

KILROY CAFÉ

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PLAYING GOD

Making decisions for others is never easy.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

LAS VEGAS — Let us consider the plight of the gods. When you are below them, bending to their will, they seem all-powerful, but when you view things from their perspective, they are just as constrained as you are.

In tough economic times, we can curse the Governor for cutting vital services or damn a manager for laying off workers, but they are merely responding to pressures placed on them from elsewhere.

The job of a god is to make unpopular decisions. The alternatives—making only popular decisions or no decisions at all—would only court the ruin of whatever world the god is in charge of.

Gods are concerned with “systems”—that is, the healthy functioning of an entire organization, country or planet. Inevitably, this requires going against the interests of some individuals within the system. It is terrible when a worker gets laid off, but the alternative may be the collapse of the entire organization, hurting many more people.

No matter how powerful the god may seem, he must contend with even more powerful forces that are beyond his control. Even the President must deal with his relative powerlessness. If a god were truly omniscient, he could predict the future, but most gods can't, so every decision involves an element of risk and vulnerability. You may have to

become a god before you understand how vulnerable they are.

Consider the simplest exercise of power: the relationship of parent and child. To the child, the parent is a god, capable of great wonders and from whom all blessings flow. The parent, however, is facing stresses of his own that are beyond the child's understanding. How does he keep enough money coming in? How does he protect the child's health? How does he raise the child so he is best adapted to the outside world?

The child only knows what he wants right now: a certain sweet food or to go to the amusement park. It is the parent's job to constrain these desires in favor of more important systemic goals. He can try to explain his reasoning to the child, but there is a limit to how much the child can grasp. Ultimately, power may have to be exerted by force: “Because I say so!”

Every god is bound to have a dicey relationship with democracy—that is, with the will of those being ruled. Sure, they may worship you one minute, but they'll be cursing you as soon as you do something that causes them pain. If every management decision were subject to a public vote, there would be no management. There would only be the tyranny of public hysteria, jumping from one overreaction to the next.

Every god has to be cagey with those he is ruling. There can be openness, but only up to a point, because no one down below is going to take it quietly when they know their own personal future is being debated. It is the destiny of gods to be inscrutable and inaccessible—like a judge in court—because that's the only

way to make truly wise and unbiased decisions.

Unfortunately, this inscrutability can lead to abuses. If you give gods too much unfettered power, some will subvert their position for their own selfish interests. All gods, therefore, must dance the political jig of seeming to be democratic and transparent even as they horse-trade in private with the lives of those below them.

Inscrutability also leads to the perception, down below, that the god is somehow more than human. Without intending it, a god can quickly be seen as God—capital “G”—where the expectations made of Him cannot possibly be fulfilled. The downside of worship is that it can flip in an instant to condemnation. When God fails to fulfill the wishes of His subjects, He can quickly turn into Satan in their eyes and may be subject to lynching wherever He appears on Earth.

Only a god understands how limited his power really is. He can make broad decisions about people's lives, and if he is lucky his choices will pan out statistically, but he can't be a micro-manager. As much as the people may pray to him for guidance, they each have to work out their own problems.

No god can be in all places at all times. He can only crunch the numbers at the top, lay out the ground rules, then let people fight it out within those boundaries.

He is not God, you understand. He's just a minor intermediary.

—G.C.

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