

Do We Overstate the Importance of Leadership?

BY ALAN RYAN

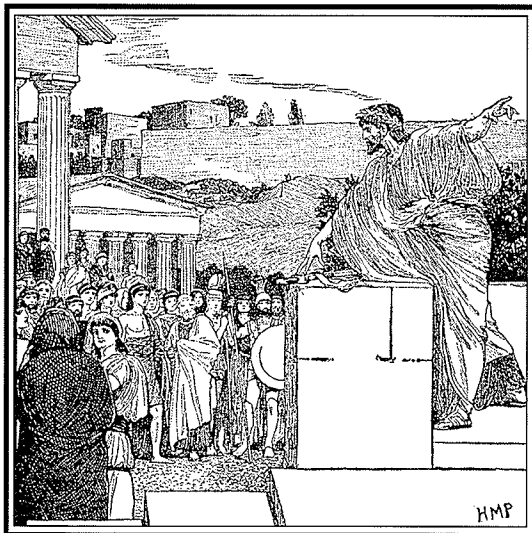
Political argument is so obsessed with leadership that it might seem perverse to claim that it is a local passion, not a universal one, and that even in the United States it has been intermittent and not constant. It is certainly a claim that would be hard to make in a gathering of orthodox social scientists. It would be equally hard to persuade the public. American politicians and voters are much concerned with assorted "crises of leadership" as described in the contemporary mass media. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher remain convinced that their success during the 1980s reflected the public's hunger for leadership. Today, in the face of one "crisis" after another, whether the Bosnian crisis, the health-care crisis, the education crisis, or some other, the cry for leadership continues to go up.

Crisis and leadership may be made for each other, but I

should like to argue that the extent to which leadership is a central element in political life and the extent to which the understanding of leadership is central to the understanding of politics are easy to misunderstand and to exaggerate.

To be sure, there are many forms of initiative needed in any political system, and it would be silly to launch a campaign against all talk of leadership. My aim is not to persuade the reader to stop thinking about leadership

but to emphasize that initiative in the creation of policy is not always leadership, and that leadership does not always imply leaders. It may be noncharismatic, provided by a group rather than an individual, based on knowledge rather than a surfeit of testosterone, and may have much more to do with *eliciting* the moral attachments of a political community than with *creating* them.



Plato feared that great orators such as Demosthenes could upset the workings of the well-ordered state.

Let us begin with our existing linguistic habits. Consider the distinction between leaders and rulers.* While rulers have commonly led those over whom they ruled—Elizabeth I both ruled the British and led them to victory over the Spanish, did she not?—there are two tasks, two roles, two statuses here. George III ruled but did not lead; his successors did not rule, even “through” Parliament.

Conversely, we would not say that Lee Iacocca “ruled” Chrysler unless we wanted to make a particular point about his managerial style—as in “ruled with an iron fist.” To say he led Chrysler during the period of the firm’s recovery, however, says only that he was in charge. CEOs lead; only some of them rule. It is a moot point whether any of them may plausibly be said to govern. Are these linguistic habits more than a quirk of idiom?

I think they are. Talk of leaders does, but talk of rulers does not, imply a struggle, a fight against other persons or a hostile environment. A leader mobilizes followers to achieve that task for which they join together. Rulers lay down the law, and may do it with an iron fist. It’s a distinction one can see in one of the first great works of political reflection, Plato’s *Republic*. Consider the difference between Plato’s Guardians—the “philosopher-kings” he thought we must institute if a just political order is to be created—and the demagogues he so disapproved of. The demagogues were leaders and would-be leaders; they led factions, and tried to rally the Athenian people behind the projects they had in mind.

Not so the Guardians. Anyone who read the *Republic* in college will remember the question every undergraduate has asked: What do the Guardians actually *do*? They hold supreme

power—but to avert change, not to bring it about. They have “auxiliaries,” soldiers who are ready to defend the *polis* in wartime, but they have no foreign policy save isolationism. They regulate economic activity, but only so it does not run amok, with artisans becoming obsessed with wealth and consumers acquiring a taste for foreign products. Although they possess the unusual, perhaps impossible, attributes that make them philosopher-kings, the authority of the Guardians is not personal. They do not charm their subjects as Alcibiades charmed his followers; they do not persuade them as Demosthenes persuaded them. Because the poets and playwrights have been sent out of the city, Plato’s Guardians can employ none of the theatrical arts on which politicians have always depended. Guardians are not party leaders, faction leaders, or popular leaders, not in any plausible sense leaders at all. We may be led by them, but that does not make them “leaders.”

