

WHERE HAVE ALL THE GREAT MEN GONE?

Good evening. I am honored to present my first essay to the members of Kit Kat.

Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish philosopher, once wrote, “*No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men.*”

The subject of my essay tonight is great men: in particular, the *lack* of great men. I would like to explain, to this captive and *so far* attentive audience, a theory I have been working on. My theory is that, because of fundamental changes that have occurred in our society, *there are fewer great men alive in the world today than in years past.* I would like to tell you why I believe that statement is true, and describe what I believe are the factors that, sadly, cause it to be true.

I will start by defining what I mean when I use the term “great”. How can we identify greatness? What are the distinguishing characteristics that set great men apart from all others? Next I will focus on how to achieve greatness. Is it a function of nature or nurture? Is it a consequence of innate ability or environmental influences? I will then describe what I believe are the obstacles, present in our society today but not present in the past, that make it harder for any person to achieve greatness. And I will conclude by identifying four individuals

who, in my opinion, have achieved greatness in recent years despite those obstacles.

I should emphasize right away, before you accuse me of political incorrectness, that when I use the term “great men” I mean it in a gender-neutral sense. It is intended to include great women as well as great men.

I hope to challenge your thinking. No one is going to agree with all the points of this essay, but hopefully everyone will consider those points carefully and contemplate what can be done to help eliminate the obstacles that prevent more individuals from achieving greatness.

So let us begin by focusing very clearly on how greatness is to be defined. My definition of greatness has three legs:

Number One, to be considered great, a man must make a *lasting impact* on the world.

Number Two, his impact on the world must be *positive, not negative*.

And Number Three, he must have *no fundamental character flaw* that destroys the value of his positive impact.

To repeat:

- a man must make a *lasting impact* on the world

- his impact on the world must be *positive, not negative*
- and he must have *no fundamental character flaw* that destroys the value of his positive impact

Now, let's look more closely at each of the three legs of this definition in turn.

First. A great man is a man who makes a *lasting impact* on the world.

This is a very high standard. I am not talking about the kind of greatness in the watered-down sense that we all use in everyday speech, like “She’s a great singer!” “He’s a great football player” “a great guy” “a great public speaker” “a great Kit Kat Club member” and so on. That kind of greatness has no real meaning.

William Hazlitt, the English essayist, expressed this same point nearly 200 years ago when he wrote, “A great chess player is not a great man, for he leaves the world as he found it.”

This is not how I intend to use the term “great”. I intend it to mean *truly great*, in the sense of history-changing, envelope-pushing, “world class”, greatness.

It may help if we look at some examples of individuals who are, by this standard of greatness, very accomplished in one field or another, and certainly famous, but *not great*:

They would include for example, Shaquille O'Neal, a man who is certainly a great basketball star; Meryl Streep, undoubtedly a great actress; John Grisham, a great author; Senator Edward Kennedy, a great politician; and Donald Trump, a great businessman.

For purposes of our discussion tonight, I think we can agree that all of these individuals are outstanding talents, very accomplished and successful in their chosen fields. But they are not to be considered truly great because they have not, in my estimation at least, made a *lasting impact* on the world. Even with the passage of time, in the case of these admittedly very accomplished men and women, it is likely that they will be relegated to minor footnotes in the history books, if they are remembered at all. By my definition, then, they have not satisfied the first requirement of greatness and therefore cannot be considered great.

I want to focus this essay instead on those rare individuals who have made an undeniable, lasting impact on the world.

Second. The second leg of my definition goes to the nature of a great man's impact on the world. That impact must be *positive*, not *negative*. Individuals who have made an enormous impact on the world, but in a negative sense, like Adolph Hitler or Mao Zedong or Saddam Hussein, therefore, cannot be considered great and must be excluded from our list. Certainly they have, through the force of their own personalities, changed history. Certainly they will be remembered as long as history books are written. But by my definition, despite their unquestioned impact on the world, they cannot be considered great, since their impact was negative rather than positive. Now, clearly, on this point it is necessary to make a value judgment. How can we judge whether a man's impact is positive or negative? I am asserting that the actions of Hitler and Chairman Mao and Saddam were negative even though I am not offering any objective standards by which we can identify negative behavior. For purposes of this essay, however, I think it is fair to assume that, with respect to negative behavior, as with pornography, we know it when we see it. So we can cross certain individuals off our list of candidates for greatness simply because their achievements were obviously, undeniably, evil.

Third. The third leg of my definition can be thought of as the absence of defects. To be considered truly great, I submit, a man's individual achievements, however positive they may have been, must not be offset by notorious character flaws. We can think of this as a sort of quality control concept.

