INTRODUCTION: A Crisis of Leadership

Call it a crisis of leadership.
—PROPOSITION JOE, The Wire, season 3, episode 10

THE CASE OF STRINGER BELL

In the so-called Third Golden Age of Television, there has perhaps been no show more gilded by critical acclaim than The Wire, which ran on HBO for five seasons (2002–8). The Wire is a Baltimore story—an urban story— premised on the alarming interconnectedness of all things. Commentators have compared the series to works of Dickens and Dostoyevsky, but its creator David Simon imagined The Wire as a tragedy on ancient models that lifted “wholesale from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality.” “But instead of the old gods,” Simon explained in a 2007 interview with Nick Hornby in The Believer, “The Wire is a Greek tragedy in which postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces.”

Those institutions, which overlap with and mimic one another in surprising ways, include unions, schools, political machines, the police force, the prison system, and the criminal underworld. One of the questions The Wire forces viewers to ask is whether it is still possible for any leader to control these new-model “Olympian forces,” or whether the postmodern behemoth has outstripped the capacities of any one person, or group of people, to alter its course. Thus The Wire presents us with a tragedy of dysfunction in which we watch leaders operating on scales large and small. Some enjoy fleeting successes, but most are doomed by hypocrisy, moral compromise, viciousness, and greed.

One of the most intriguing figures offered for our contemplation in The Wire is Stringer Bell, the right-hand man of the gangster Avon Barksdale,
who runs the drug trade on the city’s west side and whose invisibility to the police force has been ensured by Bell’s prudence and the ruthless discipline he has inculcated in the soldiers, corner boys, and hoppers who work for him. There are, for example, no cell phones in this organization. Instead, using a complex system of pagers, pay phones, and codes, its various members manage for years to conceal their operations from the law. When Barksdale eventually goes to jail, despite such precautions, Bell recognizes the fragility of even the best-run criminal enterprise and begins the work of transformation.

There are some hiccups: meetings with his middle managers don’t always go according to Robert’s Rules of Order, despite the fact that Bell’s lieutenant carries a copy around with him. And that same assistant has to be reprimanded on one occasion for dutifully recording the minutes of a criminal conspiracy. Nevertheless, Bell’s system starts to work when he persuades his dealers to think profit, not territory. While Barksdale is serving his sentence, Bell forms an alliance—“the co-op”—with the city’s other drug lords and starts investing his growing profits in real estate. Shaped by an introductory macroeconomics course he takes at a local community college as well as by his reading of Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations and Tom Peters’s Liberation Management, Bell’s dream is to leave drugs behind altogether and move entirely into legitimate business.

It is Barksdale’s release from jail that threatens everything Bell has built. The two men now inhabit different worlds. While Barksdale, preoccupied with restoring his reputation on the street, launches a war with an up-and-coming gangster to avenge his honor, Bell worries about maintaining profits. As he tells his old friend after the latter shows off a grenade he has just added to his arsenal, Barksdale thinks only of honor, corners, and the now, but he thinks of business, the world, and the future. All of Bell’s efforts to transform the organization are thwarted by his inability to change the ethos of its newly returned leader and of all those members who readily follow Barksdale into war. In a pivotal episode, Bell’s erstwhile rival and temporary ally, Proposition Joe, tells Bell that the co-op is ready to throw him out: “The feeling is it ain’t right for you to sit at the head of the table,” Joe explains, “when you can’t call off your dog. Call it a crisis of leadership.” That crisis soon ends in mutual betrayal and Bell’s death. Searching the dead man’s apartment, Jimmy McNulty, the detective who has been hunting him for years, gazes at the books on the shelves and realizes that he knew the man he had been chasing not at all.

The Wire’s dramatization of organizational dysfunction and failed leadership reveals the spirit of the age. Crises of leadership are the order of the day at the beginning of the twenty-first century: our institutions seem to be in serial meltdown. Hardly a day passes without an exposé of incompetence or corruption in the private or public sector. But if we live in a world of crisis,
we also live in a world that romanticizes crisis—that finds in it fodder for an addiction to the twenty-four-hour news cycle, multiple information streams, and constant stimulation.

Crises, we have long believed, call forth great leaders: “These are times in which a Genious would wish to live,” Abigail Adams wrote to her son John Quincy in 1780: “It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. Would Cicero have shone so distinguished an orater, if he had not been roused, kindled and enflamed by the Tyranny of Catiline, Millo, Verres and Mark Anthony.” Yet it was Abigail’s husband, John, who cautioned against the dangers of waiting for someone to rescue us, of depending on “a succession” of extraordinary men to preserve our liberties and save us from tyrants. A savior like George Washington, Adams insisted, appears on the scene perhaps only once in “two or three ages.” There would be little improvement in social and political organization, John Adams insisted, until the people learn to “consider themselves as the fountain of power, and until they shall know how to manage it wisely and honestly.” And in the great rescuer’s absence, the false prophets, the smooth operators, the gangsters, and the demagogues, together with all those who resist the tyranny of the system in small yet principled ways, carry on.

