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Introduction to Leadership and the History of Political Thought: A Symposium

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Martin Luther King Jr., in his article "Black Power Defined" (1967), writes of black Americans' urgent need to emphasize and acquire genuine leadership. To accomplish the goals of the civil rights movement, black Americans needed more than marches. They needed to win elections, participate in unions, and compete in a free, rather than a rigged, economy. To do this, however, King observed, black Americans had to overcome deep internal problems. "Negroes are capable," he writes, "of becoming competitive, carping and, in an expression of self-hate, suspicious and intolerant of each other. A glaring weakness in Negro life is lack of sufficient mutual confidence and trust."[1] This suspicion and distrust, King warned, often translated into lack of popular support for emerging black leaders. The proper response for MLK, however, was not to abandon the pursuit of power and responsibility but to recognize the critical need for cultivating *better* black leaders. King writes,

> And so we shall have to create leaders who embody principles we can applaud with an enthusiasm that enables us to rally support for them based on confidence and trust. We will have to demand high standards and give consistent, loyal support to those who merit it. We will have to be a reliable constituency for those who prove themselves to be committed political warriors in our behalf. When our movement has partisan political personalities whose unity

> with their people is unshakable and whose independence is genuine, they will be treated in white political councils with the respect those who embody such power deserve.[2]

Far from a call to radical black nationalism or egalitarianism, King's plea is for the black community and its supporters to raise up leaders of the highest moral character and courage *and* then to place in them the trust and loyalty that effective political representation requires. The political capital of black leaders, in other words, will increase as long as they are virtuous and as long as the black community celebrates and rewards that virtue.

In his time, King exemplified such a leader, but he was all too aware of his mortality and limitations. Leadership in his time and afterward would be essential for any enduring and substantive change to take place. That leadership, however, had to reflect the best of what the Western tradition had to offer—a tradition that belonged as much to black Americans as to white Americans.

The need for virtuous and effective political leadership transcends the needs of social movements. It is central to a justly ordered democracy. Nearly a century ago, Harvard literary scholar Irving Babbitt worried that Progressive enthusiasm for unrestrained egalitarian democracy would lead to imperialism for want of ethical inhibition and humility. In *Democracy and Leadership* (1924), he writes, "If democracy means simply the attempt to eliminate the qualitative and selective principle in favor of some general will, based in turn on a theory of natural rights, it may prove to be only a form of the vertigo of the abyss[;] . . . it will result practically, not in equality, but in a sort of inverted aristocracy."[3] Proper political leadership, if recognized, can resist self-destructive tendencies that elevate the radical and unrestrained by working in favor of that which is ethically and intellectually elevated. Proper leadership cultivates a moral imagination that recognizes and celebrates the good, the true, and the beautiful both generally and in particulars. Such imagination is then reinforced by an inner check against baser inclinations that marks, as Babbitt claims, "[t]he ideal of the American," summarized as "external freedom and

inner control; the individual looks after his conduct and the government looks after his liberty."[4] Good democratic leadership, MLK and Babbitt agree, establishes and exemplifies the moral and intellectual standards necessary for an ordered liberty. It restores qualitative distinctions as primary over the merely quantitative preoccupations of plebiscitary democracy. Numerical majorities must not replace genuine leadership.[5]

Ultimately, Babbitt argues, "democracy will in the long run have to be judged, by the quality of its leadership."[6] Leaders, however, are made, not born. Women and men of exemplary intelligence and ethical character emerge out of years of experience and education, typically accompanied by great pain and failure. A democracy that can neither create, nor recognize, nor reward such people is a democracy planning its funeral. The need for leadership is permanent, but the elevation of the right *kind* of leaders is not inevitable.

The good leader, though, is neither conspicuous nor the product of any formula. Nevertheless, many are tempted simply to follow the loudest or most attractive voices, or to follow someone less elevated—someone the average person might "have a beer with." Perhaps the better leaders are simply those with the most followers. These formulas may seem trite, but they nevertheless reflect the pervasive and problematic tendencies of modern democracy. How, then, might the citizen of a democracy recognize or become the right kind of leader?

