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[Introduction to] The Values of Presidential Leadership

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The Values of Presidential Leadership

Edited by
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Introduction

TERRY L. PRICE AND J. THOMAS WREN

Leadership is an elusive concept. It is sometimes used in an institutional sense—for example, “House leadership”—but more often it is used in a personal sense to describe the activities of an individual in some designated position of power—for example, “the leadership of Senator Proxmire.” Yet this does not fully capture what leadership really is: a mutual influence process among leaders and followers. In this process, each participant harbors his or her own complex motives and constructions of reality, and each participant also operates as part of a collective. The result is a complicated and ever-shifting environment in which people work in concert, and sometimes against each other, in an effort to achieve desired goals.

To understand the influence process that facilitates the accomplishment of group, organizational, or societal objectives, our field of view must therefore be wider than when our focus is only on individual actors. Accordingly, leadership studies expands the aperture of its lens by drawing upon the wisdom of multiple disciplines of the humanities and social sciences in order to gain adequate insights into what is perhaps the most important of all human activities. Few leadership contexts deserve this expanded analysis more than the presidency.

Presidential Leadership

When students first approach the study of presidential leadership, they often expect that they will read and think about great presidents such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. After all, what is the subject of leadership, students rightly

ask, if not individual leaders? Moreover, what individual leaders are more worthy of study than American presidents? The lives of these leaders reflect the fact that particular individuals can change the direction of society and, indeed, the world. It is to these individuals, for instance, that we trace political independence, emancipation, and the defeat of Nazism. Students of leadership could thus do much worse than to set out on their studies with the goal of understanding American presidents and patterning their own leadership efforts after what they have learned.

The assumption that individual leaders are the primary focus of leadership studies, however, is a reflection of what leadership scholars refer to as the "Great Man View of Leadership," the view that we can understand leadership by analyzing the traits that distinguish leaders from the rest of us. Admittedly, the characteristics of individual leaders are part of the story, perhaps a critical part. But personal characteristics are hardly the whole story. Presidential leadership, then, cannot be just about presidents. Indeed, we might go so far as to say it is characterized first and foremost by the relationship between presidents and other social actors and forces.

Fortunately, adopting a critical attitude toward the commonplace preoccupation with individual leaders does not require us to give up our fascination with the American presidents. However, it does require that we put these individual leaders not only in a political context but also in a social and moral context. So understood, the *presidency*—as opposed to the *president*—turns out to be the perfect subject for reading and thinking about the defining elements of the phenomenon of leadership. This broader context shows that we cannot understand the exercise of leadership by looking only at a president's characteristics. For one thing, presidents operate in a well-defined institutional structure. In this sense, they are political actors. But not even the political scientist's institutional expertise is sufficient to tackle all the leadership questions raised by the presidency. We also have to take advantage of resources from the disciplines of history, philosophy, communication, psychology, and law. Only in this way can the student of leadership do justice to the social and moral nature of the phenomenon.

The Values of Presidential Leadership

This collection of scholarly essays on presidential leadership is titled *The Values of Presidential Leadership*. No single volume dedicated to presidential leadership can adequately address the myriad factors that come to

bear on leadership in this context. The editors chose to focus on what is surely among the most important aspects of any leadership relation: the role of values. As previously noted, leadership is a collective activity. Yet, more specifically, it is an activity that brings people together in the pursuit of what they find valuable. This collective pursuit of values is what makes leadership a social and moral phenomenon, not simply an individual phenomenon. In fact, recognition of the connection between leadership and values is arguably a prerequisite for the study of leadership.¹

First, all leaders work from a set of background beliefs about human nature and the good society or organization. Are people inherently good or evil? Are humans free—the authors of their own destinies, so to speak? Is it moral to put the good of one's group ahead of the good of outsiders? Background beliefs of these kinds influence the ways leaders pursue their ends and, equally important, determine what ends they find valuable enough to pursue in the first place. In this volume, the focus of our attention is on the values that underpin presidential leadership: how those values are determined or constructed, how they are packaged and conveyed, and how they are interpreted and acted upon.