What kind of character flaws are we talking about? There are countless ways a man can go wrong, of course, but it seems to me that perhaps the most common character flaw that has eroded the reputation of many near-great men, is pride, or *hubris*, one of the proverbial seven deadly sins.

John Ruskin, the 19th century English critic, essayist, and reformer wrote, “I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I don't mean by humility, doubt of his power. But really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not of them, but through them. And they see something divine in every other man and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.”

Pride is the *absence* of the true humility that Ruskin referred to. Pride is related to big ego and manifests itself in a number of ways, including rash judgment, inability to accept advice, a lack of principles or personal integrity, bone-headed stubbornness, and an individual's belief that he is not subject to the accepted rules of behavior that apply to ordinary mortals. Such a man behaves as though he is above the law. I should ask you at this point, does lack of humility perhaps bring to mind any well-known politicians on our national stage?

Let us consider some examples of men who, but for their fundamental character flaws, might be considered great; men whose marvelous achievements were diminished by their personal frailties. Here again we have a subject about which

each of us will have a different opinion. I will suggest a few names and invite you to agree or disagree.

We don't have to look far for examples; they pop up quite frequently, especially among political leaders and military men. To name just a few, how about General George Armstrong Custer, General Douglas MacArthur, Governor Huey Long, Senator Joseph McCarthy, Congressman Tom DeLay, and of course, president Richard M. Nixon. Should Bill Clinton be included in this list? George W. Bush? I will leave that judgment to you.

So, if we can boil this three-legged definition of greatness down to a single sentence, it would be this: *A great man is an individual of outstanding personal integrity who has made a lasting, positive impact on the world.*

Let us now consider how greatness can be achieved.

We are all familiar with Shakespeare's famous words, taken from his comedy *Twelfth Night*, "Be not afraid of greatness: some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

So, is that what it takes to become great? Is it possible that some men in fact are born great? Or do all great men start out as ordinary mortals who become great by working very hard or as a result of the twists and turns of fate in their lives?

The way I see it, Shakespeare was correct. A man can be born great, can achieve greatness through his own actions, or can simply be in the right place at the right time. But with apologies to the Bard, I would prefer to think that there are four, not three, pathways to greatness. I believe greatness can be the result of genius, effort, principles, or luck.

I'll give a few examples of what I mean.

Men who became great because of their unique *genius* include: Benjamin Franklin, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Each of them saw the world in a different way from all who had gone before, and through the force of intellect and creative power changed the world in a positive way. They are great because of their genius.

Individuals who achieved greatness through incredible, single-minded, personal *effort* include: Thomas Edison, John D. Rockefeller, and Susan B. Anthony. I don't believe any of these individuals were blessed with extraordinary intellectual ability. But each had tenacity and the ability to work extraordinarily hard. Each

of them persevered for years, if not decades, to achieve goals that ordinary men could not have achieved. They became great as a result of amazing individual effort.

Men who achieved greatness as a result of adherence to high *principles* (such as remarkable personal courage) include: Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Nelson Mandela. Despite adversity, they never wavered from their personal convictions (at least in public!) and they changed the world in positive ways.

And lastly, let me suggest examples of men who became great as a result of *luck*, which includes both the good fortune of being born with amazing natural talent and the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time. But please note! I do not mean to suggest that those lucky few who are blessed with wonderful natural ability or who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances can achieve greatness *without effort!* Any man can, and most usually will, squander his natural gifts and never rise above mediocrity. Among those great men who did *not* squander their natural talents and fortunate circumstances, however, would be: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Jesse Owens, and John F. Kennedy. Each of them was lucky, in one sense or another, either because of the natural talent they were born with, the resources provided to them by others, or the history-altering

circumstances in which they found themselves. And each of them capitalized on that good fortune on the way to achieving greatness.

By the way, I am aware that each of these so-called “lucky” great men also was subject to a certain amount of criticism for personal character flaws. I am asserting, however, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, that their *particular* flaws were not sufficiently large to knock them out of the great category.

So, now that we have defined greatness and figured out how to attain it, let us return to the basic premise of this little essay. I have asserted that the number of great men is declining. I suggest to you that society today permits fewer great men to emerge than in earlier times. And I submit that, without question, there are fewer great men today than in the past relative to the size of the population, and maybe even fewer in absolute numbers!

Consider this: in revolutionary times the population of the United States was about 3,000,000. Today the population is about 300,000,000. Our population today is one hundred times bigger than in revolutionary times! Now let me ask you, how many great men can you think of who were living in late 18th century America? Four? Six? Eight? I’ll bet you would agree that James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Paine and perhaps several others ought to be on the

list of great men. That is *at least seven* great men in a population of only three million.

If great men were emerging at the same rate in our contemporary society that is one hundred times larger, you and I ought to be able to identify *seven hundred* great men (and women) in America today! But I submit that we would struggle to identify (and agree upon) *even as few as seven* great men today. And as for seven hundred? Not a chance!

