# Why We Have No Heroes

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Today, shortly after Paul Volcker’s passing and his memorial service, and shortly after Mario Draghi passed the baton of the European Central Bank to Christine Lagarde, I can’t help but reflect on the heroism of these people and the heroism of Ben Bernanke and many other public servants who faced huge challenges and courageously and smartly (albeit imperfectly) dealt with them. They did so despite criticisms from ignorant people who advocated policies that would have been disastrous and despite the complaints of cynics who focused on the imperfections that were the unavoidable consequences of the big changes that saved us. Thinking about these public servants led me to reflect on why we now don’t have any recognized heroes.

I believe that we are living in an era in which there are no recognized heroes, even though we aren’t lacking real heroes, because the real heroes are vilified by cynics, the media, and politicians. Let me clarify.

By heroes I mean people with exceptional character and capabilities who put the well-being of others above their own well-being. Joseph Campbell described the typical “hero’s journey” as starting off with a person experiencing a call to adventure, then encountering the harsh realities of life, then having some successes but more importantly making painful mistakes that give them humility and sound principles for success. Then, in the process of pursuing their noble mission with others, they fall in love with the mission and with the others around them so much so that they put their mission and other people ahead of their own well-being. I know a number of such people.

The cynics are people who haven’t accomplished much themselves and stand on the sidelines while criticizing the heroes who are on their fields of battle. They arrogantly pontificate about how those on the field aren’t following the cynics’ untested and impractical approaches. Cynics also love to point to the mistakes the heroes make, ignoring the reality that all successful people make plenty of mistakes. In the process, they conjure up unrealistic images that heroes must be perfect rather than imperfect but great and much more successful than unsuccessful.

Too many people in the media are opinionated cynics with megaphones and too few are true journalists trying to report unfolding stories in a balanced way. They have strong preferences to be much more critical than complementary, especially of people who have different inclinations than theirs, often so much so that they will intentionally distort the facts to help create stories of evil people in positions of power. Because their audiences seem to revel in tearing down people in power, that approach also sells well which rewards them for such behavior.

Politicians are now more polarized than collaborative, more inclined to hurt each other than to be respectful, and more likely to vote along party lines than to vote based on principles about what’s right and wrong. As an extension of this, they tear each other down rather than hold good character in high regard. Based to the stats that I gathered to measure these things, this is now more true than at any time since around 1900.

Because there are many more cynics, cynical media with megaphones, and politicians trying to tear people down, and because there are no perfect heroes of the sort that the cynics paint pictures of, is it any wonder that there are no widely recognized heroes?

To me it’s a tragedy that we don’t have widely recognized heroes because they’re the ones we need to take us through the difficult times, they make good role models who help make us better just by watching them, and they deserve our appreciation rather than scorn.

Paul Volcker, Ben Bernanke, and Mario Draghi

I was very fortunate to be close to these people personally and to see the circumstances they faced and the choices they made up close, so I’d like to briefly share with you what I saw.

Paul Volcker, Ben Bernanke, and Mario Draghi were each central bankers who inherited brewing money and credit crises that boiled over on their watches. They each had to muster the courage to do the right things despite the great criticism of people who wanted them to do wrong things. As the leading central bankers, they had to fight huge economic wars in politically-charged and dysfunctional environments, and they won those wars. Their responsibilities and their powers were comparable to those of heads of state because they controlled the amount of money and credit that’s in the world and virtually nobody liked how they did it.

Paul Volcker stepped into an inflationary spiral created by others that threatened to destroy money and credit as we knew it and he broke the back of that inflation. He did it by raising interest rates to “the highest level since Jesus Christ” and causing a number of countries, companies, and people to go broke during the painful adjustment process. Needless to say, he was criticized and even hated by many people while he was doing it. In retrospect, most people could see that that Paul was a smart and principled man who did the right thing in an unbiased and apolitical way. Over his more than 60-year career, he was unwavering in operating that way as he handled many major crises.

Similarly, Ben Bernanke and Mario Draghi were each faced with existential debt crises that came to them because of what others before them did and that would have led to deflationary depressions and social and political disasters if they didn’t buck the cynics and politicians to make the controversial, unconventional moves that returned the world economy to non-inflationary growth. I watched their every move closely every day so I saw the decisions they made, the strains they were under, the fights they needed to have, and the personal attacks they had to endure in order to bring about stability.

While these moves averted past disasters, we are still faced with large debts and non-debt obligations (like pensions and health care) and growing deficits, so there are storms brewing. Now central bankers have less effective monetary tools and will have to coordinate with polarized politicians who have to agree on taxes, spending, and regulations. Most likely the challenges ahead will be harder rather than easier. If we keep treating the heroes the way we are treating them, we might not have any when we need them the most.

That’s my greatest worry as well as the greatest injustice.