THINGS THAT DON’T FIT

“It can be subversive, constructive, deconstructive . . . whatever,” the lieutenant colonel suggested in the message inviting me to conduct a leader professional development seminar with the officers in his battalion. The subject? Disobedience. (His choice.) I liked him already. Most of the battalion’s officers had served combat tours in Iraq or Afghanistan. Now they had acclimated themselves to their assignment to the Old Guard, the regiment that conducts funerals at Arlington National Cemetery and performs various ceremonial and security details in the Washington, D.C., area.

Leader professional development sessions—LPDs—are common throughout the army, where they often entail the presentation of “lessons learned” from recent combat experience or a group discussion of an assigned book, perhaps from the U.S. Army Chief of Staff’s Professional Reading List. Paul, the battalion commander who had invited me to visit, has an expansive vision of leader development: the activities he designed were not meant to train specific areas of competence, he explained, but to build competence for a lifetime of service: “I think the most valuable thing I can do is expand an officer’s ability to perceive, appreciate, and solve problems,” he wrote. “But I can’t begin to guess what problems they will have to solve. They might be tactical or strategic. They might be technical or social. [These officers] might be looking
down the barrel of a gun, or they might be in an office and have some time to deliberate with a group of smart people. So I’ve tried to give them the very best across a spectrum.”

Paul’s program of events was wonderfully eclectic. There were case studies drawn from history and from the recent experience of some of the battalion’s officers. There were expeditions: after camping overnight near the place where George Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776, Paul led his officers across the river in rafts at dawn before running the ten miles to Trenton along the Continental Army’s line of march. There were theoretical discussions: for example, on the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz, the author of the landmark treatise *On War*.

There was also a category called “Things That Don’t Fit into the Other Categories.” That’s where I fit in. Paul had read something I had written about the tension in our history between liberty and the very American virtue of obedience, and he was interested in delving into cultural assumptions: “Obedience (and lack of it) is something we deal in every day,” he explained. “But we never pick it up and look at it.”

So that day we picked it up and looked at it—from every possible angle. We explored issues of duty, autonomy, loyalty, resistance, and ethical responsibility. The texts I assigned as homework are not typically found on army professional reading lists: Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*; a chapter from Herman Melville’s *White-Jacket*, a novel about life in the antebellum navy; a few of Ambrose Bierce’s satirical Civil War stories; and a selection from *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s account of his time in command of former slaves in Civil War South Carolina. We also watched *Paths of Glory*, Stanley Kubrick’s film about a French army mutiny during World War I.

Not everyone was immediately comfortable: after all, these officers hadn’t been spending much time with English professors. But soon their reflections on combat were texturing our exchanges about the readings in front of us, enriching stories familiar to me and enlarging their thinking about lived experience. The different settings and periods depicted helped to defamiliarize ideas they had been steeped in, thereby illuminating issues afresh. Situations in which these officers, wrapped up in the urgency of the moment, found themselves every day, began to look a lot different when they involved a soldier in a Western Front trench, a sailor on a nineteenth-century man-o’-war, or a civilian sitting in the Concord jail. At the end of the day a few officers, having noted my comment about liking to read one of Bierce’s stories with plebes (West Point’s first-year students), approached me. Describing themselves as former plebes, they told me that this was precisely the kind of endeavor they had so valued while students but had found too little opportunity to engage in since.

Through his leader development program Paul had provided the time and
space for speculative discussion that is difficult to come by in a practitioner’s life. These sessions were free of the pressure—inherent in so many high-stress environments—of coming up with a finite set of lessons, an answer, a blueprint, a plan. Instead, these were ideas that would linger, evolve, or perhaps be forgotten for a time only to resurface later when they formed a point of intersection with some new experience. Paul’s theory of leader development was influenced by past mentors but also by his concern for the long-term health of his officers and for the institution to which they had committed themselves. In a crisis—a war that has strained the army in so many ways—Paul’s sense of urgency led him to think strategically.

BEYOND THE MILITARY LEADER

I work in an organization geared to crisis, but its most successful leaders deal with emergencies in the calmest possible way. Military culture, in which hierarchy is explicit, extremity often the norm, presents what might be thought of as an intensified version of dynamics that operate in a range of institutions, industries, and professions, all of which have their own pecking orders, crises, and organizational idiosyncrasies. I have talked with various audiences—generals, health-care providers, students at an all-girls prep schools, sheriffs who came to class packing heat—about the ways in which literature can help to illuminate such phenomena and to foster the creative imagination, mental discipline, and improvisational skills essential for strategic leadership.

