

The Verdict of the People (1854–55), by George Caleb Bingham.

QUESTIONING LEADERSHIP

“Close to 3,000 books and articles have been published on the subject of leadership, mostly within the past three decades,” notes business writer Richard Luecke—in a new book that adds to his statistic. Perhaps no coincidence, these same three decades have given rise to a consensus that great leaders no longer move among us. Our authors here propose that the usual ways of addressing the leadership question might themselves be a problem.

What's Wrong with American Political Leadership?

BY ALAN BRINKLEY

Visible occasionally among the numbing political advertisements of the 1993 election season was a commercial promoting the New York City ballot initiative proposing term limits for elected officials. The spoken text was reasonably predictable, but the visual image was striking: several enormously fat men sitting together, chomping on large cigars, and chortling—as if expressing their contempt for the law, or the people, or both. Whether the commercial had anything to do with the overwhelming success of the term-limits initiative, it did, it seems clear, convey what has become an increasingly common image of American political leaders: cynical, complacent, corrupt, cut off from any real connection with the people they ostensibly represent.

Something is clearly wrong with a political system in which the men and women charged with governing are held in such contempt by so many of their constituents. It is something more serious than the normal disorder, intrigue, and depravity that have always characterized democratic politics in the United States and other nations. The bonds that link our leaders and our political system with the larger public—the bonds of at least minimal respect and confidence that are essential to the stability and effectiveness of a democratic state—are badly frayed. There is, perhaps, reason to fear that they may soon snap altogether. An almost palpable cynicism has penetrated our public life, a cynicism that seems to be felt at almost every level of society. There is a widespread popular belief that no one in politics is to be trusted, that nothing government attempts works, even that nothing government attempts can work. We are experiencing a crisis of political leadership and legitimacy.

This is not the first time the United States has faced such a crisis. A century ago, in the face of social and economic problems at least as fright-

ening and bewildering as those of our own time, many Americans developed a similar contempt for and cynicism toward their political leaders. Political cartoonists portrayed public officials with the same gleeful disdain that the advocates of term limits used in 1993. The pages of such magazines as *Judge* and *Punch* were filled with derisive images of bloated, complacent politicians and plutocrats, their vests covered with dollar signs and shiny gold watch chains stretched across their enormous midriffs. They too smoked cigars and chortled as they planned new ways to betray the public.

In the 1890s, as in the 1990s, there were fevered efforts by people across the ideological spectrum to explain the political crisis—to determine what had gone wrong, to decide who was to blame, to suggest how to fix a system that had somehow come unglued. And in both the 1890s and the 1990s, those explanations tended to cluster into two broad categories. Each of them had then, and has now, valuable things to say about American political leadership. But each of them, then and now, has also obscured some of the more important causes of our discontent.

The first explanation is what might best be called the populist critique of American politics. It is based on the assumption that most of the problems of our public life are a result of the frustration of popular will—by smug elected officials, by corrupt party bosses, by rapacious party organizations, by selfish special interests.

In the 1890s, the populist critique focused on monopolists and robber barons, the men Theodore Roosevelt once called “malefactors of great wealth.” Standard Oil, it was said, had done everything to the New Jersey legislature except refine it. The railroads, many midwestern and southern farmers believed, regularly controlled the election of United States senators and dominated the workings of Congress.



And, in an age when many Americans believed corrupt party bosses had almost unlimited power, the criticism focused as well on the paucity of political leadership. National political leaders were widely disparaged, either as stolid defenders of entrenched wealth (for example, Grover Cleveland) or as unprincipled schemers intent on advancing their own careers at any cost (for example, James G. Blaine, who was dubbed "the continental liar from the state of Maine").

The 1990s have produced a similar assessment of politicians and of the selfish private interests that seem to control them. This critique has taken many forms, among them a virulent popular outrage at the undeserved perquisites public officials presumably receive and their seeming contempt for the needs and desires of the people they serve. The image of Washington, D.C., as an inspiring symbol of our nation's hopes and ideals, presided over by the spirits of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington, must now compete with a counter-image: a city of intrigue and corruption, swarming with greedy special interests. The ferocity with which much of the public and the media responded to such trivial issues as the congressional pay raise, the House banking "scan-

dal," and even President Clinton's haircut in Los Angeles suggests the almost reflexive hostility to the idea of political life that fuels the populist outrage.

