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CHAPTER 8
LEADERSHIP AND THE *VOX POPULI*
J. Thomas Wren

James MacGregor Burns's *Leadership* is one of those marvelous books with the power to comfort and afflict simultaneously. It has had precisely that impact upon me as I have labored in the vineyards of the study of leadership: comforting me with its substance, analytical power, and moral compass; afflicting me with the central leadership issues it poses so well, yet leaves others tantalizingly unresolved. Much of my research in the field of leadership seeks to pursue the implications of these core issues: the role of values in leadership; the elusive concept and function of the common good; and, perhaps most important, how leadership can be conceived and implemented in a regime of popular sovereignty in such a manner that it responds to popular needs while avoiding popular passion. As I acknowledge my connections to Burns's work and make clear my departures from it, I trust I will also show new possibilities for future research, yielding an enhanced understanding of the place and role of leadership in our political life and of the place of historical studies in understanding leadership.

> My first brush with Burns's book was also my first encounter with leadership as a distinct field of study. In the spring of 1992, I had accepted an offer to help initiate the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, the first of its kind. While the possibilities inherent in such a venture were the obvious attraction to taking the position, as a historian deeply rooted in the liberal arts and humanistic traditions, I had substantial reservations about the field I was about to enter. Would the scholarship in this new field prove substantive? What about my concern over the moral and ethical implications of leadership? Fortunately, my new dean suggested that the first book I should consult as I entered the field was *Leadership*.

The Value of History in Leadership Studies

As I began teaching leadership studies, the substance of the *Leadership* text quickly allayed my concerns about shallow or superficial treatments, and the centrality of morality in Burns's depiction of leadership reassured me that its study need not be a managerial waste-

land. I also found areas for affliction within the pages of *Leadership*. Burns's statement that "the key to understanding leadership lies in recent findings and concepts in psychology" (Burns 1978:49) troubled me. Perhaps not so much because I disputed the truth of the comment, but because it then began to dawn upon me the magnitude of the task I had set before myself in attempting to understand leadership. Much more troubling was his use of "psychobiography." To be fair, Burns acknowledged the weaknesses in an approach where there is such a "paucity of data" and in which "such portraits. . .tend to be speculative and generalized" (Burns 1978:51). Nevertheless, he relied rather heavily upon such studies for many of the early points he made in the book. As a more traditional historian, I was uneasy with any conclusions based upon psychobiography.

His sophisticated and substantive design integrated the discipline of history into his analysis of leadership, however, and quickly assured me about his use of it. He proposed to "place. . .concepts of political leadership centrally into a theory of historical causation" (Burns 1978:4). Going even further, Burns articulated his "hope to build the foundations of a more general theory of the role of leadership in the processes of historical causation" (Burns 1978:59). This focus upon "historical causation" strikes to the heart of what the discipline of history can bring to the study of leadership. While the insights of psychology and many other disciplines are no doubt central to our understanding of the behavioral elements of the leadership process, the historical perspective offers unique insights into the context and continuities or variations of leadership. Because the process of leadership by necessity is deeply enmeshed in broader currents of intellectual, economic, social, and political change, any attempt to devise a universal theory of the process must incorporate such factors.

The book accomplished, with unprecedented flair and substance, the identification of the essential components of such a theory: power, conflict, values, psychological processes, social interactions, collective purpose, and many others. What is more, Burns does this by drawing deeply from the well of history. He taps the lives of such great men as Wilson, Gandhi, Lenin, Hitler, and Mao in somewhat suspect psychobiographies. However, he also traces brilliantly four centuries of Western history, grappling with the issues of liberty and power, and draws upon a series of historical scenarios to illustrate his typology of leadership.

Leadership, then, does an admirable job in integrating historical narrative into the key conceptual components of the process. It is less successful in explicitly formulating propositions of historical causation, although this may be because Burns never turns his hand to actual theory building in this text. Nonetheless, *Leadership* stands as a monument to others, including myself, who follow the path Burns blazed in uniting historical analysis and the study of leadership.

