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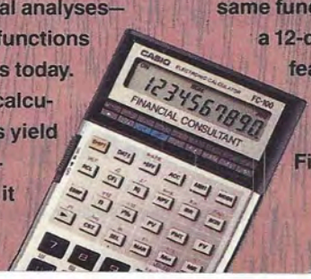
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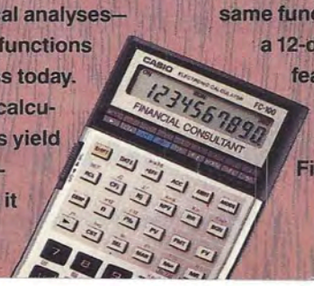
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himself. He has a capacity to take a lot of responsibility, to gird his loins and go forth with courage, and that's great. But he gets trapped as soon as he begins to believe that this capacity is going to work in complicated situations requiring the efforts, wisdom, and points of view of a lot of different people.

INC.: It sounds like you're talking about entrepreneurs.

HEIFETZ: Among others. In a way, the entrepreneur is idealized in our culture, and that sets him or her up for failure. He assumes the responsibility of satisfying employee aspirations that are impossible to satisfy. He buys into employees' expectations that he's going to guide them through the market, or through the next product innovation, or through whatever challenge.

Because the entrepreneur is inclined to accept responsibility and to see himself or herself as hero or heroine, he's also inclined to say, "OK, I'll do it for you again. I'll pull the rabbit out of the hat like last time. In fact, I pulled it out the last two times. And watch, I'm going to do it this time, too." The entrepreneur is energized by those expectations. And if he does save the day, he's reinforced the expectation that he'll be able to do it again and again. But it's a losing game.

INC.: Because?

HEIFETZ: Because he's a human being. Because he's a jerk like everybody else—with his own failings and his own blind spots. And because the landscape eventually gets too complicated, even for him.

INC.: When that happens, why can't he just pull other people in?

HEIFETZ: Because by now, there's no one around who has any capabilities. Every time he pulls the rabbit out of the hat, he generates more dependency and weakens his constituency, his own company. That's the trap in becoming the hero. If people keep expecting you to restore equilibrium, what they're actually doing is looking to you to help them avoid work. That's certainly where we're heading as a country.

INC.: Is that where you come in? Do you see yourself helping us to avoid that trap?

HEIFETZ: I would say that I'm refining the notion of what leadership is.

INC.: Refining what it is or what it ought to be?

HEIFETZ: Well, what it is, is a matter of people's opinions. Different people can say that they define leadership differently. You can't argue with someone else's definition. So, inevitably, the argument boils down to what it *should* be because the way we define leadership is going to shape the way people operate. People want to be leaders, after all. So our concept and understanding of leadership will affect the way people behave, and the ideals they hold out for themselves.

INC.: Which means?

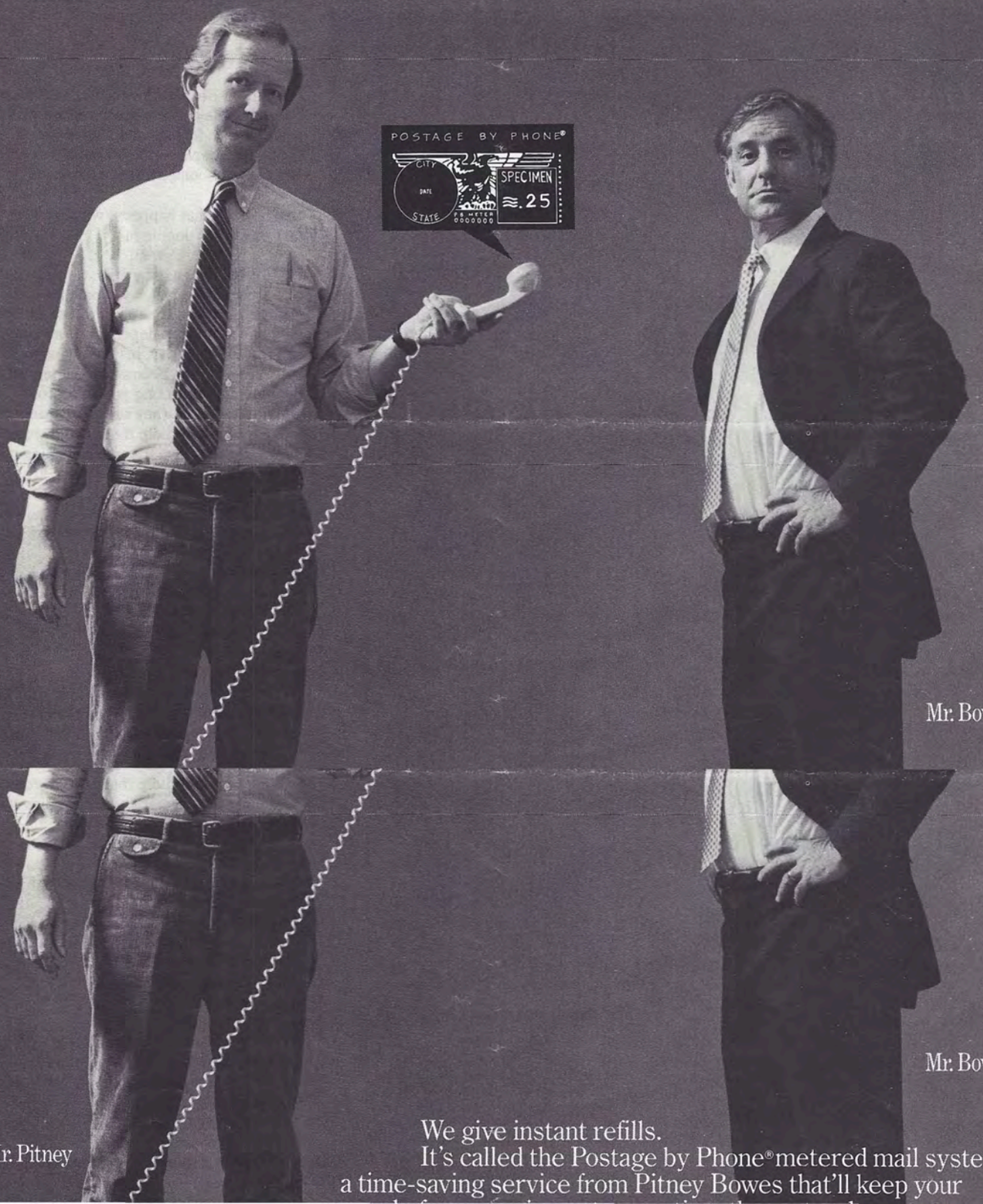
HEIFETZ: Which means my work here is to refine our understanding of leadership in a way that improves people's capacity to fulfill their aspirations for getting a group of people—an organization or a society—to get its work done, to make progress on the problems it faces. □



