

Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

What will they learn from these leaders?

If you're a parent of children between the ages of 5 and 35, you spend lots of time worrying about how to help them walk through the minefield of modern life and come out safe and happy, good and kind.

Whether they are in kindergarten or college or already out in the adult working world, children need advice from those of us who have, as the Greeks so wisely put it, "learned by suffering" — i.e., by surviving the hard jolts life can deliver suddenly without warning. The Greeks also



said, "Know yourself." If we are lucky, we have overcome the direct or peripheral damage we have inflicted upon ourselves and those around us and gained wisdom about our own strengths and weaknesses and how to treat others.

Still, as all parents know, children by the age of 5 have tired of hearing advice derived from our limited and unexciting experiences, whether we deliver it like Mr. Rogers or the prophet Isaiah.

Traditionally we have turned to our leaders. Ever since the epics of Homer, leaders have been expected to be noble "doers of deeds and sayers of words," dignified and inspiring exemplars of what we need to do in our difficult here and now and in our hoped-for brighter tomorrows. I still have in me strong feelings and images associated with the leaders of my youth.

One spoke in the energizing cadences of a gospel preacher in the heat of a Washington summer: "I say to you today, my friends, that even though we

◆

*Ever since the epics of
Homer, leaders have
been expected to be
noble 'doers of deeds and
sayers of words.'*

◆

face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

Another spoke in the chill of Washington's winter in Harvard-educated Bostonian dialect: "I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it — and the glow from that fire can truly light the world. And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Nowadays, if you asked what you can do for your kids, I'd say read the comics. Why? Imagine what they would learn by reading about our leaders.

"I did it because I could." With these six words, explicated in depth on "Larry King Live" and "60 Minutes," one of only three two-term American presidents during our last half century, after years of thinking, explained why he threw away any chance for an effective presidency, played into the

hands of his political opposition and set about repeatedly deconstructing the English language in ways not seen since the heyday of Jacques Derrida.

Imagine this weapon, along with "that depends on what the definition of 'is' is," in the hands of your son or daughter when you ask them why they did most anything.

Then again, what might children do with the "I did it because it felt good" defense of our current vice president? "I informed him of my view of his conduct in no uncertain terms. And, as I say, I felt better afterwards." Thus Dick Cheney explained why he had no regrets about his "probably" uttering an obscenity in the U.S. Senate chamber. Say your 15-year-old daughter just swore at your wife or your son skipped all his college physics classes the entire semester. Imagine asking them why and hearing them quote from the book of Cheney.

Finally, keep your kids far away from the presidential sophistry that, according to new ways of thinking, he has the right to suspend the Geneva Conventions and order the torture of prisoners, but "declines to exercise that authority at this time." You don't want the son or daughter you just caught with some suspicious-looking substances to cite the president's "I can have it, but I won't use it" logic. Why the next thing you know, they just might say they didn't inhale.

Teach your children to just say no to Clinton, Bush and Cheney and just say yes to Dilbert, Hagar the Horrible and Sally Forth. They'll thank you someday.

Palaima is professor of Classics in the College of Liberal Arts at University of Texas at Austin.