

America's Unknown Leader of the Sixties: Lombardi

by

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When Vince Lombardi, football coach died in September of 1970, thousands of Americans throughout the country paid tribute to him, not only as a coach but also as a leader. While living, in addition to his coaching exploits, he had been asked to address a national management convention on leadership, was chairman of several charitable organizations, was queried on running for Congress and was more popular than most well-known political figures. In fact, on his deathbed, President Nixon took time out to both call and write Lombardi concerning the latter's condition. Even after his death, Lombardi's name emblazoned various awards, buildings, and even a street. It was because of this respect for Lombardi that his influence exceeded the boundaries of sport and overflowed into the mainstream of American society, as he attempted to redirect the course American society of the 60's was taking.

Americans recognized Vince Lombardi as both a hero and a leader because he was the right man in the right place at the right time. Coming to Green Bay in 1959 at a time when pro football's popularity was just rising, he succeeded in directing the Green Bay Packers to six division titles, five national football league championships and two super bowls. As his image as a winning authoritarian coach became more firmly established in the public's mind, the era of the 60's provided fuel for him to offer leadership in a society which to him, lacked the order of the past.

To Lombardi, society was decaying, as evidenced by the advent of the birth control pill, the new looseness on morality, the replacement of organized religion with drugs and psychedelics and the hippie cult with their ideas of dropping out and non-competition. To add to the turmoil were the ghetto and campus riots and the advent of the new sport hero, Joe Namath, who defied all the old fashioned rules of what a sport hero was to be. However, nothing destroyed the public's faith in the era of the 60's more than the assassinations of its hero leaders, John and Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. With their deaths came an interim of non-leadership in America, which was not to be filled until the 70's.

Into this interim of non-leadership stepped Vince Lombardi as he attempted to bring back previous value systems which he felt had made America strong. Lombardi got strength from the sustaining values of religion, winning, family and challenging work and wanted to reindulcate them back into American society.

In addition to his ability to generate followers by playing on past American values, Lombardi also possessed traits which American heroes of the past possessed, such as religious and military convictions, power, strong will, forcefulness, dominance of others, charisma, mystique, speaking out on unpopular issues and patriotism. Vince Lombardi:

charismatic hero-leader and patriot, was a significant element in the settling spirit of the 70's. However, most of the credit for this settling spirit goes to Richard Nixon whom many believe inherited many of the traits of his idol.

In addition to his personal traits and being in the right place at the right time, Lombardi also filled a desire by Americans for simplicity. With the advent of computer age technology, man was looking for something which he felt reflected the society of the past. It has been suggested that the sudden increase in the popularity of football in the 60's was due to the fact that it mirrored the complexities existing in society. However, the opposite might be true in that football's appeal was a direct result of Lombardi's expose of the myth of complexity. By stating that football was merely blocking and tackling, Lombardi recruited the American who wanted to fight back against the increasingly fast pace of the 60's and who wanted to return to that world of years before where football and life could be reduced to simplistic relationships such as blocking and tackling.

While many of these examples explain Lombardi's strong following among the younger and older age groups, they do not explain why many of the anti-competitive, anti-authoritarian flower children of this period accepted him. It is possible that Lombardi gained respect from the youth element because *his* authoritarianism, unlike those in power on the campuses and nation's capitol, was a disciplined type of authority, based on reason and set within the limits of what they found acceptable.

There is no doubt that Lombardi's impact on American society in the 70's has been felt. The return to a respect for authority, the cooling of campus turmoil, the lack of mass demonstrations, the revival of interest in religion, the need to be number one, and the upsurge of patriotism were all values which Vince Lombardi revived.