

LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY*

by

W. B. Allen*

Put aside for a few moments questions of impending problems in the distribution of the earth's resources, questions of the relations among states or, within states, the relations among peoples. Do not anticipate the important drama of new political forms emerging and the question of the durability of the nation-state. Think rather that the challenge of leadership in the twenty-first century calls upon our imaginations at the most fundamental level, and let us raise the question of the nature of leadership itself. If, as I believe, the twenty-first century will be led not by a person but by a country, by the United States, that this will be the American Century, how will that leadership be discerned and to what end will it be directed?

Abraham Lincoln spoke in 1838 of leadership in a time of crisis. Only few persons besides himself foresaw at that hour the impending crisis. Was it leadership to have foreseen and said what others did not? Does leadership convey people to their dearest dreams or does it convey them safely through undreamed shoals? Is leadership—statesmanship in state or society—a mirror of men's best selves or a making of men better? George Will wrote a few years ago of "Statecraft as Soulcraft," but most recently he plaintively demanded to know why anyone should expect government to inculcate virtues, decency. In what do leaders lead if not in virtue? Leadership is a problem for people, not because leaders are difficult to recognize but because we seldom seem to know what leaders do.

De Viribus Illustribus spells the customary form of attention to leadership. It announces itself by its fame. From Plutarch to Cotton Mather to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Winston Churchill (*Great Contemporaries*) to John F. Kennedy (*Profiles in Courage*), all seek in examples of accomplished men and women the emblems of excellence that shape leadership.

The connection between individual excellence and public leadership was announced by Jonathan Edwards in a 1748 sermon: "Almost all the prosperity of a public society and civil community does, under God, depend on their rulers. . . [who] are in the body politic as the vitals in the body natural, and as the pillars and foundations in a building." Edwards elaborated upon the "strong rods" communities require. Such leaders must be wise, able, and well-qualified magistrates. They will have great natural abilities, uncommon strength of reason, and largeness of understanding. In addition, they will show "largeness of heart, and a greatness and nobleness of disposition." They will have a peculiar talent for and the spirit of government, a stability and firmness of integrity, fidelity and piety, and the habit of applying their strength to the advantage of the public good. In *Ezekiel* 19:12 Edwards found the basis for a general portrait of leadership, looking to the good order of a particular society. This is consistent with universal human practice.

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Serious students of leadership follow Aristotle's dictum: to know goodness, and to be good, fasten your attention upon a noble soul and imitate it. That is why we look to the examples and qualities of presidents and others to inquire about the role of leadership. This departs greatly from the contemporary management gurus for whom leadership is a formula for getting out of "subordinates" activity in conformity with an organizational plan. On Aristotle's plan the end of leadership is not production but excellence, not for oneself alone but for several. Excellence is its own bottom line, and for so long as excellence commends itself leadership will always distinguish itself.

That explains how we know who the true leaders are. We have yet to learn exactly what it is they do. As Lincoln phrased it, whether such souls distinguish themselves by freeing slaves or enslaving freemen is the entire question. Are both types equally leaders or statesmen in the Aristotelian sense? Churchill included "The Führer" in his collection! When the American people began spontaneously to celebrate the birthday of George Washington in 1777, at a time when the issue of the war was in doubt (1777 was the year of Valley Forge!) and the character of the new nation remained to be framed, did they observe and celebrate in him his goodness as distinguished from a mere success (not then earned)?

In many respects the standard of judgment for one man's leadership and the leadership of a nation may be regarded as the same, if President Washington may be taken as an example. In his eyes the conditions for achieving the status of "a people" in the United States hinged upon the establishment of a rule of justice, not only within the institutions, but within the souls of the people. The pre-condition for self-government is a disposition in the citizens "to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility and pacific temper of mind" with which Washington closed his 1783 "Circular Address." A spirit of moderation, understood as a moral proposition—the acceptance of self-government as an objective not only in institutional terms but within the soul of each—is that without which "we can never hope to be a happy nation." That was the spirit in which Washington resisted grumblings from the army, and attempts to stir up a coup-d'état, persuading not only his soldiers but the entire country to try to vindicate the faith that "mankind is capable of self-government." This was such an aim, of course, the benefits of accomplishing which could not be limited to the United States alone. Thus, what Washington offered America, America, by accepting it, offered to the world.

Pericles instructed the Athenians on standards of judgment for statesmanship and valor early in the great war with Sparta. To begin, he said, one can never praise greatness too much for them that actually witnessed it, and never too little for all who know it only by repute. Our difficulty, of course, is that they most require the inspiration of greatness who have not witnessed it.