As with leadership more generally, we can rarely explain these values by a simple appeal to the leader himself. A leader's background beliefs lend themselves to descriptive analysis as historical and, in some cases, religious artifacts. In other words, the study of leadership generally requires that we understand the circumstances in which leaders act. Initially at least, we can attribute a leader's behavior to her beliefs and values. But the explanatory story does not end there. Why do leaders hold particular background beliefs and adhere to particular values? A more comprehensive explanation will attend to the historical circumstances in which leaders find themselves. For example, how do leaders organize their worldview around, or in response to, dominant religious traditions?

A normative analysis of a leader's values, which asks important questions about the ultimate worth of what a leader finds valuable, complements the descriptive analysis. Once we know what a leader believes and values, we can begin to address the appropriateness of his beliefs and values. In essence, are his beliefs correct and does the leader adhere to the right set of values? For the most part, these are philosophical questions. The student of leadership cannot determine their answers by any straightforward appeal to empirical evidence. Empirical evidence tells us the way the world is, not the way it should be. The philosopher thus attempts to answer normative questions about leadership by detailing the ways in which a leader's values align, or fail to align, with what we would accept as the results of rational argumentation from our most

secure value commitments, what John Rawls calls “the method of reflective equilibrium.”²

Second, presidential leadership is similar to other forms of leadership in that it must communicate values to followers. Leadership is about more than just getting committed supporters to move in the direction the leader believes to be valuable. It is also about getting followers to act in ways that they might not otherwise act. In fact, a common distinction in leadership studies suggests that the notion of change distinguishes leadership from management.³ Leadership aims at an ideal, whereas management is content with maintenance of the status quo. In any case, if leadership is to bring about change, leaders must communicate the values they aim to achieve. Some are better at this task than others. Ronald Reagan, for example, was known as the “Great Communicator,” which may explain the success with which he advanced the cause of conservative values during his administration and afterward.

A third characteristic that the presidency shares with the phenomenon of leadership more generally is that its pursuit of these values is to some extent or other a collective enterprise. As much as we would like to think it is not true, presidents do not “go it alone” but, rather, rely heavily on advisors and other individuals who are committed—perhaps in varying degrees—to their values. How much consensus should there be around the president’s values? Too much criticism of a president’s values hardly seems conducive to effective presidential leadership. We might wonder how an administration can lead without agreement on the values that would determine its direction.

But too little criticism can also be risky, albeit for different reasons. Presidents, no less than other leaders, can be mistaken even though they are “certain” they are correct. Research findings in psychology suggest, for example, that when people say they are 75 percent certain, they are right roughly 60 percent of the time.⁴ When leaders are overly confident in their beliefs, they may need honest feedback from advisors, not loyal agreement. But psychologists give us reason to doubt that it will be easy to correct a leader’s mistaken beliefs. Because of phenomena such as *belief perseverance*, leaders are likely to be stubborn cognitive agents. In fact, studies of this phenomenon show that people are inclined to become more confident in their beliefs, not less, after hearing both sides of the case!⁵ It does not help that groups themselves can be subject to a parallel deficiency. Psychologist Irving Janis refers to an assumption of consensus within the group as “groupthink.”⁶ Still, leaders must find a strategy to manage their cognitive weaknesses, and advisors would seem to be a necessary part of any successful strategy.

Fourth, leadership is subject to interpretation. Nowhere is this clearer than in attempts to articulate and assess the values of leaders. For example, as students of leadership, we do not have direct access to the values to which presidents aspire. At most, what we have are their words, behaviors, and policies. To assess a particular president's values, we must draw an inference about a president's beliefs and attitudes from what he said or did. This interpretative exercise is also constrained by normal psychological tendencies. Psychologists point to the *representativeness heuristic* to explain how people too quickly infer that the values behind an action must be similar to the consequences of an action.⁷ In other words, people mistakenly think that an actor's motives for his behavior must have been bad just because the consequences of the behavior were bad. So, bad consequences for a president can lead us to think that the president had bad values!