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the highest office in the land is that of citizen. I think that's an important statement. If we lose that, and to some extent we already have, we do so at our peril as a nation. Democracy works successfully as an ongoing, adaptive mechanism because it develops our muscles. It keeps us thinking for ourselves. It doesn't allow us to fall into lazy dependency.

INC.: So you see us as a nation getting lazy?

HEIFETZ: I see a growing dependency on administrative structures. We now have a wholly unrealistic faith that those administrative structures can address and even solve many community problems. For example, to expect the federal government to be able to solve the drug problem is absurd when the drug problem exists on every block in nearly every community in the country. It's absurd, that is, unless you're asking the federal government to get involved in how blocks of families within a particular community work together. Now that's pretty unrealistic.

INC.: But there are some situations—you see them in military dictatorships and in lots of family businesses—where no one is exercising leadership. All you have is a strong authority figure. And yet these groups seem to do all right, in some cases for years.

HEIFETZ: That works if you're in an environment where nothing much is changing and the problems are routine. Take, for example, my car mechanic. He exists in an environment where most of the problems that are going to be pitched to him and his organization are known. Routines have already been established for solving them. In that situation, he can do a terrific job simply by exercising his authority. But if he wants to train new people, expand the enterprise, or plan for his own withdrawal and succession, there have to be activities of leadership.

INC.: With regard to this distinction between authority and leadership, do you see many similarities between the public and private sectors?

HEIFETZ: The private sector could learn a lot from the democratic processes of problem solving. The processes appear slower, but they're not. In fact, they're faster. That's because democracy is inherently more adaptive than other forms of social organization. If entrepreneurs would learn more about what makes this country great, they could apply that knowledge to making their own companies work better.

INC.: I know you don't like the word leader, but it does conjure a powerful image of the person who's up front and in charge.

HEIFETZ: We have an ideal of individualism—rugged individualism—embedded in our culture, and it is truly a wonderful thing. The notion of rugged individualism has given rise to a great deal of American ingenuity, creativity, enthusiasm, and values of integrity. The person who is able to make it against all odds is a hero in American culture. But rugged individualism has its downside, in that this same person tends to take the work of defining and solving problems on his own shoulders. He is inclined to see himself as the Atlas who can hold up the world by



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RONALD HEIFETZ

me." And the tragedy is that, eight years later, reality kicks you from behind. And that's what has happened in our current situation—with our drug problem, with our poverty problem, with our debt problem. We have had eight years with someone who has protected the American people from facing the challenges of the next century, or even of the next decade, and thereby diminished the country's adaptive capacity. He's told us we can blame external forces instead of helping us take responsibility for our own problems. And now, of course, we're upset because we have this huge debt. Reality has caught up with us and shaken some of our illusions.

Unfortunately, we're likely to repeat the same errors because our conception of leadership is fundamentally misguided. We'll elect the next guy who claims to have answers rather than the guy who is willing to challenge us by orchestrating our problem-solving processes.

INC.: We're doomed?

HEIFETZ: Not necessarily. What gives me hope is something inherent in a democracy—I mean, the idea that we all share the responsibilities and obligations for making the society work. That is the nature of a democracy.

INC.: Yes, but you've also written that, in order to have a democracy, there must be a shared set of attitudes among citizens of a country.

HEIFETZ: True. We all have to share the attitude that responsibility is ours.

INC.: Well, that's certainly not what I hear these days.

HEIFETZ: I realize that. As we face more and more frustrating problems, we tend

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HEIFETZ: I realize that. As we face more and more frustrating problems, we tend to look for saviors, and—as a result—we have been losing democracy. We think democracy simply means having a political structure in which we vote. Or, we think democracy means the protection



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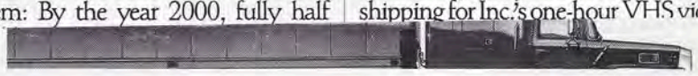
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