The History of Values in *Leadership*

It remains to consider how well Burns realized his ambitious use of historical perspective. Attention to a key era in American history—the period of the founding of the American Republic—teases out both the substance and the sub-

tleties of the role of values in leadership. Burns identifies key political end-values as liberty and equality (Burns 1978:43, 46, 429-30). He takes care to delineate between conceptions of "negative" liberty, which "defend[s]. . .private liberty against [governmental power]," and "positive" liberty, which involves "the capacity of the people collectively to expand their liberties through the use of governmental power" (Burns 1978:157). In Burns's historical analysis, the Founding Fathers concerned themselves chiefly with the concerns of negative liberty. It was not until the twentieth century that Americans confronted the ultimate leadership challenge of positive liberty: how to tap "the potential resources of the state in education, housing, health, and employment for developing and maximizing real opportunity for the common man." This, in turn, would lead to a difficult grappling with various formulations of the other key end-value, equality (Burns 1978:142, 163).

Popular sovereignty, the actual implementation of rule by the people, has interested me, and its historical implications for leadership initially drew me to the field of leadership studies. I sought to identify the values that generated the leadership challenges of the early Republic; analyze their origins in the social, political, economic, and intellectual context of the time; and explore the dynamics of the conflicts among these values.

I found two sets of conflicting values that constantly played off each other in often complex ways. The first set was equality and order. Emerging claims to equality posed a distinct threat to the deference that had been the glue holding the traditional authority system together. As a result, significant leadership issues emerged, as traditional elites struggled to maintain influence while "new men" sought entry into the system of influence. Likewise, a second set of conflicting values shaped possible solutions to this leadership challenge. These involved the desired nature of shared interrelationships, i.e., individual or communal. Specifically, implied individualism in Jefferson's rhetoric was at odds with a long and deep tradition of communalism and civic duty drawn from the Republic's founders' classical heritage. Many of the leadership challenges of at least the first fifty years of the Republic derive from such tensions between core values (Wren 1998).

These key values—equality, order, individual gain, and common goal—differ from those posited by Burns. He made simple dichotomous distinctions between equality and "negative" and "positive" liberties to achieve it. These differences stem from the differing focuses of our analyses. My interest has consistently been in the implementation of a regime of popular sovereignty after the Revolution and not the negative liberty that so well describes the Revolutionary era.

Leadership and Popular Sovereignty

While Burns believes, for the most part, that American political values have evolved out of pragmatic experience rather than conscious reflection, he perceives a key role for intellectuals in this process. For Burns, "intellectual leadership" articulates the "conscious purpose drawn from values." Indeed, Burns con-

tinues, "The ultimate test of political leadership by intellectuals is the capacity to conceive values or purpose in such a way that ends and means are linked analytically and creatively and that the implications of certain values for political action and government organization are clarified. The test is one of transforming power" (Burns 1978:142, 163).

The new Republic's popular sovereignty offered a test for the transforming power of intellectual leadership. Edmund S. Morgan closes his classic book on early popular sovereignty with that challenge—the shift from leader to leadership and the consequent implications for the changing qualifications of both. The word *leader* is old, but *leadership* was a term that no one seems to have felt a need for as long as the qualities it designates remained an adjunct of social superiority. The decline of deference and the emergence of leadership signaled the beginnings of not only a new rhetoric but also a new mode of social relations and a new way of determining who should stand among the few to govern the many (Morgan 1988:306).

The pragmatic and intellectual challenges of the new democratic order also raised questions about how the process of leadership should operate in a democratic regime. How does the process of leadership make this conflict among values a creative one? How does a polity embrace multiple, conflicting values? And, what are the implications for the process of leadership?

The challenge of rule by the people in the early Republic came from a complex and powerful constellation of economic, social, political, and intellectual developments that coalesced after 1800 and gathered momentum. Because of these developments, the leadership challenges that attend the emergence of democracy came to the fore. Burns recognizes these issues. "Authority did not crumble under the impact of these forces," he said, "but it could not be reestablished on the old foundations, for now it was supposed to be derived from the people and hence ultimately lie in their hands." The initial challenge was that "a new secular basis of authority was needed," because "the citizenry now embodied authority." Equally important, "The people had to be protected against themselves"; that is, the new polity grounded in rule by the people "had to be protected against shifting majorities and volatile popular movements" (Burns 1978:24-5).