The inescapable backdrop for my thinking about leadership—and for this book—is the series of wars in which the United States has been engaged since almost the beginning of the twenty-first century. That enterprise at once crystallized and confused so many things a lot of people in uniform and out thought they understood about developing leaders. For me, it reaffirmed in any number of ways the great value literature offers to anyone serious about the project of taking responsibility for other people and the organizations of which they are a part, about helping them to realize their full potential, about leading them anywhere (sometimes into hazardous places), and about preparing them to endure the aftermath of any trial.

That is the spirit in which I hope readers will take up this book, which is designed to accommodate students and novices embarking on their careers as well as mature professionals. Questions at the end of each section can help seminar leaders structure discussions, but the book also supports the solitary or casual reader who may wish, for example, to read a selection at a time and in no particular order. It offers a resource with which leaders in a time of crisis might practice through reading literature the deep attention, sustained contemplation, and introspection that the most pressing problems demand.

“One of the most universal cravings of our time,” the historian and polit-
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ical scientist James M. Burns began his seminal 1978 book Leadership, “is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership.” Burns argued, “The crisis of leadership today is the mediocrity and irresponsibility of so many men and women in power. . . The fundamental crisis underlying mediocrity,” he continued, “is intellectual. If we know all too much about leaders, we know far too little about leadership.” Burns called for a revival of a once-vital study of leadership that had languished in the modern world.

In 1978, Burns looked around to discover no philosophical study, no “school of leadership.” Today, nearly forty years on, we have entered a period that might be called, like the golden age of ancient Chinese philosophy, the era of “One Hundred Schools of Thought” about leadership. Books on leadership abound: they range from theoretical examinations to breezy memoirs to self-help formulas for success. Most studies of leadership draw heavily on the social sciences. This book offers not an alternative but a complement to those investigations, and it shares with them a desire to help leaders better serve their institutions by better understanding themselves and their environments. In a world perpetually embroiled in emergency, literature offers something potentially enduring. What was relevant yesterday in that headline-screaming way is irrelevant today. “Literature,” on the other hand, as the poet Ezra Pound once proposed, “is news that STAYS news.”

Organization of This Book

This anthology is divided into two kinds of sections: chapters and albums. The chapters trace a narrative arc predicated on some fundamental assumptions. Newcomers to any organization, institution, or community must first understand the system if they hope to become effective participants and leaders. After studying the system, the natural impulse is to imitate what one sees. Unconsciously, at first, and then consciously, we engage in the project of identifying and emulating heroes. The next, more sophisticated step is to grow beyond those models—to risk change, innovation, deviation from the norm when circumstances demand a new course. Risking revision is another essential step on the road to mastery, for leaders come closest to knowing the way when they accept the idea that mastery is less a state of arrival than a condition of perpetual growth and development.

The next several chapters shift focus slightly to address some essential activities and challenges leaders must navigate, and which are perhaps made especially complex in today’s technology-dominated global culture: cultivating trust, negotiating world and self, taking responsibility, and learning from failure. Of course, sometimes leading involves resisting the system altogether: dissonant voices can expose systemic flaws that even the most well-intentioned leaders cannot see. On occasion, a rebellious follower must
learn how to become a leader. Resistance is often characterized by inflamed, even violent, passions. Emotions are also a fundamental part of the healthiest organizations and institutions, where they help to forge sympathetic communities and build a shared sense of mission. But disciplining desire is among leaders’ most difficult problems: they must understand and manage not only their followers’ legitimate as well as destructive desires but also the double edge of their own internal drives and ambitions.

The short albums that punctuate these chapters highlight a set of attributes that leaders (both admirable and reprehensible) have demonstrated over the centuries: the capacity for deep attention, a sense of timing and the knowledge of when to delay decisions, an ability to persuade—occasionally to con—others, the exercise of superior judgment, the ability to weave effective personal and organizational stories, and a recognition, achieved through introspection and reflection, of when to let go.

Any comprehensive discussion of leadership explores both good and bad examples: leaders who had triumphant, disastrous, or wildly uneven careers. The texts assembled here are not offered as formulas for success, even if there is much to admire in these pages; emulation, after all, is but an imperfect strategy. Many selections depict desperate moments, ethical quandaries, and imperfect solutions to vexing problems. Nor do the authors collected here tend to make definitive moral judgments on the leaders or actions they describe: even the fables and parables are open to various interpretations. Rather, the argument of this book is that the work of understanding, analyzing, interpreting, comparing, contrasting, synthesizing, and reflecting—the work that serious literature compels a reader to perform—can help awaken leaders and keep them ever sharp.