They are rulers. Their status is peculiar, inasmuch as their authority is the authority of reason itself and not the authority of birth, individual charisma, or past success. Nonetheless, if they are *philosopher-kings*, they are also philosopher-kings. In fact, the label “philosopher-king” is regrettable. Talk of “kings” stops a democratic age such as ours from appreciating the virtues of an administrative elite whose claim to authority rests on knowledge, acquired skill, and public spirit. We see that such authority is not democratic and stop our ears. We ought not to. Modern “Guardians” must be answerable to the electorate in some way or other, but this by no means excludes the thought that they would possess an authority based on solid claims to a disinterested expertise.

A different and almost equally substantial difference between Plato’s vision and anything one might borrow from it must be acknowledged, however. Plato installs the Guardians to stop things from happening, while we have learned all too well that if we

*A quick search of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Mill reveals the interesting fact that it is only in Rousseau and Mill that “leaders” are much talked of at all; in Machiavelli, “leaders” only appears where military or faction leadership is under discussion.

Alan Ryan, a contributing editor of the Wilson Quarterly, is professor of politics at Princeton University. He is the author of Bertrand Russell: A Political Life (1988) and is now at work on a study of John Dewey.

do not move forward we move backward. That is a real difference between what he wanted and what we want. That Plato's Guardians do not *do* much is no defect in Plato's republic; the Guardians surely do not spend their days dashing around Athens putting out brush fires of popular discontent. What they do is set up arrangements that have the force of law, that regulate everyday life, assign people to appropriate work, encourage them into appropriate marital arrangements, and teach them to do without the things that would lure them into foreign adventures. Then, they maintain the timeless structure intact. If we need our own Guardians, it is because we need a flexible structure, one that is anything but timeless.

Plato's desire that the Guardians set up a timelessly valid structure within which individuals would live their lives contained no implication in favor of freedom of choice. Plato mostly treated freedom of choice as mere willfulness, and attacked Athens for placing too high a value on liberty. What mattered was that the citizens should lead the lives that were good for them. While this strongly distinguishes his ideas from liberalism, it remains true that liberal constitutionalism and the Platonic republic have something in common: The Guardians provide *structure* rather than leadership, or, better, they play a leading role without becoming leaders.

Plato's antipathy toward individual self-expression in fact reinforces the point. Citizens—or subjects—of Plato's ideal *polis* have no voluntary allegiances; there is thus no such task as persuading them to subscribe to any particular goal, no such art as that of rallying a *polis* of such people behind any particular cause. The emphasis on a rational structure maintained by a dispassionate elite displaces the entire phenomenon of political leadership from the center of attention.

It is an old complaint that Plato's stress on structure and rule as opposed to personal leadership simply abolishes politics. Aristotle

himself devoted an interesting section of his *Politics* to arguing that Plato's ideal republic had no politics, and a moment's reflection on Aristotle's complaint may be useful, since it will enable me to make my case that Plato and Aristotle both offer little scope to leaders. It is not the absence of *leaders* that Aristotle complains of but the failure to accept the legitimacy of plural interests and plural values. And this has implications for anyone who wants to take seriously the leading role of non-*"leaders"* and wonder whether we need a modern Guardian class. Just as I readily agree that modern Guardians would have to be democratically answerable, so I readily agree that they would have to consider the welfare of a pluralist society, not a monolithic one. None of this challenges the thought that we have recently undervalued rational guidance and overvalued charismatic leadership, and that Americans pay too much attention to *presidential* leadership.

Aristotle charged Plato with exaggerating the degree of unity a state could and should achieve. Politics is possible only where a degree of unity prevails—citizens must recognize one another as citizens of the same state, accept common institutions, and share a number of social and cultural values. Otherwise, they could not live with one another at all. Nonetheless, their interests are not identical, and politics is the art of reconciling *divergent* interests—not finally and forever, but for long enough to shelter the search for the good life.