In historical cases, interpretation is even more complicated. We may not even know what happened, which means that interpretation is also quite constrained by historical context. These ambiguities of history make it all the easier for us to put a president's values in line with our own political agendas. Everyone wants the hero on their side, and when the facts of the matter are camouflaged by the past, the hero seems significantly more willing to switch to what we take to be the right side.

Fifth, and finally, leadership is an instrument to goal achievement. Presidents, like other leaders, are expected to achieve their valued ends. But achieving these ends can—and often does—conflict with other rules and requirements that constrain the behavior of actors, including leaders. In fact, organizational theorists such as E. P. Hollander have argued that the process of leader emergence demands that leaders resolve these conflicts by deviating from the rules.⁸ According to Hollander, potential leaders show early conformity and competence, but if they are to emerge as leaders, they must later deviate from the rules to serve the ends of the group. Indeed, group members expect this kind of behavior from leaders, and leaders lose their status within the group if they fail to engage in it.

Some of the rules and requirements leaders face are legal in nature. Given the constitutional status of the presidency, questions quickly arise about what laws actually apply to leaders. Other rules and requirements are moral in nature. Even here, we can ask whether presidents are above "the law." For example, should presidents abide by standard moral prohibitions on deception and aggression when so doing would jeopardize the values to which they aspire? Or, as political scientist Michael Walzer puts it, must these leaders be willing to have "dirty hands?"⁹ Clearly, according to this argument, we do not want unrestrained Machiavellianism. But we might

also wonder whether we want a president who is so principled that he cannot advance our values.

In summary, presidential leadership provides a context for exploring the senses in which leadership must be understood as a value-laden activity, a collective enterprise, a communicative exercise, an interpreted set of behaviors, and an instrumental process. The student of leadership can thus use this fascinating context to understand a much broader phenomenon that is central to social and moral life.

The Plan of the Book

The first section of the volume, entitled "God and Country," focuses on presidents' background beliefs and values. Political scientist Michael Nelson considers the development of Abraham Lincoln's religious beliefs and the influence of these beliefs on his presidency. He does so against the backdrop of contemporary controversies over the appropriate role faith plays in a president's public life. How does an understanding of Lincoln's religious beliefs guide us in this debate? Nelson concludes his chapter, "Lincoln, Religion, and Presidential Leadership," with the claim that presidents who seek to make their faith public have much to learn from Lincoln's awareness of his own fallibility, his willingness to subject his religious views to the demands of justice, and the sense of humility Lincoln attached to the presidency. The second selection of this section, A. John Simmons's "Patriotic Leadership," also has important—some might say *radical*—implications for leaders in their appeals to foundational values. Initially at least, it would seem that there is no value with which presidents should align more closely than patriotism. Yet Simmons claims that presidents would do well—on moral grounds at least—to temper significantly their appeals to patriotism. Patriotism, his philosophical argument goes, is at odds with the impartial demands of morality, our "American foundational political documents," and "much of our contemporary political rhetoric."

Martin Medhurst, whose contribution leads the section "Communicating Values," suggests that "a president must start from a set of core beliefs and values—a foundational philosophy . . . for rhetorical effectiveness flows first and foremost from ideas and attitudes—ideas about where the president wants to lead and attitudes about how to convince others to follow him in those pursuits." Section II thus moves us from a discussion of presidential values to consideration of how these values are put into action. Medhurst's "Rhetorical Leadership and the Presidency: A Situational

Taxonomy” develops a systematic classification of the constraints, abilities, resources, and needs that factor into any president’s rhetorical situation. Among a president’s rhetorical resources, Medhurst counts not only speech but also power of appointment and executive order. In the second selection of this section, “Changing Their Minds? The Limits of Presidential Persuasion,” George Edwards gives us reason to rethink one important aspect of the president’s role as communicator. Edwards uses the case of George W. Bush to show that drawing on the bully pulpit is not an effective way to garner public support for a president’s values.