Implied in this language was the potential problem of the tyranny of the majority, or, phrased in another form, the need to protect minority rights and liberties in democracy. Burns also identified a less obvious problem. "One of the most troublesome questions for democratic politics is how to provide for or compensate for the unheard voices of the unorganized, inarticulate groups. . .the 'powerless'" (Burns 1978:305).

Unfortunately for the American experience, the transforming leadership Burns thought essential was not forthcoming. As a result, no one has yet articulated "a doctrine suitable for the new age. No new, democratized. . .doctrine arose to salvage the authentic and relevant in [the concept of] authority and link these strengths to a doctrine of leadership that recognized the vital need for qualities of integrity, authenticity, initiative, and moral resolve" (Burns 1978:25). In sum, "The United States simply did not possess a body of social

and political thought that could lend adequate direction, substance, and legitimacy to [the problems of democracy].... Few thinkers of that day—and this—seemed motivated or able to develop a comprehensive theory that could supply the intellectual foundations for a theory that would unite purpose, politics, and government" (Burns 1978:165). Burns does acknowledge some more recent efforts in this vein and masterfully details some of the pragmatic historical developments, such as the role of liberalism and the rise of the political parties that have served to ameliorate some of the potential evils of democracy (Burns 1978:164, 167, 311).

James Madison and Leadership Of, By, and For the People

It is not that great minds did not apply themselves to the paradox and dilemmas of popular sovereignty. James Madison represents, in almost ideal form, the transforming "intellectual leader" for whom Burns called in *Leadership*. Recall that in his text, Burns had championed a leadership that "conceive[s] values. . .in such a way that ends and means are linked. . .creatively and...the implications of certain values for political action and government organization are clarified" (Burns 1978:163). Madison fulfilled this role well. He continuously responded to challenges to his core values and maintained a steady stream of correspondence and other writings that articulated the nexus between thought and action. He thus serves as a prototype of the sort of leader Burns seems to call for in the continuing search for leadership that hews to the core values of the polity (Wren 1998). Madison's reflections bring us to the democratic challenge that remains for us to resolve: how do we relate equality, order, individual gain, and the common good in means and ends, similarities and interactive relationships?

Madison had a brace of core values that drove his thought and activity during his lifelong efforts to ensure the proper workings of government by the people. The first of these was his unquenchable faith in popular sovereignty itself. "The ultimate authority," he argued, "wherever the derivative may be found, resides in the people alone." All governments are "but agents and trustees of the people," must be "dependent on the great body of citizens," and "derive all. . .powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people" (Wren 1997). In addition to popular sovereignty, however, Madison had a parallel commitment—to the preservation of the common good. He held to a conception of the common good characterized by a priority of the general interest over local or individual interests, and a polity devoted to liberty and justice in the form of the protection of individual liberty and rights of property. This, in turn, would lead to an orderly and stable regime. The difficulty was that these core values proved to be often in conflict and were perhaps inherently so. As circumstances were to create challenges to one or the other of Madison's core values, he concocted a series of brilliant adaptations as he labored to devise solutions that addressed the perceived threat. In the process, he plumbed the possibilities inherent in his perception of the appropriate role of the people and their political leaders in a regime of popular sovereignty.

As the experiment of government by the people conjured up challenge after challenge to Madison's conception of the common good, he turned to a sophisticated and ever-changing view of the proper role of leaders and their relationship with the people. In the 1780s, when the excesses of state democracies threatened the common good, Madison limited their role. Their place in the leadership process was to choose virtuous leaders to guide them. He then designed a new polity, the federal government, to ensure that result. In the 1790s, when the danger to the common good came from federal leaders such as Hamilton and his followers, Madison expanded his conception of the role of followers in a popular regime. Now he counted upon properly guided followers to challenge the wrongheaded leaders in power. These tactics led to the development of the first party system and ultimately triumph at the polls for a party opposed to those in power. The ultimate challenge to Madison's perception of the common good proved to be insoluble. The rise of individualistic democracy after 1815 led to the sway of unchecked passions of both leaders and followers. Although Madison remained resolutely creative in the face of this final challenge, his solutions proved unacceptable, and he eventually accepted the broad sweeping democracy of the Jacksonian era as the lesser of evils (Wren 1997).