As the similarities of this account to the conventional wisdom of American pluralism might suggest, this vision of politics leaves plenty of room for the middle-level political leadership in which American politics is so rich, and American political scientists have often acknowledged Aristotle as a founding father of pluralist political analysis. It is thus an interesting fact about Aristotle's own account of politics that he skates over the question of leadership. He doubtless took it so much for granted that Athenians knew their

own interests and could press them in the *agora* that the idea that anyone might specialize in “interest articulation” and “interest aggregation,” as political scientists say, was absurd. The problem rather was that people who fancied themselves as tyrants would use their skills as faction leaders to seize absolute power and would then exploit their fellow citizens. Hence Aristotle’s famous wish that laws, not men, should rule.

The idea that when we set up a regime we might build “a machine that would go of itself” was only latent in Aristotle’s *Politics*, but it was latent. It was not a major theme because his main concern was with citizenship. Greeks cared so much whether they were or were not citizens that the question of the qualifications and benefits of citizenship was a pressing one. What citizens got, according to Aristotle, was, famously, the chance to rule and be ruled in turn. The phrasing is significant. They did not get a crack at being the Senate majority leader, or the leader of the people in arms. People would rather rule than be ruled, and justice required a sort of equality. So a just *polis* would have everyone capable of office taking turns to hold it. Although Aristotle stressed the psychic benefits of being a free man who shared in the *polis*’s capacity for self-government, there is no emphasis at all on the pleasures of occupying a *leading* position. Indeed, there is a presumption against any such taste for eminence.

Aristotle’s picture of the *polis* is thus a picture of a system that provides the government of laws; citizens contribute by taking part in a public process of deliberation about what conduces to the public good. That sounds banal, but it gets a good deal more force if we contrast it with the emphasis on *decision making* that permeates modern accounts of political activity. Laws do not make decisions and they do not lead. They shape, provide a framework, open opportunities; they do not rally troops, or summon us to some particular cause. They will doubtless lay down the proce-

dures whereby we assemble an army and charge someone to lead it in battle. We use the laws in doing those things that need leadership, but lawmaking is not itself an exercise in leadership. Indeed, what we call *lawmaking* is almost better thought of as *lawfinding* in Aristotle. No one who writes thus is likely to emphasize the role of the man on horseback, or to have a modern conception of executive initiative.

It is easy to object that Aristotle’s account of politics reflects the prejudices of educated Athenians of two and a half thousand years ago and has no bearing on our situation. There is no quick answer to that objection. Here all I can do is offer a quick sketch of one 20th-century view of political life that paints a similar picture, even though its ancestry is Hegelian rather than Aristotelian, and its author’s allegiances were as quirkily liberal as Aristotle’s were not. English philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who died in 1992, appealed to a small but discriminating American audience. In his elegant and strikingly difficult book *On Human Conduct* (1975), he gave an account of the nature of a modern state that pushes leadership to the margins of inquiry in the same way that Aristotle did. Oakeshott borrowed from medieval legal arguments to distinguish between a *societas* and a *universitas*—words about as unhelpful for a useful distinction as could be imagined. Both *societas* and *universitas* refer to “organizations” or “groups”; but a *societas* is a union that has no exterior or ulterior purpose beyond itself, while a *universitas* is a union constructed for some such purpose.

A state may be either or both, and indeed was sometimes called a *societas cum universitate*. Oakeshott wanted to rescue the idea of the state as *societas* from writers who assume that all associations must have a collective purpose, and that their merits are a matter of how well they fulfill that purpose. In spite of the obscurity of the expression, the distinction is one that most people grasp intuitively. To be an American citizen is a matter of being legally and morally tied to other

American citizens, regardless of what individual and collective purposes one may have. To be an employee of General Motors is a matter of having a particular task to fulfill.

