The president as 'Decider in Chief'

By Al Gini
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Michael Lewis scored a journalistic coup with the recent publication of the article “Obama’s Way” in Vanity Fair. For six months, Lewis was granted almost unlimited access to the President. He “hung around” Mr. Obama in the White House, aboard Air Force One, on the basketball court and even in the president’s favorite private place, the Truman Balcony, which faces the South Lawn of the White House.

As a student of leadership, the most fascinating factoid in the piece for me was President Obama’s reflections on decision-making. To begin with, both Lewis and Obama agree that if there is a central task of the presidency, it is making decisions. “Putting it the way George W. Bush did sounds silly, but he was right: The president is a decider.” From the moment the president wakes up in the morning, and often when an emergency causes him to be awoken in the middle of the night, decisions are thrust upon him. Some of these decisions are pre-scheduled or planned in advance. For example, cabinet meetings to decide on this or that policy or legislative act. But many if not most decisions are thrust upon the president out of the blue and without warning. Decisions like what to do or how to respond to “oil spills, financial panics, pandemics, earthquakes, fires, coups, invasions, underwear bombers, movie-theater shootings, and on and on and on!”

The president lamented that most of the things that hit his desk are not “perfectly solvable.” And no matter how much information you have in front of you, it’s either never perfect or never enough. And so, said Obama, you wind up dealing with “probabilities,” best estimates and well warranted guesses. Mr. Obama suggested that in theory you want to be able to reduce all choices to a “binary decision.” It’s either this or that, but most situations are full of nuances and shades of grey, which don’t always allow you to say: The answer it A and clearly not B, so let’s go with A. In the end, said the president, you make a choice, you hope it’s right, and you learn that right or wrong, you’re going to have to live with that choice.

Michael Lewis learned in the course of his time with the president that Obama has come up with a few tricks in order to survive as our national “decider.” 1) Work out every day. 2) Find time for yourself away from the job. 3) The act of making decisions actually degrades one’s ability to make further decisions. So, said Obama, you need to remove as many day-to-day decisions as you can. “I wear only gray and blue suits… I’m trying,” said the president, “to par down my decisions. I don’t want to make decisions about what I’m eating or wearing… I have too many other (important) decisions to make.”

In this job, Mr. Obama suggested there’s no place to hide. Decisions can’t be avoided. Decisions must be made.