In the 1890s, the populist critique produced, among other things, a series of proposals to get the parties and the politicians out of the way of the public, to let the people exercise more direct control over the nation's public life. Such proposals, many of

which were enacted, included direct election of United States senators (to replace election by the easily corrupted state legislatures), the initiative, the referendum, and the recall. There was a new, and briefly successful, political organization: the People's Party, committed, at least at first, to creating a more direct democracy through which ordinary men and women might once again control their own lives and futures.

In the 1990s, the populist fervor has produced a series of similar efforts to allow the people to circumvent politicians and control their public world more directly. The widespread support for term limits is a particularly vivid example. So is the popularity of Ross Perot and other antiparty politicians, who propose a direct pipeline between public opinion and public action.

At the heart of the populist view is the belief that the real wisdom and decency of American society resides in the people, that if only the politicians and the special interests would get out of the way, the people could be trusted to deal fairly and honestly with our problems. This is, of course, an old and enduring element of American folklore. Among recent examples of its hardiness is William Greider's *Who Will Tell the People?: The Betrayal*

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of *American Democracy* (1992), a dismal chronicle of the corruption of the American political system that rests squarely (as the slightly overwrought title suggests) on a belief that the greatest cost of this corruption is the way it frustrates popular will.

Competing with the populist critique is another interpretation of our present political ills, one that, for lack of a better term, might be called the antipopulist analysis. It rests on a quite different assumption: that the problem with American politics is that leaders are excessively responsive to popular will, too easily swayed by the immediate, short-term demands of unreflective voters, and insufficiently willing to resist the politically popular in the name of the larger public interest. Far from being unresponsive to popular will, politicians have become skittishly sensitive to public opinion. They slavishly gauge their actions to the most recent public-opinion polls, to the character of their mail, to the number of phone calls they receive from constituents on this issue or that. The result is a politics in which the people have, on the whole, gotten what they demanded; and what they have demanded—low taxes and high services—has produced an epic fiscal disaster that will require several generations of sacrifice to undo. Hence an effective political system, according to the antipopulist analysis, requires a buffer between popular will and public action. It requires, in effect, an enlightened elite, capable of seeing the nation's long-term interests through the thicket of short-term demands.

The version of this diagnosis articulated in the late 19th century took the form of an extraordinary loathing and fear of the populists among educated elites of all political persuasions (and a particular fear of the disaster their demand for the abandonment of the gold standard would presumably visit upon the economy). And it produced a series of prescriptions for handing control of government over to experts, who would be insulated somehow not just from politicians but from voters. Civil-

service reform created a cadre of professional public servants, protected from the pull and tug of politics. Cities created city-manager and commission governments, in which the day-to-day running of municipalities was entrusted to professional elites, never directly answerable to the people. Independent regulatory commissions emerged at both the state and the national level; their members, too, were to be insulated from politics, exercising control over economic activities on the basis of a disinterested sense of the public interest, rather than on the basis of their own political needs. A cult of expertise and professionalism emerged as a central element of the reform sentiment of the early 20th century—a cult that produced, among other things, a celebration of the “engineer,” the trained professional whose only interest was in the smooth operation of systems, the technician who could be trusted to run society on the basis of scientific principles, not popular pressures.

In the late 20th century, the antipopulist critique is less well articulated (and less politically viable) than it was a century ago and certainly less well articulated than its populist counterpart. But it is visible nevertheless in the interstices of our political culture, both in the rising emphasis on state secrecy and in the persistent belief that there are educated elites capable of understanding our long-term needs in a way that elected officials cannot. Not many years ago, New York City handed effective control of its municipal finances to an unelected panel of experts (the Municipal Assistance Corporation). There are similar proposals today for insulating the federal budget process from popular pressure. Some (although by no means all) of the pressure for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution reflects not just a distrust of politicians but also a distrust of the public.

These two interpretations of our political problems are, of course, very different, even in many ways antithetical. But they also share something very important. Both rest, in the end, on the premise that there is an identifiable

public or community interest—a set of concerns and goals that transcends politics, that transcends the particular interest of individuals and groups and reflects the essential needs of the nation. The goal of politics, therefore, should be to sweep away the obstacles to the discovery of that public interest and create a government that reflects it.

There is a basic difference between these two views over where a reliable conception of the public interest can be found. Populists believe it resides in the wisdom of the people; antipopulists believe it resides somewhere else—in the disinterested knowledge of trained elites or in timeless public truths inherited from earlier eras. But both stances reflect a belief that a unitary public interest exists and that it can and should be identified. Both envision a world free of political faction and selfish interests.