Why is this happening? Where have all the great men gone? What has happened to our world that makes it so hard for great men to emerge? How has society changed and why do those changes lead to so few great men being alive in the world today?

Let me propose that there are three important reasons why great men fail to develop in the world today.

First, and the primary reason why today's world is different, is the overwhelming change of scale. Today's world is vastly bigger and more complicated. In Revolutionary America, the population was small and relatively homogeneous. Social change, at least on any fundamental level, was rare and the pace of change was gradual. Life for most people in the population was not very different from

the life lived by their ancestors decades or even centuries earlier. In that simpler time, it was easier for an individual to have a significant impact on the world. Through his individual actions one man could nudge society forward a small step on the path of progress and have a major impact on the quality of life. Today, unfortunately, the path to greatness is much steeper and the climb is far longer. Population has exploded, the pace of life is accelerating constantly, dramatic changes have occurred and continue to occur in every facet of society, and the ability of one individual to have a notable impact has been reduced in proportion. We all know that it is much harder to change the course of a large, complex organization than it is to change the course of a small, simple organization, just as it is harder to turn an aircraft carrier than it is to turn a rowboat. Similarly, it is more difficult to make a positive, lasting impact, on a fast-moving, enormously complicated society than it is to affect change in a simple, slow moving society. Our world has become so big, so complex, *so messy*, that the great work of most individuals is lost in the background noise!

Another analogy can illustrate this point. If we think of society as a pyramid, with those individuals who have achieved greatness at the top, and the rest of the population at the base, in a small society, represented by a small pyramid, the vertical distance from the base to the summit is small. The climb to greatness is relatively short. That is how our world looked in the past. In a larger society, however, the pyramid is bigger, the base is wider, and the peak is higher. It is a

longer, harder climb to reach that higher summit. That is our world today. In order to have a significant impact and stand above the crowd, an individual today must accomplish *much more* than great individuals who lived long ago in a smaller world. Is it any surprise that so few today are able to reach the summit of the pyramid?

The second barrier our world today throws in the path of those who would achieve greatness is the way people today are conditioned to use available time. In Thomas Jefferson's day, or Charles Darwin's day, it was possible, even common, for a man of intellect to absorb himself completely in his task for hours, days, weeks at a time. Jefferson wrote and re-wrote thousands of letters during his lifetime, slowly and methodically, with quill pen and ink. He studied without distraction. No emails or telephone calls or television blaring in the background to interrupt his thoughts. He refined his philosophy and honed his style. He corresponded in writing with other powerful thinkers throughout his life. Darwin was similarly focused. He read extensively, examined thousands of living organisms in minute detail during lengthy sea voyages, and polished his theory of natural selection for years, before publishing *The Origin of Species*, a book that changed the world. Jefferson and Darwin had the *time* to achieve greatness. They had both the ability and the opportunity to *concentrate* on the subjects about which they were passionate.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed this notion poetically:

*The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upward in the night.*

Today, ironically, despite our enormously improved standard of living, we somehow don't have the time! We are too busy to become great. We have too many things to do and not enough time to do them. Multi-tasking is our norm. We are trained from the time we see our first TV commercials to have short attention spans, measured in 15-second increments. As adults we bounce from crisis to crisis during the workday and glance briefly at the newspaper headlines before channel surfing on cable TV or, now and then, settling down to read a book before falling asleep. The telephone rings constantly and we receive emails, often of the junk variety, by the dozen. We don't take the time to write and rewrite letters in ink. We don't engage in regular philosophical discussions with great thinkers. We tap out email responses in a matter of seconds and don't worry about punctuation, spelling, or syntax. We spend most of our productive time making snap decisions or engaged in superficial conversations about business, sports, or the weather. We don't contemplate great thoughts.

Every man in this room is well educated and well informed. In terms of raw information, basic facts, and knowledge of the way the world works, as reflected in science, business, economics, leisure activities (sports trivia, for example!) our brains are filled with much more data than the brains of our predecessors. Most of us have traveled more widely and experienced first hand more of the world than virtually anyone who lived in the 18th century. Each of us knows vastly more *factual* information than Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson ever knew. But our knowledge, as they say, is a mile wide and an inch deep. Few of us have the depth of understanding in any single area to begin to change the world.

Outside the academic arena, and some people may argue that even inside academia, deep thinking is rarely rewarded in today's consumer culture. Instead, our society promotes and rewards output and productivity. We stress quantity and ignore inherent quality. There is little incentive to invest time in contemplation of great thoughts, even if we had time available to do so. And rarely do any of us, with our busy lives and structured schedules, have an uninterrupted block of time where we can dig deeply into the topics that might lead us on the path to greatness.

