

A Moral Responsibility to Follow our Leaders
Exploring Ethical Dilemmas in
“Camping with Henry and Tom”

Raziah Ruiz

Rebecca Donovan-Bain

Palm Beach Lakes Community High School

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Leadership is often idealized as the beacon that guides us through the storm. We trust our leaders to make decisions, to stand for justice, to protect the people they represent. In *Camping with Henry and Tom* by Mark St. Germain, three men President Warren G. Harding, Henry Ford, and Thomas Edison find themselves alone in the woods. Removed from the ceremony of politics and celebrity, their conversations drift toward leadership and morality. What happens when leadership becomes tainted by self-interest or corruption? Is it still our moral responsibility to follow our leaders without question? The truth is, loyalty without conscience is dangerous. While leadership plays an essential role in shaping society, following leaders blindly without ethical reflection is not just irresponsible, it's immoral.

No matter what, people crave structure. We like being led. It gives us direction, a sense of order in the chaos. But history reminds us that structure without scrutiny becomes tyranny. Think of the leaders who inspired harm in the name of unity Hitler, Nixon, even cult leaders like Jim Jones who were followed without much resistance. Just because someone holds power doesn't mean they deserve trust. We live in a world obsessed with hierarchy. From childhood, we're taught to listen to authority to parents, teachers, and presidents. But morality isn't inherited with these titles. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky questions the blind submission to authority when he writes, “Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.” True morality requires freedom, freedom to think, to speak, to disobey. Without it, ethics is reduced to compliance. Leaders, even well-meaning ones, are not immune to corruption. They are flawed, insecure, and vulnerable to temptation just like any other human. Ford, in the play, masks his authoritarian tendencies behind charm. Edison wields brilliance with a subtle cruelty. Harding, meanwhile, crumbles under the weight of being a puppet. If these are the men shaping a nation, then surely the public's responsibility is not to obey, but to observe, to question, and if needed, to resist. Obedience is not morality, it's often its opposite.

Of course, there's comfort in following. It's easier. It feels safer. During moments of uncertainty like those faced by Harding in the woods people crave direction. We fear the weight of our own judgment. Many claim that unwavering loyalty to leadership is essential for societal stability, particularly in times of crisis. They argue that trust in our leaders builds collective strength. From this vantage point, leaders are seen as guides, whose decisions are from a broader vision that a mere individual like you or I might not fully comprehend. In this context, following a leader may be viewed as an expression of shared values and trust, echoing the notion of unity in the face of adversity. To question them, would foster disorder and undermine the social fabric necessary to navigate turbulent times.

Yet, the danger in this perspective is the seductive lie of leadership: that power knows best. That our conscience is optional. That sacrifice, even injustice, is acceptable so long as it comes from the top. But history doesn't forgive passive obedience. The crimes of the 20th century were not committed by madmen alone, but by ordinary people following orders. Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World*, offers a chilling portrait of a society that has traded freedom for comfort and stability. "The greatest triumphs of propaganda," he writes, "have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing. Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth." Obedience in the face of injustice isn't ethical, it's complicity. And still, some argue that loyalty to leadership is essential to ensure cohesion, national unity, and peace. Although, *Camping with Henry and Tom* makes it clear, even unity can be a mask. Behind closed doors, leaders negotiate self-interest and sometimes betray the very ideals they claim to defend. Harding admits as much, caught between his desire to do good and his need to stay in power. If even a president doubts the morality of his own choices, how can we, the people, be expected to follow without question?

Leadership deserves our attention, but not our blind allegiance. It begins with doubt, with discomfort, with resistance. Ethics is not about doing what we're told, it's about doing what's right, even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard. And so, the answer is clear: our moral responsibility is not to always follow our leaders, but to follow our conscience, no matter who stands above us.

Reference: St Germain, Mark. *Camping with Henry and Tom: A New Play*. Fireside Theatre, 1995.