Charisma. Elvis had it. So did John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, and Mahatmas Gandhi. Madonna and Tom Cruise have it in spades. A lot of people on reality TV wish they did.

It’s that special something that sets a few people apart from the rest, that draws us to them as if by some magical force of their personality. You’re either born with it or you’re not. We all recognize it when we see it, right?

Not so fast. Could charisma be, at least in part, in the eye of the beholder? Does what we view as charismatic change with changing circumstances? Can leaders put on charisma like a new suit of clothes? Researchers at CGU are providing insight into questions such as these. The answers they are finding may surprise you.

Is former California Governor Gray Davis really more charismatic than Arnold Schwartzenegger, “the Governor”? At first glance it seems unlikely, if not downright preposterous. Yet that is indeed what Michelle Bligh, assistant professor of organizational behavior, found in a study of Southern California college students the day before the state’s recall election last October. “We showed them videos of the two-minute closing statements of Cruz Bustamante, Schwartzenegger, and Gray Davis,” says Bligh. “We also had them rate their perception of whether California was in a state of crisis and rate their tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders. Despite all the media cynics talking about how Gray Davis is dull and boring, if you didn’t see the state in a crisis and you were a Democrat, you saw Davis as charismatic”—and rated him more so than the action star.

“By most people’s accounts,” Bligh continues, “Arnold is

Cha-risma (kə-ríz-mə)

(n.) 1. a divinely inspired gift, grace, or talent. 2. a special quality of leadership that captures the popular imagination and inspires allegiance and devotion. 3. a special charm or allure that inspires fascination or devotion

—Webster’s New World Dictionary

That certain SOMETHING

By Marilyn Thomsen

“Yesterday, John Kerry and Ralph Nader met face to face. It was an historic meeting. Astronomers today said their meeting actually created what is called a charisma black hole.”

—Jay Leno on “The Tonight Show”
The allure of toxic leaders

I’m deeply suspicious of charisma.”
So says Jean Lipman-Blumen, who has spent her career studying leaders as good as Martin Luther King and as destructive as Jim Jones. In her newest book, The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them, to be published in September by Oxford University Press, she looks at toxic leadership “both as a set of behaviors as well as a set of qualities that people have within their character.” She hopes that by pulling back the veil on the behavior of toxic leaders she can help lessen their grip on the people who follow them.

To be sure, charisma, by itself, does not make a leader toxic. “Max Weber, the German sociologist, defined charisma as ‘a gift of grace,’ ” Lipman-Blumen says. “In contemporary parlance, people use the word ‘charisma’ to mean sexy, attractive, charming. Traditionally, it meant a divine gift that compelled people to hold a person in awe. You couldn’t help but follow that person.”

But too often, she notes, charisma “can draw you down the rabbit hole to toxic leadership. When people have charisma, we often pay attention only to that. We let the person’s charisma blind us, and we may not recognize if they are toxic.”

When we are fortunate, charisma is a force for good. Mahatmas Gandhi was not a gifted orator. He was known on occasion to sit down before completing a speech he had begun. But his vision was so compelling, and pursued so singlemindedly to the benefit of his people, that he achieved outcomes far beyond what might have been expected without his special gift of charisma.

Too often, though, leaders polish their charisma instead of their characters. “They feel they can get by with charisma,” Lipman-Blumen says, citing the example of Bill Clinton. “He was a very talented policy wonk, but he spent so much time honing his charisma that he forgot about his character. He felt he could get out of any tight spot he might get himself into by turning on his charisma.”

This summer Lipman-Blumen is working with Michelle Bligh on a study of Presidential speeches. She is especially interested in language the speeches contain about threat and safety. “I got the idea from listening to Bush’s State of the Union address,” she says. “I began to wonder whether in election years Presidents are more likely to talk about threats from which they can keep us safe and if this makes them more likely to be elected.”

