

ASHLEY: Now more than at any time I can remember, we need good leaders, men and women who'll make tough decisions but also have some empathy and can reassure us that they know what they're doing. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Today on Let's Find Common Ground, what does it take to be a good leader in this time of unprecedented crisis? Why do persistence and good communication skills make a difference? We look at what the best leaders share in common and how they can help us find common ground.

ASHLEY: Retired general Wesley Clark has thought about this a lot. He's a business leader, educator, and writer. He spent 38 years in the U.S. Army. His final military assignment was as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. Today, he heads the nonprofit group Renew America Together.

RICHARD: Wesley Clark ran for the Democratic Presidential Nomination in 2004. General Clark, we've never faced a crisis like this one before. What makes a great leader when something shocking and unexpected happens?

GEN. CLARK: Well, I think you have to have a number of qualities. First thing here is, if you're going to lead, you have to understand you're responsible, and you can't run from that responsibility. Political leaders as a class like to take credit for things that work and don't want to be associated with things that don't. So, if you go back in American history and you look at Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War, there was no question who was responsible for the Union war effort. He didn't call up a vice-president and say, "You're in charge of this war effort." And if you look to Franklin Roosevelt in World War II, it was clear that he was responsible. Great leaders take responsibility.

I think the second thing you need to do is you need to have a strategic mindset. You have to see the larger picture. I always say a good leader always has a plan. Now, the plan may not be a final plan. What are the constraints and restraints on your side? What are the courses of action you can take going forward, and how would you move forward? Then you continuously assess this, and you modify your steps based on latest information. Obviously, you listen to the experts, but the experts don't control you.

RICHARD: How does this moment now with the coronavirus differ in terms of leadership demands from other problems that the world has faced in the past?

GEN. CLARK: Well, I think every challenge is unique, but what distinguishes this one for me, let's say, unlike 9/11, there was a real concern for a couple of days after 9/11 there might be a second wave of strikes. Then there was the anthrax scare, and people were really nervous about riding on airplanes, but then it was over. This is going on and on and on and on, and even though the leadership might want to say you're going to wake up and this is going to be gone, it doesn't seem like it's going to be gone. Now, we had exceeded the number of deaths in the

United States from corona that we suffered during the Vietnam War, and we did that really only from February, March, and most of April. So this is not a problem that's likely to disappear. All the experts say it won't.

ASHLEY: So, knowing this crisis won't end quickly, what should leaders do moving forward?

GEN. CLARK: What I'd like to see is more emphasis on therapeutics rather than vaccination because if you can stop the coronavirus from killing people, you can restart the economy. But the mortality rate is much, much greater than influenza. If you could knock out that mortality rate, if there was a therapeutic that could treat you when you contracted the disease, we'd move on with life. We'd just have another disease to worry about.

ASHLEY: Talking about leadership traits for a minute, are there specific traits that you think are particularly valuable right now?

GEN. CLARK: Well, all the leaders I've known who've been successful are strategic in their outlook. They don't overreact to the moment. They gather information. They make decisions. They retool it. The second thing is, of course, the higher you go up the flagpole toward national leadership, the greater the emphasis on your communication skills. You want to both inform and reassure. You can't sugarcoat it. You can't tell people falsehoods that are then disproven, and then you're discredited. You have to take it seriously, and you have to learn from it. So people want from a leader someone that they can trust.

If you're a leader, your interests have to align with the group that you're leading. I think every candidate for higher office should have to release his finances. In the military as general officers, we had to have a financial disclosure statement. You couldn't be deciding on procurement in the military and own a bunch of Lockheed Martin stock. So why is it that at the highest office of the land, somebody doesn't have to disclose his finances? How do we know what his motives are in involvement against Iran, in working in the Middle East, in his treatment of Russia? How do we know what his motives are? How can you trust that he's operating from the best interests of the United States rather than the best interests of his family or his business? So that factor of trust, it's the absolute foundation of effective leadership, and when it's not there, you can't lead.