The search for a “public interest” is a worthy effort. It is, indeed, essential to the functioning of any political system. But much of today’s political discourse reflects a rather too-easy acceptance of a set of illusions about what it is our society is seeking. The idea that a “public interest” exists somewhere as a kernel of true knowledge, untainted by politics or self-interest, is an attractive thought. But it is also a myth. We cannot identify a public interest outside of politics, outside of competing conceptions of self-interest, because in a democracy—and particularly in a democracy as diverse and contentious as our own—any conception of the public interest will always be contested. And as a democracy, we are obligated to provide a means by which that contest can occur.

That means is politics. And so our best hope for dealing with our problems is not escaping from politics, but rehabilitating and relegitimizing our political system and its leaders so that they can contain the inevitable conflicts of our society in a way that gives all Americans a sense that they have a stake in the process and its outcomes.

One way to begin is to search for some of the causes of our present discontents that

move beyond the limited perspective of the prevailing diagnoses. There are two areas in particular where an effort to reshape politics may be worth pursuing and where a genuine change holds at least some promise of restoring public life and public leaders to a position of respect in our society.

One reason for the present disaffection with our political system is reasonably well described by the populist critique: the absence of any sense of connection between most individual citizens and the political process. The decline in voter turnout that has characterized public life throughout much of the 20th century and has, it seems, accelerated in the last 20 years is one sign of this sense of disconnection. So, of course, is the cynicism that has helped produce that decline.

The growing disconnection of people from politics has many causes, but among the most important are some changes in the *style* of politics that have occurred in this century, particularly during the last several decades. In the 19th century, and to a lesser but still significant extent throughout the first half of the 20th century, American politics relied heavily on mass popular participation: on the mobilization of thousands, even millions of people not just to vote but to work in campaigns and join in partisan events. Politics was something people cared about not just because of issues but also (as the historian Michael McGerr has argued) because of its importance as a social and cultural activity. For many, politics was a form of self-identification, as important to some people as religion or ethnicity.

An example of the power of this partisan loyalty was David B. Hill, a generally unremarkable Democratic governor of New York in the 1880s, who once attended a political meeting where some dissidents were threatening to desert the party. Hill stood up and made a short speech in which he said he would never bolt the party, no matter what it did or who it nominated, because, he said, “I am a Democrat.” And that single sentence became a

great political rallying cry, repeated constantly all over the country as a statement of profound emotional force and significance. It helped make David Hill a national hero to his party and, for a time, a highly touted contender for the Democratic nomination for president.

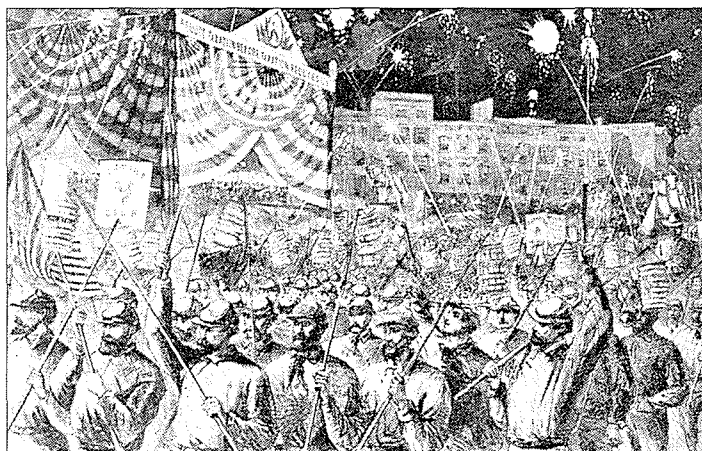
Politics was even a kind of sport. To many people, caring about a party or a campaign was much like caring today about a football or baseball team—an irrational attachment at times, but a passionate one. Politics meant attending rallies and barbecues, marching in parades, distributing bumper stickers and buttons—trivial activities, perhaps, but ones that gave many people the feeling of being a part of the public world and that created life-long habits of political participation.

Americans began to lose those habits nearly a century ago, but during the last 20 years the level of interest and participation in politics has dropped more rapidly and steadily than ever before. Politics has moved out of local party offices, out of the streets and auditoriums, out of any significant place in the lives of communities and families and individuals, and into consulting firms, advertising agencies, and television studios. One result is that the parties themselves play an increasingly attenuated role in public life. Another is that it is now far more difficult for individual voters to feel any real connection with the candidates and campaigns they are asked to support. Politics has become remote, impersonal, unapproachable. And so most Americans have simply ceased to participate very often in, or even to think very often about, public life. Instead, politics has become an almost entirely passive activity in which most voters rarely and glancingly engage. They read capsule descriptions of campaigns in newspapers and magazines. They listen to the radio. Above all, they watch television. And occasionally, in

ever-dwindling numbers, they go to the polls and vote. For most people, apparently, that is not enough to make politics seem significant.

