

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Against Leadership

“Democracy and the Problem of Statesmanship” by Richard S. Ruderman, in *The Review of Politics* (Fall 1997), Box B, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556.

Liberal statesmanship, as practiced by democratic leaders from Pericles to Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, is out of favor these postmodernist days. It smacks too much of “elitism” and being “judgmental.” Contemporary democratic theorists such as Benjamin R. Barber want political leaders instead to act as “facilitators,” drawing citizens out, helping them to discover what *they* want to do, and letting *them* rule. Ruderman, a political scientist at the University of North Texas, objects.

Barber, a political scientist at Rutgers University and author of *The Conquest of Politics* (1988), argues that even the best statesmanship undermines democracy. By accepting the need for leaders, democratic citizens reduce themselves to mere followers. Thanks in part to communications technology, he contends, it is now possible to do what is safer, more fulfilling, and more just: let all citizens exercise political judgment. Leadership, Barber claims, is now “a matter of effective citizenship.” Robert Dahl, a prominent Yale University political scientist and author of *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989), adds that a democracy can develop only if all members of society “perceive themselves as about equally qualified to govern.” It should not be assumed that “only some people are competent to rule.”

Democratic citizens “are often sounder judges, even of moral dilemmas, than all but the greatest statesmen,” Ruderman acknowledges. Nevertheless, “leading or even on occasion opposing the people is a defensible and even essential element of

democratic politics.” Indeed, the chief attribute of a statesman may be “his ability to foresee problems before they are apparent to others.”

Barber’s “deepest objection to statesmanship,” writes Ruderman, is that it may impede the “often irresponsible desire to act—and act now—in imposing a ‘simple’ or ‘obvious’ solution to the problem of injustice.” To Barber and other critics, Ruderman says, the statesman appears as Lincoln did to Frederick Douglass, when viewing him from a strictly abolitionist perspective: “tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent.” But when Lincoln was measured “by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult,” Douglass reflected in 1876, “he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.” It was not Lincoln’s moral judgment that slavery was wrong that set him apart, Ruderman says. “It was his additional capacity for political judgment—namely, what to *do* about this tolerably clear moral judgment—that truly elevated him above his fellow citizens.”

The liberal statesman does not wish to do away with vigorous debate, Ruderman says, but when the talk is finished, “there may still be a need (at least in all the hard cases) for someone . . . to decide what must be done—perhaps by compromising or picking and choosing, or even ‘completing’ the partial and partisan arguments that he has heard.” As democratic theorists until recently well understood, there is nothing inherently undemocratic about that kind of political leadership.

An Emerging Democratic Majority?

“An Emerging Democratic Majority” by Paul Starr, in *The American Prospect* (Nov.–Dec. 1997), P.O. Box 383080, Cambridge, Mass. 02238; “Man Trouble” by Paul Starobin, in *National Journal* (Dec. 6, 1997), 1501 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

The Emerging Republican Majority was the title of Kevin Phillips’s famous and prescient 1969 book. Starr, co-editor of the liberal *American Prospect*, would like to think it’s now the Democrats’ turn to have

an emerging majority. Though explicitly refraining from making that prediction, he argues that the Democrats’ “long-term prospects may not be as dire as they look.”

The two parties are now roughly equal