So, I would argue that the second fundamental change in modern society that diminishes the number of individuals who will achieve greatness is the increased pressure all of us feel to use our time in superficial ways.

The third fundamental change in our world that impedes the development of greatness is the change in attitudes about privacy. In Jefferson's time and in Darwin's time the flow of personal information was much slower and was constrained by prevailing standards of privacy. Perhaps Jefferson did have a romantic relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, but there was no "Sixty Minutes" film crew camped out on his doorstep demanding to know if the paternity test was positive. It did not become the lead story on prime time TV news for six weeks in a row.

Perhaps, in FDR's day, rumors of an affair were true, but they did not appear above the fold on the front page of the New York Times, and they were never mentioned in news conferences.

As a result, the reputations of these great men were not eroded away. Their great achievements stood, pretty much untarnished. Their character flaws were suppressed, not exaggerated, by the media.

Today we know that the world is very different. Today we are bombarded with intimate details of the personal failings of every celebrity or pseudo-celebrity, whether we want to know about them or not!

Of course all men have flaws, but the “nothing is sacred” approach of today’s journalist is so intrusive that no famous man today can keep his flaws hidden. Those flaws will be discovered and will be splashed across the media and the internet, to delight the public. And the bigger the man, in terms of public visibility, the more intense will be the pressure to uncover those flaws. No man can be allowed to appear great. Our culture seems to have an insatiable appetite for negative news. Rather than build up and support individuals who are on the threshold of greatness, popular media assume the worst, look for the dark side, magnify whatever blemishes they are able to uncover, and tear down potentially great individuals.

Human nature hasn’t changed over the years. All men are subject to temptations and failings. But public awareness of those weaknesses has increased exponentially. Famous individuals today must be much more careful than in years past. They know, or they should know, at any rate, that their temptations and failings are guaranteed to become public. That makes achieving greatness much harder. No wonder so few men today are able, or perhaps even willing, to do what it takes to rise above the norm.

OK. If you are still with me, I will now identify four individuals who have achieved greatness during our lifetimes, even measured against the lofty standards of our definition. That they have achieved greatness despite the difficulty of doing

so in contemporary times makes their accomplishments all the more amazing. I will suggest these names, and I will invite you to agree or disagree. Perhaps you can think of a few others.

First is Martin Luther King. No surprise here. He clearly changed our world in a positive sense, and did so through a rare combination of genius, effort, and adherence to principles.

Second is Ronald Reagan. Not an intellectual giant, perhaps, but a remarkable communicator and a visionary who believed in the possibility of historic events, like the collapse of communism, that were beyond the ability of many people, including me, to envision. He stuck to his principles despite criticism of the most mean-spirited kind. And Reagan exhibited no diminishing character flaws.

Third, I give you Oprah Winfrey, the queen of daytime television. She is famous around the world, but she is much more than merely a wealthy media star. She is an entire industry, exerting enormous influence over the direction of popular thought. On her recommendation, newly published books can achieve best-seller status in a matter of weeks. And without meaning to diminish the importance of her charitable efforts, I believe her most lasting impact may be defined as the role model she has become for women, especially black women, in our society.

Ordinarily I would avoid any use of the buzzword “empowerment”, but if anyone

is entitled to use it, Oprah is. She has empowered American women like no one else. She has become great as a result of genius and hard work.

And lastly, I declare the name of Bill Gates. He has achieved greatness by a remarkable combination of effort, genius, and luck. He has already changed the world in one way, by inventing software systems that allow practical computers to be within reach of everyone, and he is in the process of changing it in another way, through his philanthropic efforts. Through the Gates Foundation he has transformed the way in which private dollars can be used to achieve public good. He is on track to become the greatest philanthropist in the history of the world. And he too has accomplished these feats without evidencing personal character flaws that diminish his positive impact on the world.

To summarize, then. There *are* a few great men today, but fewer than in past ages. True greatness requires single-mindedness and great personal strength of character. In our culture today the cards are stacked against the development of great men. Our vast society is at the same time both too complex and too superficial to permit greatness. Our culture promotes multi-tasking and short attention spans. Our news media give no one a break and *potentially* great men are knocked down as fast as they appear on the scene.

Does this mean the good old days of great men gone forever? I hope not! We need great men and women. We need authentic heroes, to serve as role models and to inspire us all. It is from their achievements that society moves forward. We must look for greatness around us, promote it, nurture it, and believe in it.

Here is another wise statement from Thomas Carlyle, whom I quoted earlier this evening, “No sadder proof can be given by man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men.”

Or, as Mark Twain put it, “Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.”

So, let’s raise a glass to great men! May they thrive and flourish and may each of us in our own way be responsible for allowing their tribe to increase!