The presidential campaign of Ross Perot in 1992, among its many significant (and ominous) implications, suggests the allure of an alternative political style. In the early months of that campaign, in particular, before Perot's precipitous and temporary withdrawal from the race, it produced something that had long been missing from American politics: It gave millions of voters the chance to feel that they were part of a genuine popular movement. As a result, the Perot campaign enjoyed astonishing success. The enthusiasm of those citizens was not just for, perhaps not even mainly for, Perot himself; it was an enthusiasm for the idea of political participation: for collecting signatures, organizing local campaign committees, passing out buttons and bumper stickers. Perot's followers experienced a small dose of the sense of empowerment that made the civil-rights movement, the antiwar movement, the New Left, and the right-to-life movement so alluring in the United States. Perot gave his supporters the chance to feel that they were controlling the process and not being controlled by it.

Perot's campaign demonstrated, if nothing else, that a yearning for political empowerment remains strong in America. To many voters, apparently, Perot's position on issues



Parades and hoopla made 19th-century American politics a popular activity. Here Democrats in New York march for their candidate in the 1868 election.

(or his unwillingness to take positions on them) was beside the point. He gave them something they considered more important: a chance to feel democracy at work.

Replicating that feeling in more conventional political campaigns will be difficult, perhaps even impossible, given the erosion of party structures and the overwhelming power of television in our world. But involving citizens in public life need not be restricted to campaigns, as the impressive growth of local, grass-roots political movements in recent years demonstrates. Leaders who wish to create some real sense of connection with their followers would do well to recognize that thousands of Americans have found a sense of engagement in working for specific, sometimes local, causes—environmentalism, education, feminism, antifeminism, and many others. Politicians might look for ways to make these people participants in the work of government.

But there is another, equally important, task awaiting those who hope to relegitimize political life in America. And that is the task of introducing into political discourse habits of reasoned reflection capable of making it an activity we can take seriously as an intellectual endeavor. Achieving this goal is even more difficult than meeting the voters' demand that our leaders tell the truth, although without a respect for truth political language will remain as empty and unrespected as it is now. What is needed is a vision of leadership as a search not just for power but also for knowledge.

In recent years, in particular, our politics has often seemed to be precisely the opposite. It has seemed a flight from knowledge. The cultivation of ignorance—ignorance of the real nature of our problems, ignorance of the predictable consequences of our actions—has been a deliberate political style. It is little wonder that contempt for political language and political life has risen significantly in the last decade or so and that leaders at all levels now find it much more difficult to enlist even modest public confidence.

The poet Robert Penn Warren wrote in 1975

(in *Democracy and Poetry*) of this concern, which had shaped his own thinking about politics throughout much of his life. He described

the tragic ambiguity of the fact that the spirit of the nation we had promised to create has often been the victim of our astonishing objective success, and that, in our success, we have put at pawn the very essence of the nation we had promised to create—that essence being the concept of the free man, the responsible self.

To Warren, democracy had meaning only when based on the concept of the “responsible self.” It had meaning only when citizens could aspire to understand the world in which they lived and their place in it, and only when they could expect their leaders to do the same. That was important, Warren argued, because without understanding there could be no effective public action. But it was also important because, without understanding, individuals would have no control of their own lives, no sense of their connections to their fellow citizens, to their community, and to their government.

What separates the 20th century from all the historical eras preceding it is, he argued, this: It is a world in which the gulf separating individuals from the institutions and processes that govern their lives grows ever larger, and in which the entrenched moral and social norms that once shaped and constrained the public world have lost much of their power to persuade. One response to such a world is simply to withdraw from it, to retreat into a private universe where one can at least pretend to exercise control. Another response is to place faith in leaders who promise simple solutions to complex problems. Both responses, Warren suggested, represent abdications of the responsibilities that come with being part of a democratic community. They represent, in particular, an abdication of the responsibility to seek knowledge—of ourselves and of our world. Without knowledge, he argued, we have no contact with our past,

with our community, and with ourselves. Without knowledge, we move through the world without really living in it. Without a respect for knowledge, the political world becomes an empty place. Its leaders become cynical, amoral, with no moral compass, no guide to what they can and cannot do, creatures of empty political ambitions.

