

# [***Recovering a Lost Tradition of Statesmanship | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B7G-D521-JBR6-90MG-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** While it's impossible to predict our fortunes, we can and must prepare the next generation with the moral qualities needed to rise to the occasion.

**Body**

***The following essay is an adapted excerpt from John A. Burtka's new book,*** [***Gateway to Statesmanship: Selections from Xenophon to Churchill***](https://www.regnery.com/9781684515431/gateway-to-statesmanship/)***, due out from Regnery Gateway/Skyhorse in February.***

From James Collins' *Good to Great* to [*Peter Thiel*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/peter-thiel?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s *Zero to One*, there is an abundance of books available to assist aspiring entrepreneurs in their quest to found the next unicorn company. Nothing comparable exists for statesmen in the modern world, which is a marked departure from much of human history.

In his 1516 book, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus wrote that "the main hope of getting a good prince hangs on his proper education." Erasmus was writing for Prince Charles, who would grow up to become Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. His moral and practical advice to the young statesman was part of a tradition of literature called "mirrors-for-princes" that existed in nearly every civilization—Eastern or Western—dating back to antiquity.

The genre's essential writings—usually short books or letters—are described as mirrors because they serve as self-help manuals for political leaders to examine their conduct and appearances. Some of the most famous authors include Xenophon, Cicero, Han Fei, Kauṭilya, Al-Farabi, Thomas Aquinas, Christine de Pizan, Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Thomas More. Taken as a whole, these texts contain the political wisdom of mankind.

Despite millennia of success and popularity, including among American Founders like [*George Washington*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/george-washington?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams, the tradition vanished from the West over two centuries ago. Part of the reason for its extinction was the historical shift from monarchical to representative forms of government during the modern era, which removed the occasion to present such texts to a new king or queen. However, there's no reason why the mirrors-for-princes tradition couldn't have become a "mirrors-for-presidents" tradition, offered to elected leaders at the time of their inaugurations.

More importantly, the tradition likely disappeared because our contemporary education system is guilty of presentism, prioritizing secondary literature over primary sources and social sciences over moral philosophy and theology. Regardless of the cause, we can no longer afford to be the only great civilization in history to not have our own distinctive cannon of texts to shape the character and conduct of public leaders.

What's needed today is a process of rediscovery and redeployment: we must remind ourselves that previous generations gave careful thought to the virtues needed for political leadership and paid special attention to the education required to cultivate such qualities, and we should not hesitate to write our own mirrors-for-presidents—or baptize more modern texts like Washington's Farewell Address or Winston Churchill's "Consistency in ***Politics***"—that draw from our tradition and elevate the standards for contemporary leaders.

Even in a democratic republic, you don't often get to pick your ideal statesman. Great leaders emerge when character and fortune align, often at a moment of national crisis. In the face of a $33 trillion national debt, threats of global military conflict, a crisis at our southern border, and the radicalization of higher education, we may find ourselves in such an emergency—and in search of a statesman—sooner than anticipated.

Against the backdrop of these profound challenges, two lessons from the mirrors-for-princes tradition are of relevance. The first is summed up best in St. Thomas More's *Utopia*, which bemoans the intellectual class who refuse, out of principle or purity, to get involved in the messy business of ***politics***. More laments "no wonder we are so far from happiness, when philosophers do not condescend even to assist kings with their counsels."

We don't always get the leaders we want or deserve as a people, but that doesn't diminish our responsibility to use every tool at our disposal to promote what is good and reduce what is harmful. No matter how bad things are in the regime, More reminds us, "you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth. Do not give up the ship in a storm because you cannot direct the winds."

Second, while it's impossible to predict our fortunes, we can and must prepare the next generation with the moral and intellectual qualities needed to rise to the occasion when the moment requires. To be successful, it's important to connect the world of theory to the world of action. Statesmen will ignore philosophers unless the advice is practicable and can be used to advance their careers—and better serve their constituents.

Charles de Gaulle took this advice to heart. At the age of 42, he published his own "mirrors-for-princes" titled *The Edge of the Sword*, which has been described as an "anticipatory self-portrait." Calling to mind Aristotle's magnanimous man, he outlined the qualities of character and prestige embodied by an ideal statesman and then devoted the rest of his life to becoming the man he so eloquently describes, leading the French resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II and founding the Fifth French Republic in 1958, which he served as a successful president for 10 years.

It will require the extraordinary ambition of a De Gaulle to revive the mirrors-for-princes tradition for today. But if we make the effort to articulate the characteristics that we'd like to see in a model American statesman—just like we do for entrepreneurs—and expand institutions of higher learning to promote these virtues, we raise the probability that one or several heroes will emerge to help us navigate the challenges and opportunities of 21st century.

*John A. Burtka IV is the president of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2343617/george-washington-statue.jpg)

**Graphic**

George Washington statue

John Lamparski/Getty Images

NEW YORK, NEW YORK - OCTOBER 07: A statue of George Washington is seen in Union Square Park on October 07, 2020 in New York City.

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