Why does the distinction matter? It implies a view of politics in which leadership is played down. Leadership goes with assembling people to carry out projects, and Oakeshott thought that even such projects as the achievement of "the welfare state" have unnoticed dangers. Politics, in Oakeshott's view, ought to be concerned with preserving the legal and institutional framework that allows particular, noncollective goals to be chosen and pursued by the citizenry. Once we make a goal such as maximizing social welfare central to the legitimacy of the state, it becomes credible that we might achieve that goal by some process of a technical or managerial kind. This erodes the idea that each person has his own life to lead. It also makes each of us vulnerable. Once politics is instrumental, we are in danger of being discarded, either as a threat to the goal, or as simply redundant. A Marxist party that thought it had mastered the key to history is an example of a group that claimed the right to lead society down the path to the socialist utopia because of a technical competence in getting us there, and the Marxist habit of consigning opponents to "the dustbin of history" an example of the danger.

Oakeshott thought that, in such a regime, citizens were no longer citizens but human building materials. He remarked, in a phrase that caused some resentment, that the welfare state is the first step on the road to the concentration camp. That was exaggerated, but not foolish. Anyone who has read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* knows that one of the more chilling aspects of the book is its depiction of what can occur when many humane, sensible, and eminently defensible ideas for the amelioration of the human lot are taken to the extreme. What is disgusting is just that the inhabitants of *Brave New World* have no lives of their own, and are the manipulated objects of other people's arrangements.

Politics in Oakeshott's universe is a con-

tinuous debate about the conditions under which the game can go on, the ship can remain afloat, the argument can continue. There is a role for leadership here, but not for leaders. Leadership is a matter of helping to *elicit* or to *articulate* a view that the hearers already accept, but only implicitly. It sometimes seems that Oakeshottian politics was best practiced in 18th-century England. Parliamentary politics was not devoid of leaders and followers, but they conceived of themselves—or at least Edmund Burke offered an idealized portrait suggesting that they conceived of themselves—as devoted to preserving a constitutional framework. Yet it doesn't do to think these men had no sense of a collective purpose. The greatness of the British Empire moved them to enthusiasm; the promotion of national prosperity was a constant goal, as was the maintenance of a particular moral and religious culture. Nor, in fact, does Oakeshott wish to say that a political community, what he calls a "civil association," is all *societas* and not at all *universitas*. In practice, states will engage in a mix of instrumental and noninstrumental activities, but Oakeshott wanted to pick out the characteristic that he thought Utilitarians, Rationalists, Weberians, and almost anyone who wrote too readily about the "machinery of government" would overlook. In other words, we need leaders, but not as generally as they suppose, and leadership, but not always provided by leaders, and not always in the form of rallying the people behind a particular project.

The point can be made without Oakeshott's allegiances and antipathies. We might content ourselves with saying that one conception of politics emphasizes the importance of keeping a constitutional framework in good repair and ensuring that legislators understand their task as the provision of a framework, not achieving particular outcomes. People who were "good at" politics so defined would be capable of arguing a case and thinking about what made good law; people who were "good at public administration" would be skilled at

devising systems of rationing, queuing, or superintendence, and the distribution of benefits to the needy or deserving. Both might have the qualities of a leader in their particular spheres, that is, might be particularly good at the game, deft at getting people to take the same view as themselves, and so on. But the provision of leadership would not be definitive of either activity; nor would it be quite the same thing in different contexts.

Oakeshott's avowed object of discussion was "the character of a modern European state." An American audience might wonder how this bears upon American concerns—especially on the American concern with presidential leadership. In *Taming the Prince* (1989), Harvey Mansfield, Jr., provides an answer. His discussion of the authority of the modern executive starts from what Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard University, takes to be Aristotle's tactful burial of the topic of executive action. The topic needed to be buried because Aristotle did not wish to dwell on the ugly deeds that leaders must often do. Aristotle throws the burden of government on the whole (qualified) people and suggests, without quite saying, that rulers can be held in check—that princes may be tamed.

Machiavelli is the proper foil to Aristotle. He insisted that princes could not be tamed, and that they needed their untamed power if they were to be effective. The U.S. Constitution then turns out to be an attempt to square the circle—to create a prince and then to tame him—and the current obsession with presidential leadership, an anxiety not to tame him so thoroughly that he cannot act. Mansfield himself does some squaring of the circle. He admires the Constitution, but takes the same pleasure as Machiavelli did in insisting that politics is played for high stakes—we rightly speak of executing both policies and enemies. The rise of the modern executive is thus the rise of a power that is beyond the reach of constitutional checks and yet has to be somehow kept in check. In that sense,

Mansfield argues from both sides of the debate I have set up. On the one hand, he stresses the need for general rules, procedures that tie the hands of anyone with aspirations to leadership, and on the other sees even Roosevelt and Reagan as the heirs of Machiavelli's prince.

