

The Follower Problem

By DAVID BROOKS | June 11, 2012 | NY Times

If you go to the Lincoln or Jefferson memorials in Washington, you are invited to look up in admiration. Lincoln and Jefferson are presented as the embodiments of just authority. They are strong and powerful but also humanized. Jefferson is a graceful aristocratic democrat. Lincoln is sober and enduring. Both used power in the service of higher ideas, which are engraved nearby on the walls.

The monuments that get built these days are mostly duds. That's because they say nothing about just authority. The World War II memorial is a nullity. It tells you nothing about the war or why American power was mobilized to fight it. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial brutally simplifies its subject's nuanced and biblical understanding of power. It gives him an imperious and self-enclosed character completely out of keeping with his complex nature.

As Michael J. Lewis of Williams College has noted, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial transforms a jaunty cavalier into a "differently abled and rather prim nonsmoker." Instead of a crafty wielder of supreme power, Roosevelt is a kindly grandpa you would want to put your arm around for a vacation photo.

The proposed Eisenhower memorial shifts attention from his moments of power to his moments of innocent boyhood. The design has been widely criticized, and last week the commission in charge agreed to push back the approval hearing until September.

Even the more successful recent monuments evade the thorny subjects of strength and power. The Vietnam memorial is about tragedy. The Korean memorial is about vulnerability.

Why can't today's memorial designers think straight about just authority?

Some of the reasons are well-known. We live in a culture that finds it easier to assign moral status to victims of power than to those who wield power. Most of the stories we tell ourselves are about victims who have endured oppression, racism and cruelty.

Then there is our fervent devotion to equality, to the notion that all people are equal and deserve equal recognition and respect. It's hard in this frame of mind to define and celebrate greatness, to hold up others who are immeasurably superior to ourselves.

But the main problem is our inability to think properly about how power should be used to bind and build. Legitimate power is built on a series of paradoxes: that

leaders have to wield power while knowing they are corrupted by it; that great leaders are superior to their followers while also being of them; that the higher they rise, the more they feel like instruments in larger designs. The Lincoln and Jefferson memorials are about how to navigate those paradoxes.

These days many Americans seem incapable of thinking about these paradoxes. Those “Question Authority” bumper stickers no longer symbolize an attempt to distinguish just and unjust authority. They symbolize an attitude of opposing authority.

The old adversary culture of the intellectuals has turned into a mass adversarial cynicism. The common assumption is that elites are always hiding something. Public servants are in it for themselves. Those people at the top are nowhere near as smart or as wonderful as pure and all-knowing Me.

You end up with movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Parties that try to dispense with authority altogether. They reject hierarchies and leaders because they don't believe in the concepts. The whole world should be like the Internet — a disbursed semianarchy in which authority is suspect and each individual is king.

Maybe before we can build great monuments to leaders we have to relearn the art of following. Democratic followership is also built on a series of paradoxes: that we are all created equal but that we also elevate those who are extraordinary; that we choose our leaders but also have to defer to them and trust their discretion; that we're proud individuals but only really thrive as a group, organized and led by just authority.

I don't know if America has a leadership problem; it certainly has a followership problem. Vast majorities of Americans don't trust their institutions. That's not mostly because our institutions perform much worse than they did in 1925 and 1955, when they were widely trusted. It's mostly because more people are cynical and like to pretend that they are better than everything else around them. Vanity has more to do with rising distrust than anything else.

In his memoir, “At Ease,” Eisenhower delivered the following advice: “Always try to associate yourself with and learn as much as you can from those who know more than you do, who do better than you, who see more clearly than you.” Ike slowly mastered the art of leadership by becoming a superb apprentice.

To have good leaders you have to have good followers — able to recognize just authority, admire it, be grateful for it and emulate it. Those skills are required for good monument building, too.