Throughout his career, Madison struggled with the tension that often existed between his two priorities of the common good and popular sovereignty. He consistently looked to an elite of appropriate leaders to pursue what he defined as the common good. These leaders could be called transforming leaders—men, in this case, who perceived the true interest of followers and lifted them above their more mundane and transitory self-interest.

That had been at the heart of his elitist solution to the problem of majority tyranny in the 1780s, the Constitution. His answer in the 1790s had been to create a more popular polity, to hold elite leaders accountable to the common good. Regrettably, at the end of his career, after 1820, with the overwhelming tide of majoritarian democracy sweeping all before it, Madison despaired of ever finding a lasting solution (Wren 1997; McCoy 1989). It certainly poses the most difficult of the leadership issues implied in a regime of popular sovereignty: to pursue the common good of a polity characterized by diverse and often antithetical interests. What happens when individuals are no longer content to rely upon leaders who "know better" what is in their interests? This, in a sense, was Madison's predicament in the latter stages of his career, and he despaired of an answer.

Leadership and the Role of Leaders in a Democratic Regime

James Madison might have been comforted had his wide circle of correspondents included James MacGregor Burns—the historian Burns, rather than the psychologist one. Burns is anything but reticent about the role individual leaders must play in his desired leadership process. With his transforming leadership, Burns sought to identify a process to achieve the common good, even in a democracy, by raising the followers themselves to new levels of insight and commitment in pursuit of shared interests. In this sense, then, transforming leader-

ship represents an advanced stage of Madisonian leadership, dedicated to the same end—achieving the common good. Even Burns, however, acknowledges the remaining "deep ambiguity and confusion over the place of leadership in political life—at least in democracies where leaders are expected to lead the people while the people are supposed to lead the leaders" (Burns 1978:452-55).

Nevertheless, if true "transforming" leadership occurs, leaders will play a central role. Burns asserts that conflict is at the heart of democratic leadership. If the goal of the process itself is the "expressing, shaping, and curbing of [conflict]," then "leaders, whatever their professions of harmony, do not shun conflict, they confront it and ultimately embody it." Moreover, particularly if the followers are heterogeneous in their makeup, it will be incumbent upon the leader to "embrace competing interests and goals within their constituency" (Burns 1978:37-39). Leaders, therefore, play a key, catalytic role in crafting substantive results from the leadership process.

Burns conceived of the role a leader plays as helping the group or society to achieve what might be deemed the common good. "The essence of leadership in any polity," he argues, "is the recognition of real need, the uncovering and exploiting of contradictions among values and between values and practice, the realizing of values, the reorganization of interests where necessary, and the governance of change." In all of these obligations, the role of the leader is "immense" (Burns 1978:420). This leads Burns to his conception of the "transforming" leader. Such leaders, "more than other leaders, must respond not simply to popular attitudes and beliefs, but to the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations and expectations, values and goals of their existing and potential followers" (Burns 1978:420). Indeed, it is often the duty of the leader to perceive and act upon these fundamental needs of followers. "Leaders can. . .shape and elevate the motives and values and goals of followers through the vital teaching role of leadership." Burns concludes, "This is transforming leadership" (Burns 1978:415).

This rather lengthy summary of the argument Burns articulates in *Leadership* brings us a model for proper leadership in a society based upon rule by the people. It stresses the conflict between and among values. Likewise, Burns appears to retain his commitment to a notion of some form of common good. His conception of the potential role of the leader in a regime of popular sovereignty recalls some of James Madison's work. Yet, problems remain with Burns's work.