Whatever the justice of the charge, Machiavelli is associated with the doctrine that politics is centrally about the acquisition of power, and that there is a technique for its acquisition that can be learned and applied by anyone with the nerve, ruthlessness, energy, and ambition to do so. This focus on technique displaces the concern of previous political philosophers to elaborate the ends of political association, and it is this that is often simplified into the charge that he teaches evil. More important, Machiavelli writes as though the daring, skill, ambition, and ruthlessness of the would-be prince for whom he writes fill the whole of political space. The skeptical note I want to sound—it is the theme of this second part of my essay—is that writing about politics in these terms suggests that the common people, those who are not striving to become the supreme power in the state, are entirely plastic, and will receive whatever impress the prince cares to stamp on them. To overemphasize leaders is to treat public opinion as endlessly manipulable.

The step to Max Weber is a small one. Weber argued that the convictions of a modern society must be given to it, or impressed upon it, by a leader, whose personality would enable him to carry a conviction carried by nobody else. Part of Weber's argument was that moral and cultural values, and the political projects they validate, are not discovered but chosen—imposed rather than found. A feature of contemporary politics is that conservatives talk a good deal about leadership but believe in the existence of objective moral and religious rules that greatly curtail the leader's freedom, while moral and religious skeptics are anxious about what leaders may lead us

IL PRINCIPE DI NICCHOLO MACHIA
VELLO AL MAGNIFICO LOREN
ZO DI PIERO DE MEDICI.

LA VITA DI CASTRUCIO CASTRA
CANI DA LVCCA A ZANOBI BVON
DELMONTI ET A LVIGI ALEMAN
NI DESCRITTA PER IL
MEDESIMO.

IL MODO CHE TENNE IL DVCA VA
LENTINO PER AMMAZAR VITEL
LOZO, OLIVEROTTO DA FER
MO IL S. PAOLO ET IL DV
CA DI GRAVINA ORSI
NI IN SENIGAGLIA,
DESCRITTA PFR
IL MEDESIMO.



Con Gratie, & Priuilegi di . N. S. Clemente
VII. & altri Principi, che intra il termino di . X.
Anni non s' Stampino . ne Stampati s' uendino:
sotto le pene, che in essi s' contengono.
M. D. X X X II.



The title-page of the first edition of *Il Principe* (1532). Machiavelli (inset) cited Cesare Borgia, subject of this 16th-century portrait (artist unknown), as an example of the new "Prince."

into. This may reflect a sound judgment. It is easier to be confident that leaders will do nothing too destructive if you believe in an objective moral universe to which they will feel themselves answerable.

Weber, however, was a skeptic who believed in leadership. Weber's concept of *Führerdemokratie*—"leadership democracy"—emphasized two things that seem to be at odds: the modern phenomenon of the rational, bureaucratic administrative order on the one hand, and, on the other, the elected leader who brings the vigor and ruthlessness of Machiavelli's prince to the task of setting goals, standards, and purposes for that administrative system. What is absent is any suggestion that views and convictions may need to be elicited from and articulated for the public, but not imposed or stamped upon it; the public has desires for comfort and is susceptible to certain sorts of appeal, but this is not a picture of a give-and-take between leader-as-facilitator and people-as-source-of-inspiration. It is a

picture of someone imposing a moral and political commitment where none was. To my eye, this exaggerates a feature of uncommon situations into a defining feature of modern politics.

