

## **THE HARVARD CLUB DINNER**

CROWN PRINCESS HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 17 JANUARY 1996

I would like to thank the Harvard Club of Malaysia for inviting me tonight and for the opportunity to talk on the topic "Leadership Ideals For Malaysia".

2. Whether a nation succeeds or fails or remains mediocre depends very much on the quality of leadership the nation generates. Thus many nations suddenly emerge to become great, to expand into empires and to dominate regions, continents and even the world. And then with even greater rapidity they decline and some disappear altogether from the face of the earth. The great empires of Egypt, Greece, Rome and Persia, the Islamic Empires, the Mongol Empire, the Ottoman Turkish Empire and of course the European Empires of Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and even Belgium, all seem to have gone the same way. If we want to find the leadership ideals for our country, we should study the great leaders of history.

3. When we trace the history of these empires we invariably discover leaders and leadership qualities which inspired, which brought out the best in their people, enhanced their skills in the art and science of governance and formulated unbeatable strategies. On the other hand we should study also the leaders and the kind of leadership responsible for the decline.

4. The names of these leaders are legends. Alexander, Caesar, the Prophet Muhammad and the early Caliphs, Napoleon, Genghis Khan, Mehmet II, Sulaiman the Magnificent, Akhbar the Great and others. One of the most remarkable was Genghis Khan. This chief of a small wild nomadic tribe of cattle and sheep herdsman fought, persuaded and welded the small tribes of wandering Mongols into a great fighting force and into a nation. Within the space of his lifetime Genghis Khan conquered and established the biggest empire in the world, extending from China in the East and Eastern Europe in the West. His hordes advanced up to Moscow and south eventually to India.

5. As an empire that of the Mongols was short lived. But it left behind many great nations and minor empires in Central Asia, in India where the Mogul (Persian for Mongol) Empire of Akhbar was established and in some of the West Asian areas where the Mongols merged with the Turks.

6. It was the leadership of Genghis Khan which made possible the welding of the wandering Mongol tribes and primitive herdsman into a nation. Leadership in those days required fearlessness, harshness and cruelty and generally intolerance

to those who stood in the way. The loss of such leadership qualities, the love of comfort on the part of Kublai Khan, ended the Mongols' dominion over three quarters of the known world then. Such was the role of leaders and leadership in the achievements of even the primitive nomads.

7. Bad leadership is equally as decisive in the destruction of nations or in keeping the potentials of a people unexploited. The great caliphs of Islam built an empire and a religious following that has never been matched in human history. But the jealousies, bickering and hunger for power of the governors of the various regions of the Muslim Empire soon broke it up into warring nations which cared little for the teachings of the Prophet regarding the brotherhood of all Muslims.

8. The Turks rescued the Muslim nations and resurrected the greatness of the Muslim Empire. The leadership of men such as Mehmet II and Sulaiman the Magnificent ensured the success of the Turkish Caliphate.

9. Unfortunately the later Sultans were more interested in a life of luxury and the sensual pleasures of the harems to pay much attention to state matters. They no longer went to war at the head of their armies. Instead generals were chosen to do this, generals whose leadership was equally questionable.

10. In the early years, the Turks went to war fully prepared to face the rigours and the hardships of battles in the fields. But when Cara Mustafa laid seige of Vienna he had his army set up a luxurious tent city, manned by the best cooks in Turkey. The most magnificent tents with velvet hangings and thick carpets was prepared for him. He was accompanied by his favourites from his harem. Not surprisingly Vienna did not fall into Turkish hands. Mustafa executed a number of his officers to prevent news of his defeat from reaching the ears of the Sultan. But the Sultan found out soon enough and sent men to execute Cara Mustafa by strangling.

11. In modern times Hitler and Mussolini destroyed their great countries almost completely. Mao Tse-Tung, a great guerilla leader, failed miserably as an administrator. Obsessed by his interpretation of the Communist ideology and convinced that he could never be wrong, Mao impoverished his great country. It was not until he died that China under the leadership of Deng Xiao Ping emerged from its decline to become potentially the greatest nation in the world.

12. It is clear that leadership, more even than the culture of the people, determines the fate of nations. Indeed it determines the success or otherwise of all human

organisations, be they social, political or economic. And of course the success of all organisations, big and small, add up to the quality and the achievements of a nation.

13. One might ask, what are the ideal qualities required in a good leader? One might wonder even whether there is some alchemy, some magic formula which a good leader must possess. If there is then one might despair because this alchemy, this formula seems to belong only to the privileged few. These people seem to be born with these qualities while others are not.

14. But actually the qualities of a leader are the very same qualities which we generally acknowledge as good qualities in any individual. If this is so then surely many people should emerge as leaders. That there are so few is due largely to most people not caring enough to adhere to good qualities. Most people give in to their baser instincts, thinking more of short term pleasures and gains than the kind of sustained self-restraint required in order to practise what is good and reject what is bad. Thus a leader who allows himself to abuse the power he wields is not thinking of his future good but the immediate gains from corruption. Of course those who allow themselves to be corrupted even before they become leaders will never make it at all.