Positive leaders, Lipman-Blumen says, help their followers face problems and find solutions. Toxic leaders, by contrast, portray themselves as the key to the solution, the ones who can bring safety. Therein lies the root problem of toxic leaders. “There is no safety,” she says. “Life isn’t safe. Nobody can keep us safe. The human condition requires that we inevitably live on the edge of uncertainty and unpredictability.” Anyone who says they can keep us from all harm is creating an illusion—like that spun by Hitler, who promised the German people a Third Reich that would last a thousand years.

How can we tell when a leader has become toxic? In the ten years she spent researching the book, Lipman-Blumen developed criteria for identifying leaders who had crossed the line. One powerful sign is that the leader leaves the followers worse off than they were before the leader found them. Jim Jones of the People’s Temple, for example, manipulated his followers so profoundly that they ended up killing themselves in a mass suicide.

Some leaders appear to have a noble vision. But “how do you detect when a noble vision has the seeds of toxicity in it?” Lipman-Blumen asks. “One way to recognize emerg-

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by Presidential speech. Followers—the American people—had been changed by the tragedy as well. “There were a lot of references in the media about how Americans were for the first time fearing for their own safety, feeling more vulnerable,” she says. “All of a sudden we have a terrorist enemy who hates America and wants to obliterate us. As a result, we have people perceiving President Bush in a whole new light—and we argue, a more charismatic light—because of the situation.”

So did September 11 magically transform President Bush into a more charismatic individual? No, says Bligh. “I would argue that it was because of the situation involving an external enemy and being uncertain and fearful that more people were likely to see him as charismatic than before the crisis. It contributes to the argument that charisma is more something you attribute to someone. What you see as charisma may or may not be what I see as charisma, which makes it an even more interesting phenomenon to me. It’s not black or white. It’s shades of gray.”

This summer, Bligh and Jean Lipman-Blumen, professor of public policy and organizational behavior in the Drucker School, are collaborating on a more far-reaching study of charisma and the Presidency. For the past year, Bligh has been collecting inaugural addresses and other pivotal speeches given by 38 of the country’s 43 Presidents. (A few were excluded because their time in office was too short for them to have left much of a body of work.) Using software programs such as Diction and the Dictionary of Affect in Language, they will study whether Presidents viewed as more charismatic than others used more emotion and affective language than the non-charismatics. “Historians have decided that the modern charismatic Presidents are Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton,” says Bligh. “I’ve already done some analyses looking at how optimistic, how security focused, and how certain the language is in some of the President’s speeches,” she says. “Jean’s interested in the danger of leaders who deliberately instill a sense of anxiety and fear in their followers and present themselves as the only source of protection and security.”

(See “The allure of toxic leaders,” page 22)

IS CHARISMA TO BE FEARED?

Robert Dawidoff, a professor of history at CGU who studies the American Presidency, suspects that the most charismatic Americans never became President. “It seems to me that the Constitutional structure is designed—when it works—to destroy charisma,” says Dawidoff. “No matter what the President does, the minute he is able to establish a direct connection with the people, what happens? The Congress and the Supreme Court are there to restrain the power of the executive.”

“Our system is structured in such a way that it downplays charisma,” notes Jennifer Merolla, an assistant professor of politics at CGU who specializes in voter behavior. “There are so many strong institutions that prevent truly charismatic leaders.”

Charismatic figures? Dawidoff mentions Elvis, maybe, Frank Sinatra and Maria Callas, definitely. But Presidents? “I think one of the things we should be aware of in democratic life is charisma,” he says, “because it is exactly the opposite of our
ing toxicity is when the leader calls for destroying something else in order to make us better and bigger. Toxic leaders are always talking about purifying the world—which usually means getting rid of the people with whom they don’t agree.” We should see a giant red flag of trouble ahead “when we have to make something or someone else smaller or worse off in order to enhance ourselves.”

People not only follow toxic leaders, says Lipman-Blumen—they often seek them out and even create them. For example, she says, “People may push the leader to promise them more than is humanly or realistically possible. You see this in all kind of situations, such as when the staff push the leader to guarantee that he or she can produce a result when there isn’t any evidence for it.”