RICHARD: In a crisis like this, how important is it to seek common ground and to, at least in your messaging, include the concerns of people who may not have voted for you or who may come from different backgrounds and cultures?

GEN. CLARK: If you're the leader and you want to get legislation passed, it's a lot easier if you get everybody on your side in the Congress, in the Senate, and everywhere else, and you're not demeaning and attacking them. But you're referencing our current president, and he is exploring and developing a leadership

style unique in American history thus far, and that is that he leads from his base. Rather than trying to reach across the aisle, instead he's pulled together his followers in a powerful way. That's his leadership model. It's to use the press as a foil to build on the resentments of ordinary people to those well-educated elites who seem to think they know everything and can always ask the right questions and think they're smarter than everybody else. And he builds on that resentment. He is very, very skilled at this. He's very good at it.

RICHARD: His style of leadership, does it in any way measure up to the needs of the present moment?

GEN. CLARK: Well, I don't think it does. I can think of a lot of people who might do a better, different job of leading. But remember, this is a democracy, and one of the problems that Trump's critics have is they don't respect him. You have to respect President Trump. He's hardworking. He is strategic. He is single-mindedly focused. He may not always spell everything right in Twitter. He may blurt things out without having thought through them, but don't ever doubt what his objective is and that he's working very, very diligently front channel, back channel, and every sideways channel he can get to win that reelection coming up in November.

ASHLEY: You're a Democrat, and you live in Arkansas, which is a conservative, Southern state led by Republicans. What do you say to Republican friends and neighbors and colleagues to convince them about the type of leadership you think we need?

GEN. CLARK: Well, I think most people here see what's going on in Washington, and they're embarrassed by these two-hour briefings at the end of the day where the president gets up and blurts stuff out. Even the Republicans are embarrassed, but they're not going to say it, necessarily. They're aren't going to say it out loud. But here's the thing: President Trump has delivered stimulus packages to the economy. He's making a lot of people happy. That's his barometer for success, that stock market. So, yes, there are real problems with the leadership style. Had we taken this seriously, had we started social isolation sooner, we could've done better. Back up further, if we hadn't disassembled the National Security Council team that worked on pandemics, we'd have been even better off. But these are the fine points of leadership.

What I've learned about American politics is most people follow politics the way some people follow baseball. Come September, people start saying, "Well, there's a World Series coming up. Who's in it this year? Is it the Yankees again?" And at the last minute, they start, "Oh, yeah, watched the first game last night." With politics, it's going to play out starting after Labor Day. That's the conventional way it works. What happens in April and May and June and what gaffs have been made from the presidential leadership podium, listen, if the economy gets restarted, if a therapeutic is found... There's 1,000 different medical firms and pharmacies out there working on therapeutics and vaccines right now.

RICHARD: Wes, I want to explore different types of leadership, not just politics. You mentioned this question of companies coming up with potentially new treatments, new therapies. Our reaction to this crisis has been ad hoc in America, but is that part of the country's strength, that the inspiration doesn't just come from the White House or from the president but can also come from governors and from business leaders?

GEN. CLARK: I think that's a tremendous source of American strength. There are some things that can't be handled through ad hockery. I think having states compete against cities, compete against hospital chains, and compete against FEMA for personal protective equipment for doctors and nurses is crazy. But the spirit of the private sector and the entrepreneurship in the medical technology field is astonishing. It's one of America's greatest strengths. We have so many brilliant scientists out there, and the market rewards them. So they know they're playing for very high stakes on this, and, boy, they jumped on it immediately. So people are really racing on this thing, and that's a good thing. You could not muster the government resources. You could not direct it. You couldn't set up a panel that was smart enough, broad enough, fast enough to analyze every competing proposal and instantly eliminate 90% of them. You've got to let the market go through this.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. More on leadership with Wes Clark coming up.

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BARRY KUDLOW: But I would give you a lot of running room on the personal tax side if you give me my 15% corporate tax rate, large and small [crosstalk 00:12:58].