In Section III, which is entitled “Collective Leadership,” the volume turns to the relationship between a president’s values and the values of his team of advisors. Both chapters in this section defend the importance of a strong advisory system, as against what one of the authors calls “the personal presidency.” In “The Tale of Two Bushes: Standing Alone versus Standing Together,” James MacGregor Burns uses the two Bush presidencies to argue for a form of collective leadership that controls divisiveness within an administration or party, thus allowing government to be “effective and responsible.” Whereas George H. W. Bush lacked a unifying vision, his son George W. Bush correctly put Dick Cheney at the helm of “the de facto leadership collective of hard-right, experienced power wielders. . . . [who] possessed—and were possessed by—a potent conservative ideology.” But Burns notes the tensions between the collective leadership of George W. Bush’s administration and the ethical constraints on leadership in wartime. In “Presidential Leadership and Advice about Going to War,” James Pfiffner takes up this theme and uses cases from the Eisenhower, Johnson, and Kennedy administrations to resolve these tensions. According to Pfiffner, collective leadership must be tempered by “multiple advocacy” and dissent, which are critical components of successful presidential decisions about going to war.

The volume concludes with the consideration of “Presidential Wrongdoing,” the topic of Section IV. This section focuses on conflicts over the interpretation of values and, in some cases, conflicts between presidential values and morality itself. In “Grant ‘Blinked’: Appraising Presidential Leadership,” George Goethals and Matthew Kugler address the shifting historical appraisals of presidents, with a particular emphasis on Ulysses S. Grant. Goethals and Kugler explore the psychological processes that underlie causal attributions and rankings of “presidential greatness.” A better understanding of these processes, Goethals and Kugler argue, has significant implications for our evaluations of past presidents. For one thing, it forces us to rethink the universally negative

appraisal of President Grant. Goethals and Kugler thus challenge historians to “justify their interpretations . . . and . . . move toward more thoughtful individuating interpretations of the evidence and away from simpler schema-driven accounts.” Frederick Schauer continues the discussion of presidential wrongdoing with his chapter “Should Presidents Obey the Law? (And What Is ‘The Law,’ Anyway?).” Schauer asks whether American presidents are justified in insisting on “the right to their own constitutional interpretations, the Supreme Court’s views notwithstanding.” Despite whatever good reasons presidents might have to adopt this perspective, Schauer concludes that it would be wrong from our perspective—“the perspective of constitutional governance”—to cede interpretative authority to the president. Philosopher Judith Lichtenberg’s chapter, “Presidential Dirty Hands,” moves the discussion to moral, not legal, wrongdoing. Lichtenberg suggests that political leadership necessarily brings moral costs with it. These costs are unacceptable when—as in the case of Richard Nixon—they are the result of vanity and self-aggrandizement. But she hints that we should be willing to accept the moral costs of leadership when a president is committed to “the cause,” shows concern for the interests and well-being of others, and exercises good judgment. Here Lichtenberg has in mind the “wise person who, without a rule or measure, can weigh conflicting or seemingly incommensurable factors and come to a reasonable conclusion about practical matters.”

Taken together, these chapters suggest the richness of insight that can be derived by viewing a topic such as presidential leadership through the lens of multiple disciplines. The scholars in this volume engage issues that are central to an understanding of the values of presidential leadership, and fresh perspectives result when, for example, a political scientist and a philosopher, or a psychologist and a historian, address similar themes. What these scholars have to say about presidential leadership ultimately gives us a better understanding of the broader phenomenon of leadership.

Notes

1. See James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978).
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 20.
3. See John P. Kotter, “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail,” in *Harvard Business Review on Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1998), pp. 1–20.
4. David M. Messick and Max H. Bazerman, “Ethical Leadership and the Psychology of Decision Making,” *Sloan Management Review* 37, 2 (Winter 1996): 19.

5. See Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), chapter 8.
6. Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982).
7. See Nisbett and Ross, *Human Inference*, p. 241.
8. E. P. Hollander, *Leaders, Groups, and Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
9. Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2, 2 (Winter 1973): 160–180.