

ELEGANCE IN LEADERSHIP

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“Elegance in Leadership” aims to identify elegance in the Western Hemisphere, the United States specifically, in an attempt to sift out shortcomings in leadership opportunities by using text from a letter written by Vincent van Gogh. Specifically, this article will address controversial topics such as the legislative system, income disparities, and second-wave feminism stances. Over the preceding decades, American society has been labeled as overtly opulent, and although it used to be socially acceptable for the upper-class to showcase their success as part of the American Dream, this is no longer the case. “Elegance in Leadership’s” goal is to highlight key areas where there is inherent elegance and why it is no longer treated as acceptable.

Vincent van Gogh wrote a series of letters throughout his life, and one, in particular, stood out to me—letter 325 (Van Gogh, n.d.). When expressing thoughts about van Gogh it would be simpler to discuss family, art, or how depression impacts one’s inner psyche. However, the most significant feature to me was not the sketchings of a world-class artist or the overall content of the letter, but an idea within letter 325. While discussing etching, van Gogh writes, “very fine pens, like very elegant people, are sometimes very impractical” (Van Gogh, n.d.). This idea resonated with me because it can be related to several controversial topics in the United States: the legislative branch as a whole, income inequality, and arguments offered by feminists in contention to the patriarchal system ingrained in the United States. Moreover, taking an opportunity to learn from this, as it relates to a leader’s perspective,

would be eminently useful considering its striking relevance to modern society in the Western Hemisphere. Some might argue that it would be stretching to suggest that van Gogh would consent to the alteration of “elegant” to extend to the topics listed, but if van Gogh is as generous with viewers’ interpretation as he was with his artwork, I believe it would be completely permissible.

Multiple factions within the United States perceive the legislative branch as very elegant and impractical. This isn’t a particularly polarized issue. To better define elegance, I would claim that any disassociation with the “working man” would be cause for referring to someone as elegant. The common definitions of elegance, per Dictionary.com (n.d.), illustrate the digression from the average which is useful when discussing the United States:

1. Tastefully fine or luxurious in dress, style, design, etc.
2. Gracefully refined and dignified, as in tastes, habits, or literary style.

These definitional distinctions epitomize the views many Americans have towards Congress. Accordingly, Gallup research showed “79% of Americans” view Congress as out of touch (Dugan, 2015). Conservatives maintain that most issues should be handled intrastate and typically look at federal representatives as overreaching. Conservatives also see politicians as too politically correct—an idea furthered by President Donald Trump. To elaborate on how powerful this understanding of U.S. politics is, one of President Trump’s main running points during the 2016 election cycle was that he was not like the other politicians which, although obvious, was evidently the right route to take. Liberals typically view congress as very impractical because of its bureaucratic nature and how long it takes to get laws passed. There have been countless complaints from both sides that those who construct laws “just don’t get it.” This could be fair to say when the current president of the United States is a billionaire and the majority of United States senators and representatives are within the upper-class (Drutman, 2016).

As this relates to income inequality, one can make the argument that some of the highest compensated executives in the United States are not

worth their pay. They make significant contributions to their company and society, but when the three wealthiest people, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Jeff Bezos, in the United States are worth more than the bottom 50% of proletarian Americans, it might be time to call the system very impractical (Kirsch, 2017).

In conjunction with this claim, colleges and universities perfectly illustrate the idea van Gogh offered in letter 325—some schools, and the students educated there, might be overvalued. For example, there have been studies done on prestigious schools versus the worst schools in the United States in the field of economics where publication is of the utmost importance (AsapSCIENCE, 2015). Generally, the worst schools for economics in the United States are able to teach students to the point where the 99th percentile are published more often than the top 85th percentile of Harvard students. Moreover, students in the 95th percentile at the worst schools are publishing more than the students at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford in their respective top 65th percentiles. Perhaps, it is time to move away from the commonly accepted idea that elite universities are the exclusive dwellings of the most impactful students in the U.S.

Lastly, I believe the second-wave feminist argument of establishing equality among sexes goes to the core of van Gogh's views of the pen. In essence, he is implying two things: Pens can do the same as other pens in some situations, and at times what looks most appealing is useless in reality. This relates to the feminist argument in that women do the same work as men and are, at times, undercompensated and undervalued for their contributions. The perfect exemplification of this being true is the former London School of Economic's (LSE) compensation for their female employees (Havergal, 2016). LSE conducted research within their university and found that women with equivalent tenure and experience were making significantly less than their equivalent, male counterparts. In this instance, I am not arguing that the very fine pens, i.e. men, are useless, but I am attempting to promote the idea that there should not be a distinction between male and female workers. Moreover, perhaps in America's culture, and other cultures having an innate affinity for patriarchal systems, an understanding of the transition of power is inherently flawed. Maybe patriarchy, in reality, is very impractical.

To conclude, van Gogh's ideas, as they relate to the argument of elegance within leadership in Western society, should not be undervalued and are profound in nature. Additionally, when looking at individuals, it is important to not overvalue their educational past but identify key characteristics and perform an analysis to see their true value. When van Gogh's ideas are applied to politics, income, education, and equality, they are too good to be discarded and should be treated as such. Using this knowledge, a leader can utilize divergence from elegance to gain the support of constituents, workers, and promote beneficial change in the equitable treatment of individuals.

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