realized that the sticker price they paid was far more than the present resale value of the home, and **thus made the morally questionable decision to walk away.**” (emphasis added)

There is plenty of blame to go around, and Main Street is not exempt. Our “absence of character” facilitated the ever-ugly envy we have and “the presence of the intemperate cravings and utter disdain for virtues of patience and truth.”

Fortitude/American Resistance in the Era of Outrage by Dan Crenshaw

This is a book about personal responsibility, self-discipline, and self-reliance. In a nutshell, it’s about mental toughness, something that, arguably, is in short supply these days and that is critically needed to counter the “self-pity, indulgence, outrage, and resentment” that characterizes much of our present culture.

I’ve read a number of books on self-improvement during my lifetime, too many of which were pop psychology crap, and I’ve learned that the dispenser of advice on how to improve oneself better have the bona fides to do so. *Fortitude* is the best book I’ve read, hands down, on self-improvement.

Crenshaw is 36 years old. It’s legitimate to question whether a such a young guy has the bona fides worthy of one’s attention. One might think that the magical confluence of experience and education producing wisdom would occur much later in life. Crenshaw, at his young age, has what it takes.

A Navy SEAL Lieutenant Commander and now Congressman from Texas, Crenshaw is the epitome of mental toughness. While in Afghanistan in 2012 he was wounded, lost his right eye and came perilously close to losing vision in his left. He went on to earn a Master of Public Administration degree from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and was subsequently elected to Congress in November 2018.

His book is the antidote to toxic outrage, a pervasive weakness in our culture that is “the muting of rational thinking and the triumph of emotion.” Crenshaw doesn’t pull any

punches, as if you would expect something different from a SEAL. The culture of outrage is something to overcome and this requires one to be mentally tough.

What is this outrage? “What used to be rare instances of political correctness, microaggressions, and irrational anger have metastasized into the outrage culture we see today—characterized not just by outrage and political correctness but also by identity politics and an increasingly polarizing media and digital environment.” It is “petty, weak-minded” and, ultimately, disempowering. And it breeds a dependence government to take care of us, to alleviate our pain.

The media is complicit. Outrage is a poisonous hypersensitivity “cheered on by our media and opinion journalists who thrive on drama, conflict, and strife. Knowing that the most salacious headlines will get the most clicks, journalists are all too happy to oblige.”

The responsibility to change this and improve lies squarely on you. “If you’re losing your cool, you are losing. If you are triggered, it is because you allowed someone else to dictate your emotional state. If you are outraged, it is because you lack discipline and self-control. These are personal defeats, not the fault of anyone else. And each defeat shapes who you are as a person, and in the collective sense, who we are as a people.”

Extreme Ownership - How U.S. Navy Seals Lead and Win by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin

I’ve read a lot of books about leadership throughout my career. For me the best book is this one, written not by a PhD, business leader, military general, or guru. This one is by two former Navy Seals who served in the pivotal Battle of Ramaldi in Iraq.

Willink and Babin effectively present their principles of leadership by explaining how they worked on the battlefield and how they can be applied to business. I wish I had the benefit of this future classic earlier in my career. I would have been a better leader and follower.

“The idea for this book was born from the realization that the principles critical to SEAL success on the battlefield – how SEALs train and prepare their leaders, how they mold and develop high-performance teams, and how they lead in combat – are directly applicable to success in any group, organization, corporation, business, and, to a broader degree, life. This book provides the reader with our formula for success: the mind-set and guiding principles that enable SEAL leaders and combat units to achieve extraordinary results. It demonstrates how to apply these directly in business and life to likewise achieve victory.”

Leadership is the most important factor in mission accomplishment and the only meaningful measure of a leader is whether his/her team succeeds or fail.

The first, overriding principle is that exceptional leaders take absolute ownership of the mission. **They do not blame others.** There are no excuses. They put their egos aside

and solve problems. Ego disrupts plans and the acceptance of advice and constructive criticism.

They discuss a tactic called “cover and move” which simply means teamwork – mutual support in a singular mission. Decentralized command is vital. Junior leaders must clearly understand the mission and be truly empowered to accomplish it.

These are just a few of the principles explained. They will resonate with any leader who truly wishes to lead.