BARNEY FRANK: With the right tradeoff, we could do that.

BARRY KUDLOW: I mean that. I mean that. I think there's a deal to be had.

RICHARD: Watch full events online at CommonGroundCommittee.org or on our Common Ground Committee YouTube channel.

ASHLEY: Now back to retired general Wesley Clark. Going back to your own life, as a former general with many years of service in the military during wars and peacetime, as well, do you draw on leadership lessons from your own life and career?

GEN. CLARK: Oh, certainly, yeah. Leadership varies by the milieu that you're in. Military leadership's a little bit different than political leadership. It's a little bit different than business leadership, and that's common across the board. When you're in the military, you can be directive in leadership. The troops don't get a formal vote. Now, if the troops don't like you, they get an informal vote. They just won't go out in the cold weather. They won't sit under the tank with the wrench with the oil dripping on them with their earmuffs on and their freezing feet, working on tank engines in cold weather if they don't like you.

They've got to like you, but their standard for liking is they're looking for charismatic, forceful, strong leadership. So you use these tools as a military leader. And I think our Army, our Air Force, our Navy, Coast Guard, Marines, we've been very, very scrupulous since the end of the Vietnam War in really studying organizational behavior and cultivating developing our leader skills. We couldn't have made it through 19 years in Afghanistan and however many years it's been since Iraq in the Middle East if we had gone into it with the same mindset and the same leadership skills we brought to the World War II Army. And if you look at the business community, the best-selling title for any business book has leadership in it.

ASHLEY: So, Wes, you say America lacks strategic sense. What does that mean?

GEN. CLARK: We had a national security strategy from the time that Ike became president, when he said, "Democrats and Republicans have to work together. Even if we disagree domestically, we've got to stop godless communism from continuing to expand."

RICHARD: Ike, meaning General Eisenhower.

GEN. CLARK: Yeah, President Eisenhower, 1953 in his inaugural. That really was the strategy, and every president through the end of the Cold War adopted more or less the same strategy. It was politics stops at the water's edge, that we're all in this together as Americans. We understood that if American business went to South Africa or it went to Europe or it went to Asia somewhere, it was promoting American values, and American business was closely connected to the United States. So this strategy of working together abroad, the idea that we would deter attack, we would invest at home, we would promote our values—it carried us through the Cold War.

Then, after 2001, we went crazy on the Middle East. Okay, we had to do something about Osama bin Laden, but actually there was a frenzy of everyone wanting to go after Saddam Hussein. So 9/11 became the pretext for the invasion of Iraq, and the

Democrats were sort of swept aboard on that. Then it became clear that this wasn't such a good idea, and we wandered. Barack Obama said, "Don't do stupid stuff," but that's not a strategy. It may be a good pearl of wisdom, but it's not a strategy. And meanwhile, Russia had regained its footing based on the high price of oil and the money it was able to take in. It rebuilt its armed forces. China really began to feel its oats and begin to feel like they didn't have to work with the United States. They had arrived on the world scene.

Meanwhile, the United States is just grappling with: what are we supposed to do here? President Trump's strategy is, "Hey, let's withdraw. America first, except for the Middle East and terrorists and Iran. We don't like Iran." But that feeds into the strategy that Russia first enunciated in 1998, which is, "We don't accept American leadership. We don't accept NATO leadership and hegemony in Europe. We want a multi-polar world where Russia is important," the so-called Primakov doctrine. We don't have an answer to it yet, really.

RICHARD: A lot of President Trump's critics say that his shoot-from-the-hip leadership style is unique, but what I'm hearing you say is that we've lacked a real direction for the important strategy that should underpin American interests for a very long time.