By contrast we experience that the Washingtons and Lincolns are constantly measured to ordinary proportions by the tailor-souls of succeeding generations, the valets, as Gertrude Himmelfarb expressed it, who cannot abide that heroism is aught but fiction—bad fiction—and who prefer narratives of false teeth and illicit loves to private sacrifices for public good. The human mind is so constituted, then, as never to mis-

recognize greatness when confronted in the flesh and seldom to credit it when reported in faith. Tom Paine conceded that Jesus was a very great man only to deny his divinity!

Pericles continued that the surest defense against this human inclination to depreciate just titles to fame is to leave the power that fame builds greater in fact even than in reputation—a power that is nothing other than the benefit of all who are subject to it. Did not Washington do this? In other words, we secure the experience of greatness from generation to generation in proportion as its influence is continually renewed in the lives of grateful successor generations. We know, therefore, that to enslave freemen is neither leadership nor any other kind of excellence; slaves know no gratitude. Thus the twentieth century bids adieu its totalitarian slave-masters, to be recalled henceforth only as the too little foreseen perils to a freedom we slowly begin to recover.

To grateful successor generations the experience of greatness becomes direct, and they are liberated from the need to depend on interpreters—or even laws—justly to appreciate the excellences of true statesmanship. When George Washington can be spontaneously celebrated through the iconography of his birthday, not only in his own era but continually thereafter, we know that the influence of such greatness remains alive for any people who are alive to its example. Their enduring gratitude bespeaks the direct effect and not merely the reputation of excellence.

Take it to be true, then, that people easily recognize great leaders because they easily recognize when they are benefited. To avoid *post hoc, propter hoc* reasoning, we must also say how it is or why it is, if it is, that the leader sees what will benefit a people. We must answer Lincoln's most important question, not just in general but relative to a twenty-first century world whose cry for leadership can be heard already amid the rattles of a dying twentieth century.

In the first place, no one cries for office-holders—even office holders with a flair for the dramatic. Of office-holders there are numbers sufficient and more than enough eager to replace even these. What one asks in addition, therefore, is that steady grasp of dangers to be avoided that will enlist a people's own best instincts in their defense. Thus did Washington when he foresaw the urgency of national union to realize the promises Americans had already prepared themselves to live. So did Lincoln when he conceived that national union was rooted in an equality without which Americans ceased to matter in the world. So Churchill did when he rescued democracy from colonialism's impetuous self-renunciation and found a will to resist evil in the resolve to persevere in goodness. Such are the strong rods Edwards found in an articulated faith.

Modern times, according to Paul Johnson, produced both the accession and the failure of state power. "The state had proved itself an insatiable spender, and unrivalled waster" and "the great killer of all time." Who cannot see, however, that more progress in the exact sciences, and in "sociobiology," will little relieve this dour appraisal? Johnson's voice is one of those twenty-first century cries for "strong rods" which, in its own answer, reveals how unlikely are they who cry for leadership actually to see its approach.

It is safe to say, however, that new leadership will walk in the old steps previously trod, will approach by way of the crises of the twenty-first century now too little foreseen. In the United States the temptation to anticipate tribalization as the nadir

of national union and general happiness is entirely irresistible. The slow but steady progress of policy and habit toward restructuring American society along lines of group entitlements seems irreversible. Jonathan Edwards had reasoned that the “strong rods of community” bore the responsibility to “hold the parts together, without which nothing else is to be expected than that the members of the society will be continually divided against themselves..., until the society be utterly dissolved and broken in pieces.”

More and more today citizens seem little disposed to cooperate with each other whenever questions of interests or advantage arise. And unless it soon appear how profoundly general impoverishment must follow upon such an organization of society, there will be little likelihood of escaping disaster. A superficial indicaton of the grounds for such pessimism may be discerned in the United States Commission on Civil Rights request to Congress that the agency, for the first time, be reauthorized without an expiration clause. The majority of that body can no longer foresee a United States in which controverted civil rights claims have been resolved.

At the same time, it is not often noticed how essential the aspect of American homogeneity (understood as *e pluribus unum*) has become to the restraint of far more vigorous inclinations toward tribalization everywhere else in the world. In South Africa the “dream” of a multi-racial society alone binds deadly enemies to a rhetoric of accommodation, which is all that stands between them and outright destruction. Without the putative example of the United States the rhetoric would surely collapse, and with it, at least for a time to come, civilization in that corner of the world. The example of the Middle East is no less exigent—indeed, perhaps more so. The danger of tribalization in the United States, then, not only imperils two centuries of humane accomplishment; in fact, it endangers humanity itself.

The individual world leaders of the twenty-first century, then, will likely be they who, whether from within or without, force the United States to live true to itself. For it is in the United States that the greatest crisis of the twenty-first century is likely to arise. I take the measure of the twenty-first century by the measure of this crisis, and if the United States meets the crisis successfully it will lead the entire world toward increased prosperity. For that reason, the twenty-first century will surely deserve to be called the American Century.