Historians writing of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have noted, looking back on the anguished political rhetoric of those years, how imperfectly contemporaries understood the great social and economic forces that were the most important sources of their problems, how often they focused their anger and fear on things that were marginal to their plights, or irrelevant to them altogether. Future historians of our own time may say the same of us: that we flailed away at ephemera and phantoms without understanding that our real task was to comprehend a series of profound structural changes in our society and our world.

But there were people in that earlier period of political crisis who believed that Americans could find a way of genuinely understanding their dilemmas, and that effective political leadership could help them do so. One of these people was Walter Lippmann, who as a very young man wrote several now-classic books about politics in which he confronted directly what he considered the major crisis of his age: a crisis of knowledge. In one of the most important of those books—*Drift and Mastery*, published in 1914—he described an America that had been “passing through a reorganization so radical that we are just beginning to grasp its meaning. . . . The scope of human endeavor is enormously larger, and with it has come . . . a general change of so-

cial scale. Human thought has had to enlarge its scale in order to meet the situation.”

And human thought, Lippmann and others believed, was capable of doing so, particularly if society was capable of producing leaders committed to genuine understanding of the world. There is, in *Drift and Mastery*, a tone of real contempt for “anyone who picks his way through the world as if he were walking on eggs.” Such people, Lippmann wrote, will find the world “a difficult and unsatisfactory place.” The worst qualities in leadership, Lippmann believed, were “timidity of



One of the more remarkable aspects of Ross Perot's campaign in the 1992 presidential election was the intense involvement of his army of followers.

thought, hesitancy and drift.” (It is not surprising that Lippmann's great political hero was Theodore Roosevelt.)

Drift was a word Lippmann returned to repeatedly, with contempt, even loathing. It was a sign of weakness and failure. Like many intellectuals in those years, Lippmann was profoundly influenced by Freud, and he drew from Freud a belief (perhaps not completely synonymous with Freud's own) that individuals must set as a goal the mastery of their own inner lives. But the more important political task, Lippmann believed, was for the nation, and its leaders, to do the same—for their collective life, their political life. They should

strive for mastery, for a coherent understanding of themselves and their destiny. In one of his most powerful passages, Lippmann wrote:

We drift into our work, we fall in love, and our lives seem like the intermittent flicker of an obstinate lamp. War panics, and financial panics, revivals, fads sweep us before them. Men go to war not knowing why, hurl themselves at cannon as if they were bags of flour, seek impossible goals, submit to senseless wrongs, for mankind lives today only in the intervals of a fitful sleep. There is indeed a dreaming quality in life. . . . Men often wake up with a start: "Have I lived as long as I'm supposed to have lived? . . . Here I am, this kind of person, who has passed through these experiences—well, I didn't quite know it."

There is, in this passage, a contempt for the drift that Lippmann believed characterized so much of life, but also an implicit admiration for the "waking up," for recognizing the aimlessness of life, because through that recognition can come the determination to *control* one's own life and control one's own world. Lippmann continued:

That, I think, is the beginning of what we call reflection: a desire to realize the drama in which we are acting, to be awake during our own lifetime. . . . When we cultivate reflection, [when] we draw the hidden into the light of consciousness, record it, compare phases of it, note its history, reflect on error, . . . we find that our conscious life is no longer a trivial iridescence, but a progressively powerful way of domesticating the brute.

That is what mastery means: the substitution of conscious intention for unconscious striving. Civilization, it seems to me, is just this constant effort to introduce plan where there has been clash, and purpose into the jungles of disordered growth.

Americans in Lippmann's time never did, and of course never could, achieve real mastery over the great historical forces that were shaping the world. But their effort to do so was responsible for some of the notable public achievements of the early 20th century. In our own time, in a world considerably more complicated and considerably more dangerous than the one Lippmann described, it would be foolish to assume we could do much better. And yet we too, through the way we live our own lives and the way we conduct our politics, have an opportunity, even an obligation, as Lippmann put it, to "cultivate reflection," to attempt to understand and, when possible, "master" the forces that buffet us and bring such uncertainty and insecurity into our lives.

Political leadership in a democracy—be it from the president or from any one else who presumes to represent the interests of other people—can do only so much; one of the tasks of modern leadership is to help citizens understand that. But political leadership can do something. Leading us in an effort to comprehend our world, and what we can and cannot do to control it, would be a good place for those who hope to refurbish the tattered reputation of American public life to begin.