



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

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No More Heroes?

Some years ago, I opened a presentation on disaster mythology with a brief discussion on the power of myth. My example was the influence of the myth of the heroic death of the French knight Roland on the development of the concept of chivalry and how that influence far outweighed the reality of his death. The myth is still remembered and retold, while only historians can recall the true facts behind his death.

This contrast between myth and reality is not unusual and many of those we celebrate as heroes may not truly deserve the title. The focus on racial justice over the past year has led to an increased questioning of this dichotomy and a reassessment of many of our most deeply held beliefs.

As someone with a deep interest in history, I do not think this is a bad thing. In many cases, the facts are even more remarkable than the myth because those involved are shown to be ordinary people who overcame difficult challenges. In other cases, the myths are misplaced and should be debunked. However, I do think that in some ways we are rushing to judgement and run the risk of

creating a society with no more heroes.

Deeds Alone?

When I was very young, my father was a big fan of the late-night movies and I grew up with a love of the black and white movies from the 1930's, particularly the ones dealing with the British Raj. As I grew a bit older, my mother would occasionally treat me to a movie and one that had tremendous impact on me was *300 Spartans*, the story of the battle of Thermopylae.

These movies helped mold the values that have stayed with me through the years: loyalty to your comrades, personal honor and integrity, devotion to duty or a cause, willingness to sacrifice for the greater good.

As I grew older, these movies sparked my interest in history and the desire to learn the facts behind the stories. It was then I came to understand that there was a dark side to my heroes. The British Raj was a tool of empire, used to subjugate the Indian continent, and the "bad guys" were freedom fighters. The Spartans were a dour, militaristic society supported entirely by slavery. My heroes had feet of clay.

The odd thing was this knowledge did not diminish my commitment to the values engendered by these myths.

Instead, I could separate the heroism of the deeds from the ideology that drove them and, in many cases, understand the viewpoints of both sides. I could put the deed in context without diminishing its inspiration.

Context Matters

Amid the fiscal problems created by COVID-19, the San Francisco school board is considering a recommendation to rename 44 schools, decision that could cost millions. The committee making the recommendations does not include a single historian and “research” in some cases consisted of little more than Wikipedia searches or newspaper articles.

The committee’s recommendations are an example of the cardinal sin for historians: applying contemporary mores to other time periods. Mores evolve over time and context is critical to understanding why people acted as they did in a certain period. For example, in a country where separation of church and state is guaranteed, it is difficult to fully grasp the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on every aspect of medieval life. Attitudes towards the same institutions can change over time. Slavery in colonial America and the Caribbean was viewed differently by contemporaries than it was by a Spartan or a Roman citizen.

Understanding context allows us to separate ideology from inspiration. One of my personal heroes is Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, 1st Marquis of Pombal, who led the response and recovery to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. A man of vision who implemented recovery programs that presaged the ones we use today; he could be considered the first modern emergency manager. He was also a ruthless despot who used his powers to eliminate a rival family and to break the power of the Roman

Catholic Church in Portugal. Do his accomplishments as prime minister during the earthquake and recovery outweigh his actions against his rivals?

Nobody’s Perfect

This is precisely the question that is creating problems as reassess our heroes. There is an unspoken assumption that a person is either good or evil. The current litmus test seems to be a connection with racism. In San Francisco, George Washington is out because he owned slaves. Abraham Lincoln permitted the execution of 38 Native Americans involved in the Dakota War of 1862 (even though he personally reviewed all 303 military tribunal convictions and commuted 264 sentences). Even Senator Diane Feinstein was not spared; as mayor, she ordered the replacement of a vandalized Confederate flag that was part of a display of historic flags.

The question, therefore, is what makes a hero? Do we judge Washington by his success as a general and president or as a slave owner and land speculator, in common with his contemporaries? Can we admire the generalship of Thomas Jackson without supporting the cause for which he fought? How do we balance the environmental and trust-busting legacy of Theodore Roosevelt against his racism towards Latinos and Filipinos?

Heroes exist to inspire us, to reveal qualities that we may lack, and to encourage us to dedicate ourselves to something greater. That they are human, with human failings, should not detract from that but should highlight the fact that we can rise above these failings to achieve great things. We should focus on accomplishments and consider context. Now, more than ever, we need heroes. 