Despite two centuries of intellectual leadership, the central questions of popular sovereignty—and their implications for leadership in such a regime—have yet to be adequately articulated and explored. Or perhaps the conflict values of democracy have to be adapted to changed environments, as Madison exemplified. Morgan's masterful study of the concept of popular sovereignty needs to be extended, enlarged, and brought forward through the American experience to the present day precisely because the rule by the people calls for leadership more than leaders.

Back to the Future

The collective wisdom of over two centuries of grappling with issues of popular government provides new possibilities for the future. Future reflection on the leadership implications of rule by the people will benefit from keeping the following enduring questions in mind.

Who are "the people"? This question is much more complex than it might at first appear. Throughout the American experience, the definition of who constitutes "the people" has constantly evolved. It is my contention that there has been what I call a "flywheel of democracy" that has included more of the populace in the definition of the people at every turn. There are no longer three-fifths persons or gender distinctions in voting. At the same time, each new revolution of the wheel has posed its own unique aspects; it is important to analyze each for the lessons it contains for future turns of the wheel.

What is the proper relationship of the people to their leaders? This is another enormously complex issue that can benefit from the insights of historical analysis. We have seen that Burns recognized the "deep ambiguity and confusion over the place of leadership in political life" when "leaders are expected to lead the people while the people are supposed to lead the leaders." (Burns 1978:452-55). Madison conducted the prototype for this inquiry with sophisticated nuances of evolving concepts and their applications (Wren 1997). Carefully tracing such matters through the remainder of the American experience can yield important insights that might prove useful in our continuing efforts to resolve an issue fundamental to democratic practice.

What is the role of the "common good" in rule by the people? The notion of the common good is a problematic issue. Some may question whether such a conception is even relevant in a society as diverse and disparate as ours. To the extent that any common direction is found, such critics argue, it is a function of the pragmatic balancing of conflicting interests (Keeley 1996). James Madison and James MacGregor Burns seem to argue the contrary: that there is such a thing as the common good and that it needs to be the end-value of leadership. The question is of more than academic interest, particularly as it relates to conceptions of leadership. A conception of the process as merely a clearinghouse for conflicting interests yields different prescriptions than if it is viewed as an effort to move the polity toward some envisioned end state. Likewise, the role of the leader takes on significantly different attributes. Again, a careful historical analysis of the American experience in this regard is likely to prove insightful. Again, Madison provides a starting point. What happened to his admittedly elitist conceptions of order and the common good under the deluge of democracy? How have Americans sought to identify and pursue the common good in subsequent years? This, in turn, is likely to call forth a continuing exploration of the role of values in the polity.

How can minority interests be protected in a popular regime? This question emerges immediately from any discussion of the potentially dangerous notion of the common good. The analysis of this issue in the American experience must go beyond the mere tracing of the evolution of constitutional rights and practices. While minority "rights" are increasingly acknowledged in a legalistic sense, it is quite a different story with respect to minority "interests" conceived more broadly. The flywheel of democracy metaphor again becomes relevant here. If the functioning of the American polity is conceived of in terms of an engine of popular rule, that engine has impediments of friction and inefficiency, the same as any other. These, in their various manifestations, need to be explored and, together with the solutions, brought to bear.

How should policy be made in a regime of popular sovereignty? This question, intimately related to those that have gone before, looks to the practical implementation of popular sovereignty. Assuming, for each time period studied, reasonably complete answers can be discerned with respect to the foregoing questions. How did each iteration of rule by the people pragmatically achieve implementation? Again, the answers should provide a rich library of possibilities for our modern leadership challenges.

Conclusion

I began this essay by commenting that James MacGregor Burns's classic book, *Leadership,* had both comforted and afflicted me. In its comforting role, it has provided me with the faith that leadership can indeed be a noble, useful, and practical endeavor. When it has afflicted me, it has done so in the best sense of the term. It has challenged and guided me to puzzle out difficult issues related to leadership. Drawing upon the insights of historical analysis embellishes the best current interdisciplinary scholarship in the field, which includes, of course, the historical accounts of leaders who deal with enduring human dilemmas.

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