

WELL BEHAVED DIRECTORS SELDOM INFLUENCE HISTORY

British author Mary Anne Evans, who used the pen name George Eliot, once advised, “The important work of moving the world forward does not wait to be done by perfect men.” The same can be said of directors who create disruption that leads to recovery after a crisis—especially an unexpected, unprecedented one like a pandemic. These flawed but bold individuals have always played a role in major change, and they will continue to do so into the future.

Greta Thunberg is one such person. Born in Sweden in 2003, this young environmental activist gained international recognition for promoting the view that humanity faces a crisis arising from climate change. Known for her youth and straightforward manner of speaking, she criticized world leaders for their failure to take enough action to address the climate crisis.

By the age of 15, she had started spending her school days outside the Swedish parliament protesting their decisions. Soon other students joined her. Her efforts led her to address the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019 with accusations of, “How dare you?” The press and others took up the clarion cry that came to be called, “The Greta Effect.” *Time Magazine* named her to the 100 Most Influential People List and the youngest Person of the Year. *Forbes* listed her as one of The World’s 100 Most Powerful Women in 2019, and she received three consecutive nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, 2020 and 2021. She may have been the youngest person to be mentioned in these esteemed publications, but she wasn’t

the best behaved.

Neither was Arianna Huffington. A Republican turned Democrat and critic of early feministic writing turned feminist author, Huffington served as a vanguard to show us the future of online communications. She demonstrated ways to personalize media, share content on a new platform, and totally democratize the news. She co-founded *The Huffington Post*, started Thrive Global, and authored fifteen books. *Time* and *Forbes* also singled her out for recognition. At times perspicacious, often humorous, Huffington challenged the mundane and claimed to have spent hours fending off inquisition from her nasty “inner-dialogue roommate” who pointed out her every flaw. People have described her as “impish,” “wickedly funny,” and “wacky.” I choose to call her “disruptive.”

Also disrupting social mores and customs, Ayaan Hirsi Ali burst onto international headlines following the murder of Theo van Gogh by an Islamist who threatened that Ali would be next. She made headlines again when the Dutch government threatened to strip her of her citizenship and forced her to resign from the Dutch Parliament. Her high public profile and outspokenness continued to attract controversy after she immigrated to the United States. In 2007, the local Muslim community protested Ali’s planned lecture at the University of Pittsburgh, with one activist claiming she deserved the death sentence, not a place of honor at a university.

Raised in a strict Muslim family, Hirsi Ali survived civil war, female mutilation, and brutal beatings.

Reactionary Islamists demonized her; her family disowned her, and others threatened her; yet she refused to be silenced. As a distinguished political superstar and champion of free speech, her iron will and extraordinary determination to fight injustice allowed her to triumph over adversity to emerge an outspoken pioneer of freedom—not well behaved, but certainly disruptive.

No one would describe business magnate Richard Branson as well behaved either. A headmaster once told Branson, who has an estimated net worth of \$4.4 billion, that he would either end up in prison or become a millionaire. He chose the latter.

Robin Olds, a United States Air Force fighter pilot and triple ace, shot down a total of 17 enemy aircraft during World War II and the Vietnam War. Military historians regard him as the best wing commander of the Vietnam War, both for his air-fighting skills and his reputation as a combat leader.

Historians also remember Olds for his extravagantly waxed, and decidedly non-regulation, mustache. It was a common superstition among aviators that growing a “bulletproof mustache” would protect them in combat. But Olds went a step further. He used his as a sign of defiance, pointing out that, “It became the middle finger I couldn’t raise in the PR photographs.” He used this gesture again in 1967, shortly after he took command of the US Air Force Academy.

After his return from Vietnam, the newly promoted General Olds reported to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General John P. McConnell, who pointed to the now famous mustache and ordered, “Take it off.” Olds complied, ending the era of the bulletproof mustache. But the cadets at the academy had ideas about extending the

tenure of the facial hair. As Olds took the stage to be introduced, 3,000+ cadets greeted him with black paper mustaches they donned in unison. In a light-hearted response, Olds displayed the aforementioned middle finger to the Cadet Wing while hiding it from the Cadet Staff and officers seated on the elevated seating area behind him, once again proving that those who don’t disrupt seldom make history.

What do these examples have in common? Not everyone who behaves badly makes it onto the lists of *Time* and *Forbes*. On the contrary, people who disrupt the status quo for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or any other non-helpful reason, do more harm than good. But well-intended, insightful decision-makers do share some salient characteristics: they show a willingness to question what they’ve always believed, leverage their smarts, set demanding goals, self-regulate, and emerge from the changed reality ready to tackle challenges.

Philosopher John Dewey observed, “Saints engage in introspection while burly sinners run the world.” These burly sinners will help themselves, and everyone else emerge from crisis, but they will also innovate in whatever reality comes. They are the virtuoso leaders among us who will help us fix what the pandemic broke.

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