Lipman-Blumen says she wrote the book “because I’ve seen so much suffering in the world’s organizations and I have been amazed at the fact that people who really knew that somebody was a toxic leader let that person keep going as the leader of the organization for long periods of time. And I kept asking myself, ‘Why?’”

“’When people have charisma, we often pay attention only to that. We let the person’s charisma blind us, and we may not recognize if they are toxic.’”

One reason, she says, is that people find it seductive to be near the center of power. She saw this powerfully demonstrated when she worked on the domestic policy staff at the White House. “What shocked me was the people who worked there for long hours on a volunteer basis, even when they had to hire babysitters. People loved the idea that they were where important decisions were being made and that they were part of the action.”

Though crises make us particularly vulnerable to toxic leaders, sometimes we are fortunate enough to see good leaders emerge instead. Lipman-Blumen cites the example of former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. “One week before 9/11, he was being booed on a parade route,” she notes. “He just ran down the parade route to seek shelter from the cat calls. One week later, he’s transformed into a fantastic leader.”

Why the sudden transformation? “He didn’t lie to people,” Lipman-Blumen says. “He didn’t create illusions. Remember the most striking thing he said? When they asked him on the very first day, ‘How many have died?’ He didn’t say, ‘Don’t worry. It won’t be too many.’ He said, ‘We don’t know, but it will inevitably be more than we can bear.’ What a good leader does is create a safe environment in which the constituents can confront the problem, even if it’s a very painful problem, and somehow work their way through it.”

So how do we get more good leaders? Lipman-Blumen thinks the answer is twofold. First, we must recruit them. “Instead of waiting for the most power-hungry person in the room to elbow his or her way to the head of the line, why don’t we say to someone we recognize as trustworthy, ‘You would be really good for this leadership responsibility, and we want you to do it.’”

And we can act on our own leadership potential as well. “We have to start thinking about leadership differently,” Lipman-Blumen says. “We think that leadership is a privilege. I think instead we should think of it as a responsibility that we all have to various degrees. We can’t just lay it off on other people who are willing to do the work for us. We all have a responsibility to contribute whatever amount of leadership talent we have to the level that’s appropriate.”

By so doing, we can play our part in draining the swamp of toxic leadership and contribute to a healthier future, to the benefit of ourselves, our organizations, and indeed our entire communities.

—by Marilyn Thomsen

system. We are supposed to be a system based on natural rights and the capacity of the individual to make rational decisions. Even patriotism is supposed to be limited.

“I think charisma is what the Founders were afraid of,” Dawidoff adds. “They were afraid of tyranny from the top.”

Is charisma likely to be a factor in this year’s Presidential election? Merolla says it’s hard to tell. Political science researchers have shown that voters make their choices based on three components: party identification, issues, and candidate qualities. “The early characterization was that if you voted based on candidate traits, that was irrational or ignorant voting,” she says. “But subsequent studies showed that it’s not irrational. It’s an important component when you’re electing leaders.” However, she says, researchers do find that “less sophisticated voters rely more on candidate background, charisma, and appearance, as opposed to competence, integrity, and issues.”

Predicting the outcome of this year’s election “is really tough,” Merolla says. “It depends on the context, on what’s happening. The country is evenly divided by partisanship, so charisma may make somewhat of a difference.” She points to research on the 1996 election. “Studies have shown,” she remarks, “that if the economy of 1996 had been like it was in 1992, Clinton would have lost the election, even though most people would have seen him as being the more charismatic candidate.”

Charisma—whether it’s “a divinely inspired gift” or a gift born of exceptional circumstances, it’s sure to play a role in how we see leaders now and into the future. “We Americans tend to put our leaders up on a pedestal and believe that they are responsible for a lot more than they really are,” says Bligh. Whether or not they are able to deliver in the harsh light of reality will determine in large measure whether we continue to perceive them through our own eyes as superheroes—or as leaders whose feet are, indeed, made out of clay.