Let us backtrack briefly. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses the qualities needed by a would-be holder of power in the chaotic conditions of early 16th-century Italy. He generalizes to a wider canvas, but rulers who can rely on tradition, on habits of deference, and on the props of established religion do not interest him in the same way as "new men." The *virtù* of such men is not "virtue," since it embraces such qualities as Hannibal's extreme cruelty and Cesare Borgia's readiness to bring about the ostentatious and savage murder of his lieutenant Remirro de Orco. Politics does not aim at the virtuous life as described by Aristotle. What it aims at is the acquisition and maintenance of power. *The Prince* is advice addressed to a man contemplating a bid for power in a

rough world. It is amoral. Some kinds of violence and cruelty are so disgusting that they subvert the pursuit of what the prince wants—glory, or a great name in the history books. If a prince can obtain power by morally reputable means, so much the better. It is hard to acquire thus, but, if acquired, easier to hold on to.

I have said that Machiavelli treats technique as all-powerful and the people as passive until molded in what the ruler wants them to be. This makes the “prince” the most interesting character in the story and conveys an implausible image of popular vacuity. Yet, it is the well-being of the common people that is ultimately at stake. The self-aggrandizement of the prince is not Machiavelli’s project. A “good” prince will leave a legacy of sound law and stable institutions, and acquires greater glory by building a stable polity than by any other act. Machiavelli also wants one kind of polity more than another, one kind of political result rather than others: He wants Italy to be unified and powerful, he wants the ordinary people to be contented and prosperous, and he wants them to live in popular republics on the Roman model. It remains true that his great “discovery” was that we can discuss the acquisition of power as a technical matter. Although Machiavelli never employs the word “leader” except when he is discussing leaders of armies or leaders of factions, it is this emphasis on the capacity to acquire power that has fed into modern understandings of leadership.

The connection between Machiavelli and Weber then runs as follows: One-man rule cannot provide for the administration of a modern state. The only thing that can is a technically competent bureaucracy that follows clear rules. Weber was interested both in the technical efficiency of bureaucratic administration and in its adherence to predictable and calculable rules of conduct. Getting things done and handling cases on a uniform basis are not always compatible with each other, and his vagueness on which was to give way to the other is a common

complaint against Weber’s work.

The more important thing is something quite simple. Weber thought of a bureaucratic administration as a headless entity, just as he thought of the mass of the population as a blank sheet on which charismatic leaders were to inscribe their plans. A bureaucracy needs a political input; it has to be given a purpose and a direction from somewhere other than within its own body, just as the public needs a sense of direction. *Führerdemokratie* thus answers to two needs at once. Leaders acquire the authority to govern by getting it from the people in an election, and the people find legitimate rulers in charge of the administrators with whom they have to deal in everyday life.

This picture animates the most impressive, if rather depressing, account of democracy offered in the past hundred years. Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1943) is hated by participatory democrats and other radicals. Schumpeter offered what he called a “realistic” theory of democracy that he contrasted with the so-called “classical” theory offered by writers such as Rousseau and James Mill. Democracy was not government by the people, since government by the people was impossible. Nor was it government by the people’s delegates, since it was impossible to secure that sort of control over the people’s delegates and still have them do what was needed. Democracy was the system of government in which elites acquired the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.

How well democratic government worked did not depend on how democratic it was but on the local political culture. This brings us back to leadership. Where Machiavelli’s prince got his power by the exercise of *virtù*, the modern ruler has his crown placed on his head by the people. This presents a danger that Machiavelli’s prince did not face. The people who have the right to place the crown on their ruler’s head may think they have the right to remove it. If democracy is to work, the

people must show a great deal of self-control, and Schumpeter does in fact urge that once a government is voted into office it must be allowed to govern. But Schumpeter did not emphasize in quite the way Weber had done the role of charismatic leaders. To borrow from my opening claim, Schumpeter stresses leadership without romanticizing leaders.

The political system as understood by Schumpeter is animated from the top, not from the bottom. The people do not form a view of their own welfare and search for someone to help them attain it. They may reject the vision on which their rulers have operated, but the vision comes from above, not below. Just as consumers are incompetent to design the goods they consume and must respond to what they are offered, so must voters. As the analogy suggests, Schumpeter saw elections as marketing operations, not as moral and evaluative transformations.