The historian of political thought is uniquely positioned to address this challenge by drawing attention to the study of individuals who exemplify great leadership and great thinking *about* leadership. Such scholars necessarily stand at the intersection of history, philosophy, politics, and literature where over two millennia of wisdom—with all its warnings, encouragement, successes, and failure—is disclosed in an invaluable inheritance. That inheritance provides the single greatest resource for cultivating the leadership desperately needed in our moment of global crises. This symposium beautifully demonstrates how the history of political thought offers a reservoir of insight into the nature and practice of political leadership.

Brent Edwin Cusher's contribution revisits the speeches of Pericles to emphasize the legendary Athenian's ability as a storyteller. Pericles' success, though fleeting, profoundly shaped Athenians' self-understanding, offering a kind of "political culture" to unite the people and to become an ancient naval superpower. While competing narratives and plague would undermine the endurance of the reforms Pericles instituted, his exemplary rhetoric and persuasiveness immortalized him and his example.

Next, Michael Promisel turns our attention to Aristotle, whose influence seems to quietly underlie the other articles. This is especially true regarding the great philosopher's emphasis on prudence (*phronesis*)—a notoriously difficult term to pin down. But Promisel's nuanced account helps show how moral character distinguishes the prudence of an effective political leader from the leader who is merely clever or lucky.

Kevin M. Cherry explores Cicero's *De Republica* to draw attention to the great Roman statesman's preference (through the "voice" of Scipio) for a mixed regime where the aristocratic element dominates. Modern readers might find Cicero's observations to be elitist, but this overlooks his elevation of the aristocratic element's limited, but essential, "deliberative ability or *consilium*." There is hope that an "aristocracy based on merit" might mitigate the vices of Roman politics and resist the dangers of faction. For Cicero, virtuous leaders contribute to, and are shaped by, a careful deliberation, which navigates the inevitable tension between freedom and restraint among rulers and the ruled.

Leaping 1,700 years later, Zachary K. German offers an original reading of Montesquieu to consider how his neglected use of the concept of spirit contributes to theories of statesmanship. Like Pericles, in a sense, Montesquieu views a good leader as one attuned to this spirit, someone who prudently leads a people with laws best suited for their flourishing. Such thinking would be exemplified among some of Montesquieu's most enthusiastic readers: the American framers.

Then, Christie Maloyed writes of Benjamin Franklin, showing how much had changed, and how much had not changed,

from the time of Aristotle. On the one hand, Maloyed observes, Franklin recognized the need for shrewdness and even a dose of hypocrisy as a means to the common good. Franklin's example, though, does not elevate the dishonest, the narcissistic, or the excessively forthright. Instead, Franklin recognized the need for the statesman to choose prudently a balance between deception and candor to achieve the kind of deliberation necessary for democratic politics.

Finally, Matthew Van Hook brings the conversation to the present day, examining the curious way contemporary Americans see military leaders as exemplifying the prudence, deliberation, spirit, and, especially, the character of great leaders. Specifically, Van Hook notes Americans' preference for a somewhat mythological "ideal military moderate." Looking at Niccolò Machiavelli, as well as George Washington, George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, Zachary Taylor, and James Mattis, Van Hook analyzes the source of this myth along with its promises and pitfalls for aspiring leaders.

These papers exemplify the value of studying the history of political thought, and they all emphasize to some degree the critical need for leaders of great moral character, prudence, and creativity. This need, along with the effort to recognize and cultivate it, highlights the role of models, especially in the stories we tell, watch, and read. In myth, in history, and in the arts we begin to recognize and intuit the qualities that distinguish leaders worth emulating and following. It pays considerable dividends to know, for example, the stories of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, of Cato, Winston Churchill, Henry V, and Pericles, and of MLK. We also need the stories of Aragorn, Gandalf, Captain America, and Captain Kirk, of Elwin Ransom and Horatio Hornblower, of King Arthur and Merlin, and of Leia and Mulan. These imperfect and extraordinary individuals provide edifying models for even the most seasoned leader.

That the foregoing list identifies great leaders may not be self-evident. But as the authors in this symposium illustrate, the history of political thought provides fruitful ground from which to see and imitate the kinds of leaders that will always be needed.

Notes

1. Martin Luther King Jr., "Black Power Defined," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 307.
2. Ibid., 309.
3. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (1924; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Books,1979), 271.
4. Ibid., 278.
5. Ibid., 38.
6. Ibid., 307.