

## BOOK CLUB GUIDE

*Courage Can Save US*, by Rye Barcott, is a book about courage, brought to life through ten comprehensive profiles of sitting elected officials: nine military veterans and a former FBI agent, five of them Democrats, five of them Republicans. Readers may find profiles of leaders with whom they strongly disagree, and members of reading groups may disagree with one another. The people profiled are not perfect leaders, and sometimes are far from it, but each one has, at times, chosen to advance the common good despite risk to themselves and their families.

Through the stories of those ten elected officials, Barcott contends that American democracy can renew itself if citizens and leaders alike are willing to choose courage and recognize it in one another.

### Opening: Around the Room

Before discussing the book itself, you may consider going around and asking each person to share a moment of courage from the book that resonated with them.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1. Bravery vs. Courage.** Barcott differentiates bravery from courage. Bravery, he argues, is action in the moment, instinctive and sometimes self-serving, whereas courage—physical and moral—is a conscious decision to advance the common good despite the risk to oneself. Do you agree? Can you think of a moment where you or someone you know has been brave but not necessarily courageous?
- 2. Political Courage.** What is political courage? Should elected officials represent the views of their constituents as closely as possible, or should they act, at times, against public opinion to do what they believe to be right?
- 3. The Roots of Courage.** In the Epilogue, Barcott identifies three values as “the roots of courage”: integrity, humility, and commitment. Do you agree? Which of these values is most important to you, and which of the ten leaders profiled most exemplifies that value in your view?
- 4. The Ten and You.** If you could meet with any one of the ten leaders in a setting of your choosing, who would you choose and why? What are some questions you would ask them? (Optional for fun: if you could meet them anywhere, where would you meet and why?)
- 5. The Book and Your Views.** Were there moments in the book that challenged your assumptions—about the other party, about American politics, or about the people who go into public life? Did anything you read change how you think, or surprise you about something you hadn’t known before?



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- 6. Polarization.** Some observers argue that America’s biggest political problem is not disagreement over policy, but growing distrust and hostility between people from opposing parties. Do you agree? Which is the greater challenge today: differences in ideas, or distrust and hostility?
- 7. Solutions.** If polarization has costs, what might be done to address them, in Congress and in the country more broadly? Could efforts to reduce polarization come with tradeoffs or unintended consequences?
- 8. Veterans in Public Life.** The author argues that military service can help build trust across partisan lines; he co-founded [With Honor](#), a “cross-partisan” organization to help more veterans serve in elected office. Yet the leaders in the book are, by his own description, “extraordinary”—most veterans never run for office—and veterans themselves hold a wide range of political views. Is shared service enough to bridge political differences, or does it only work under certain conditions? What might those conditions be?
- 9. Courage as an Answer.** Do you believe courage can save us?

(Note for any reading groups that might wish to have discussions about specific profiles: The Teacher’s Guide for the book, available at [couragecansaveus.com](http://couragecansaveus.com), contains detailed questions about each chapter.)

### Further Reading

*Hearts Touched with Fire: How Great Leaders Are Made*, David Gergen

*Profiles in Courage, John F. Kennedy, with foreword by Robert F. Kennedy and introduction by Caroline Kennedy*

*Washington’s Farewell Address, George Washington, and/or Washington’s Farewell, John A. Tolson*

*Meditations, Marcus Aurelius, translated by Gregory Hays, with introduction by Ryan Holiday*

*It Happened on the Way to War: A Marine’s Path to Peace*, Rye Barcott

### Before You Go

We’d love to hear from you about a moment of courage you’ve witnessed or lived that has shaped your life for the better. Please consider sharing a “courage moment” at [couragecansaveus.com](http://couragecansaveus.com). The author reads these personally and appreciates each one. Select stories may be highlighted with participant consent as part of a broader effort to elevate acts of courage in American life.