Indeed, Schumpeter ended his realistic account of modern democracy by insisting on the importance of an elite civil service, not by looking for a man on horseback. Schumpeter looked to several constitutional and cultural factors to make sure democracy did not collapse into factionalism or dictatorship. A traditional ruling class was one thing on which he relied. If peace was to be kept, politicians had to be able to lose gracefully and then find plenty of other things to do with their lives. Schumpeter expected to find this grace in defeat only in a ruling class that saw political service as a duty, not as psychic compensation or psychic thrill. In other words, democracy would only work with a large admixture of aristocracy. A society that did not possess a social stratum that took it for granted that it *ought* to provide political leadership would find it itself governed by inferior types who sought power for personal gratification or compensation.

Schumpeter did not put the whole burden of successful democracy on the characterological dimension. Two other things do a great deal of work. The first comes in response to a standard truth of liberal democratic theory and practice: the fact that democratic



Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company.

politics are peculiarly vulnerable to ideological and religious passions. (Schumpeter was an Austrian in exile in the United States and wrote when Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini were at the height of their power.) Having a ruling class of the sort Schumpeter thought the British had possessed in the 19th century would do no good if it were swept away by an inflamed mob. The inflamed mob must be stopped from forming. The obvious means was to take inflammatory matters out of politics. It was irrelevant whether this was done by a constitution as in the United States or by the conventions that preserved the same sense of what was and was not politically discussable in Britain. Fundamentally, what mattered was the thought that it was no part of the political process to sustain religious orthodoxy or racial purity or some particular revolutionary ideology. This was yet another element in the idea of popular reticence and leadership initiative. The public was not to swamp leaders with insatiable and ideologically driven demands, and leaders were not to chase fantasies.

The other essential requirement that

Schumpeter set down was the existence of an impartial career civil service ready to serve any government with equal skill and public spirit. These civil servants were not paper pushers and order takers, but people who could formulate policy and who would be able to guide, check, and otherwise assist the political leaders of the state. They were a more autonomous source of policy than Weber seems to have thought they could be. Once again, Schumpeter appears to have had in mind the British civil service as it was popularly supposed to be at the end of the 19th century.

At the risk of sounding like Lord Bryce, who preached this doctrine at Johns Hopkins University a hundred years ago, and even convinced Woodrow Wilson for a time, I should say that I think Schumpeter was right, not so much about the British civil service as about the problem to be tackled. The demand for leadership cannot—save perhaps in time of war—be satisfied by anything done by a president, but it can be *bypassed* by spreading the burden over a differently constituted cabinet and an enlarged senior civil service.

This is not a novel view—something like it was argued by Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* in 1922—and it has never made any impact on American opinion. One powerful objection is that the American people distrust elites and do not like government by “experts.” Another is that the people who would have to fill those posts do not exist. My sense is that it is the first objection that matters. So far as the second is concerned, we don’t so much lack the persons who could do the job as an understanding of what the job is and, therefore, of the institutional arrangements that would attract the appropriate people. Only in the State Department have career public servants generally enjoyed the prestige and authority needed for them to perform the tasks Schumpeter had in mind.

It is the idea that the civil service ought to generate policy in a steady and continuous, rather than a crisis-oriented, fashion that is hard to get across. Although this view first reached the English-speaking world in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in the mid-19th century, I do not suggest for a moment that the United States ought to adopt most features of the British civil service and its relationship to Parliament; the attractive combination is the (rather notional) American attachment to fierce congressional scrutiny by well-informed committees together with a cadre of public servants much like the British administrative class. Each side of the Atlantic has one half of what’s needed.

The more serious the need for independent sources of policy, for disciplined administration, and a selfless attention to the needs of the public, the more persuasive the idea of leadership without leaders. When John Stuart Mill defended the about-to-be-abolished East India Company in 1858 before a committee of the Parliament, he argued that under the rule of disinterested civil servants, both British and native Indian, India had made a degree of progress that could not have been achieved by any other means. It was precisely because India had not been the object of political competition between the leaders of the British parliamentary parties that progress had been possible.

It would perhaps be tasteless to wonder whether the British themselves might have done better had they been governed by the East India Company; it is certainly against the whole spirit of Mill’s argument, which was that it was essential that the East India Company should answer to an elected parliament *in some fashion*. We thus arrive at one defensible recipe for leadership without leaders, and without the obsession with “leadership qualities” that distorts current discussion. Indeed, my guess is that if Plato were writing today, he would be defending this answerable mandarin class, and not his implausibly omniscient philosopher-kings.