GEN. CLARK: Richard, that's what it seems to me to be. So, in the case of let's say our business community, most of the American companies are multi-national now. So you don't even have Americans in charge of supposedly American corporations in some cases, and they draw finance, they get revenues abroad. Some of them park their earnings abroad so they don't have to pay taxes to the United States. And they consider themselves supra-national. They don't consider that they're really part of the American experiment. They're their own creation. So they don't necessarily support what's right for the United States. They support what's right for their investors. On the one hand, this is a good thing because we like to see the rise of internationalism and international institutions. We like to see everyone share our values and take care of people. But the world still has some angry predators out there, and the nation state has not yet been replaceable as the protector and guarantee of liberty and our rights and freedoms. So we can't let go of having a national strategy.

ASHLEY: I'm curious about this group you founded, Renew America Together. Tell us a little bit about what that is. What's the goal?

GEN. CLARK: We bring students in. We bring business leaders in. It's been really, really fun and illuminating and, I think, helpful to people because we're not asking for money. We're not asking for a vote. We're not trying to sell anything. We're just trying to explain it, and politics is a very confusing thing when you see it from the outside. We think that if you can talk sensibly and if you can find post-partisan political people who have come up through the political system, know how it works, but now can step back from it and see the broader interests of America, that you can have a constructive dialogue, that you can, through that dialogue, educate

young people to see past the personalities and invectives and the passions of politics and get into the real interests that should guide America.

ASHLEY: Are you hopeful that we can find common ground in the future and that the crisis we're in now could be an opportunity for Americans to talk about their differences?

GEN. CLARK: I'm always hopeful that we're going to find common ground. I think that there's always a certain percentage of people in the United States who are on the extremes, Left or Right. The great thing that saved America is the people in the middle. It's the fact that there's some reservoir of common sense that is expressed through the electoral process that somehow you get out of bounds too far, you get cut off. You get rebuked. You get voted out of office. I think that that's going to come again, and we're going to see that in the 2020 election.

RICHARD: Some great leaders in the past, and I'm thinking of famous speeches by Winston Churchill, by John F. Kennedy, who asked more of the people than has been asked at any time recently by any American president. Do you think that one important aspect of leadership is to ask more of everyone?

GEN. CLARK: Well, yeah. You've got to get other people in the boat with you. So, if you're company commander in a tank company, you've got to go out there and rally the troops. You've got to tell them, "You're going to go out there in the cold. You're going to go out in the snow. It's going to be difficult, but we need you. This is for Alpha Company." It starts there, and it goes up through the presidential level, as you say, Winston Churchill, or an Abraham Lincoln or an FDR. It's been odd. After 9/11, President George W. Bush said, "We got to work to restore the economy," but I understand why he did it. Yet, there was a tremendous outpouring of public support. Lots of people wanted to enlist in the armed forces. Many people changed their pattern of life to do it, to go back and help the country.

Here, the message from Washington has been mixed, but the American people have been strongly supportive of social isolation policies. 94% of the American people were under these policies, and by and large, people have done it. Now, the protests—this is the interesting thing about leadership—the protests have been sparked by our supreme leader. Why? Because he's worried about his reelection and whether he can get the economy restarted again and what it means if there's 20% unemployment and 26% unemployment or 30% unemployment. What's that going to do to him personally? That's the way he's looking at these things.

ASHLEY: What is the most under-appreciated leadership trait that's essential?

GEN. CLARK: Oh, persistence without a doubt, persistence, really, the ability to set a goal and to hang with it and to evaluate all the facts but to be determined and to not give in at the first sign of trouble, not to be wishy-washy, but find your central core of what you're aiming to do and stay with it so you have a chance to work. So

what I hope with Renew America Together is we can project a spirit of listening, of tolerance, of looking at the interests and facts and values and respecting each other and move the country in some small way, whatever group we can reach in that process, move it away from the intolerance, making fun, humiliation of opponents and into serious consideration of alternative viewpoints.

RICHARD: Much appreciated.

ASHLEY: Yes, thank you so much.

GEN. CLARK: Thank you very much. You guys asked me some good questions, but I don't know if I gave you the answers you needed or not, honestly.

RICHARD: I think you did.

ASHLEY: Yeah.

RICHARD: I think we're fine.

ASHLEY: That's retired four-star general Wesley Clark on Let's Find Common Ground.

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