15. Obviously, if one does all the things that society condemns as bad, one cannot expect to succeed as a leader. What society considers as bad is well-known to everyone of us. It should not be difficult to recognise them. But the fact is that many who wish to be leaders or who are leaders quite knowingly do those things which they know society would not accept.

16. As ordinary people we all condemn arrogance or dishonesty or selfishness in a leader. But the moment one becomes a leader, one would display those very traits. Apparently we are quite incapable of remembering that we disliked these qualities in leaders before.

17. I have already pointed out that the qualities which were ideal during the time of Genghis Khan are not quite the ideal qualities in our age. We live in a more enlightened era. Ever since the French Revolution the ideals have changed. Emerging from an era of tyranny, society laid great stress on "liberty, equality and fraternity". Interpretations of these have undergone many evolutionary and revolutionary changes so that attitudes towards leaders differ from one period to another. Today leaders in the West are hardly respected. They are often the subject of scurrilous attacks.

18. The composition of a society, its religious beliefs and its culture also determine the ideals of leadership. The ideals in Malaysia are rendered more complex because ours is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. It may be that what is approved by one is not approved by the others. One has to tread one's way very carefully indeed.

19. Still Malaysians of all races are a tolerant lot. They will forgive mistakes made by leaders from other ethnic groups. They may not be so forgiving if leaders from their own ethnic or cultural group make the same mistakes.

20. Malays, for example, are quite sensitive and will not accept being corrected or scolded in public. They may forgive non-Malays for doing this, but not leaders of their own race. Nevertheless it would be a mistake for non-Malays to do this knowingly.

21. And so apart from doing what is approved by society, leaders must take pains to learn of the sensitivities of the different races who work under them and avoid trampling upon these sensitivities.

22. The list of qualities which leaders should have is very long. There is a tendency to isolate just one quality and credit it for the success of leadership. But this would be a mistake for there is no single character or ideal which ensure good leadership. Rather leadership depends on a complex interaction of many qualities.

23. A leader may be a pious practitioner of all that is good but if he is not assertive and ready to defend his actions, he could still fail. Dedication and singleness of purpose require a strong character which tends to attract a great deal of antagonism and opposition. But a leader who is mild and accommodating, and is popular because of that, is not likely to achieve much. Clearly there is a need for conflicting values to accommodate each other, for both humility and assertiveness to be shown by a leader. This is not going to be easy. But then if it is, everyone can become a leader. That only a few succeed in effective leadership is due to the difficulty in mixing in the right proportions qualities which are not very compatible. This is why the number of truly great leaders in history are few and far between. Despite early signs of good leadership qualities, many fail to make it.

24. Leaders must of course lead. If leaders merely follow in the footsteps of past leaders, then they cannot truly be called leaders. Those who aspire to be leaders in whatever field must be willing to critically examine the past leaders, no matter how great they may have been. If they find the

methods of the past wanting in any way they should be willing to modify or even discard them and initiate their own strategies or policies.

25. Today mass production is accepted as the obvious way to meet mass demands and reduce cost. Yet for ages, goods were manufactured from beginning to end, one by one by practically the same person. The first man to reject the old methods and device mass production became a real leader. In the business sector as well as in Government, the good leader must look critically at the way things have been done before and question whether they were correct, whether they were the only way and whether they were still relevant in the present situation. If he is any good as a leader he is bound to discover some weaknesses or inadequacies or irrelevance. If he is brave enough he would discard the old ways and devise new ones. If he does this and he succeeds then he is a leader. Otherwise he is merely follower.

26. To lead it is obvious that a leader must know where he is leading to. A leader who does not know his destination cannot really lead.

27. The destination may be obvious in which case he needs merely to follow the shortest route. But a good leader may see more than what his predecessors saw. He may then set a new destination, a greater one than that previously identified. If he does this and he leads successfully, then he may be considered a better leader than the others.

28. A leader must therefore have vision, the ability to see beyond what others see, to determine new objectives and targets, to assess the capabilities of his followers, to encourage and arouse them and to guide them to greater achievements.

29. It does not matter how big or how small is his following. Whether he is leading a department or a platoon or a nation is not material. What is important is that he has the qualities mentioned, qualities which assure, guide and inspire his followers to strive for greater achievement and greater heights.

30. The ideals of leadership are many. No leader can have all of them. But it suffices if some of these qualities are to be found or are absorbed by a leader. It is equally important that bad qualities are eschewed by the leader, unconsciously or consciously.

31. Leaders cannot last forever. But good inspiring leadership should leave its mark on the followers, so that even if he is

no longer around, the qualities he inspired in his followers remain. This is the final quality and achievement of the ideals with which the leader is imbued.

32. Today it is acknowledged that leadership is not inherent in anyone. It can be learnt. Leadership training is now common and has produced good leaders. There is really no mystery about leading and the ideals of leadership. Everyone knows them. The problem is whether an individual is willing enough to make the necessary adjustment and sacrifices in order to be a leader, a good leader.

33. There is enough material for good leadership in Malaysia. All we need to do is to identify them and train them. All they need to do is to be willing to accept the responsibility and make the necessary sacrifices.

34. You don't have to be a paragon of virtue to lead. But you do have to give up some at least of your vices.