The Modern Prince

What Leaders Need to Know Now

CARNES LORD

Yale University Press  *New Haven and London*

ONE

Why Leadership Is Still Possible

It is not obvious that leadership is actually possible in contemporary democracies. Constitutional democracy is supposed to rely on the rule of law rather than the rule of men. Because its fundamental law is laid down in a written document, opportunities for even the greatest statesmen to effect major change are severely restricted. Constitutional democracy rests on powerful institutions, not individuals, both to give it direction and to curb its excesses through a process of mutual checking and balancing. But more than that, the very commitment to liberty that is at the heart of the idea of democracy in modern times greatly limits the sway of politicians over the wider society.

Over the course of America's history, many of its presidents have behaved as if they agreed with this view, deferring to Congress for policy leadership and in other respects playing a relatively passive or instrumental part in the machinery of government. Nowadays, for

reasons we shall explore shortly, Americans have gotten used to the idea that presidents are all-powerful figures, princes in all but name. It is certainly convenient for presidents if people think this. But is it true? Or is democratic leadership, in the United States or elsewhere in today's world, perhaps an illusion, a sleight-of-hand perpetrated by politicians desperate to assert their own importance and justify their role?[1] Are there broader trends at work that frustrate effective leadership?

A plausible argument can be made to this effect. Marxists have long held that the real rulers of capitalist states are not the politicians but the owners of the means of production. In spite of the obvious flaws in this notion, it would be hard to deny that democratic politicians today are extraordinarily sensitive to the needs of major corporations and other critical cogs in the machinery of the national economy. Other domestic interest groups (labor unions or trial lawyers, to name a few) can also wield substantial power, often because they contribute disproportionately to the coffers of political parties and candidates. It is hard to overstate the challenge some democratic leaders face in contending with the daily realities of party government. And virtually all democratic leaders today must defer to one degree or another to the wishes of deeply entrenched bureaucracies. In extreme cases (Japan, notably), leaders have little ability to contest policy positions developed within the state bureaucracy.

Especially, but not only, in the developing world, political leaders today complain that their freedom of action at home is increasingly constrained by global economic and technological trends. Global interdependence, so long talked about, is becoming a reality. And the growth of transnational regimes and institutions of all kinds limits what leaders can do at home as well as abroad. The United Nations has less patience than in the past with absolute claims of national sovereignty, and in Europe, a vast rule-making bureaucracy threatens to usurp the traditional powers of legislators and politicians.

Then, in some advanced democracies there is the near-crippling impact on leadership of the news media and the political culture. A culture of extreme egalitarianism of the sort now found throughout the English-speaking world as well as much of northern Europe tends to be hostile to the pretensions of politicians and unforgiving of their

flaws and errors. This tendency is aggravated by the emergence of a mass media that is independent of government and, indeed, views the exposure of its shortcomings as a measure of merit and one of its primary functions. All this has contributed to a decline in public respect for the political class throughout the West, and it has fostered a wider alienation from politics that is reflected in reduced voter participation and a generalized cynicism concerning the motives and accomplishments of political leaders. Given such attitudes, it would hardly be surprising if even the most effective political leaders found it difficult to generate public interest or confidence in their programs or to mobilize the political support essential for implementing them.

What is true now of the West may be true soon enough throughout the rest of the world. If or to the extent that democracy is destined to sweep the globe, as argued not many years ago by Francis Fukuyama in a work of impressive historico-philosophical analysis, the legitimacy of leadership will be increasingly in doubt. The "end of history" has little place for leadership in the traditional sense of the word—leadership on behalf of great causes or ideals. The conquest of nature by modern technology, the unprecedented prosperity it has brought, the resulting growth of a democratically minded middle class, and the rarity, if not the disappearance, of great wars—all this threatens to make politics unimportant and leaders dispensable. To borrow the well-known Marxist prediction about the postrevolutionary future: the government of men will be replaced by the administration of things. Yet that is not all. The radically egalitarian culture that looms on the historical horizon may destroy the very psychological conditions necessary for the nurturing of leaders.[2]

There is something to all this—certainly more than is generally recognized. Such a vision of the end of history may be off the mark in foreseeing the virtual disappearance of politics and international conflict, and overly optimistic in assessing at least the near-term prospects for democracy throughout the world. It is more compelling in its sketch of the trajectory of democratic ideology and culture. There can be little question that the egalitarian turn in world history marked by the American and French revolutions has fundamentally altered the way many if not most human beings alive today view social hierarchy and political authority. Nor can it be doubted that the democratic

idea has an internal dynamic of its own, one that continues to play itself out in our own times. Slavery in the United States proved itself incompatible with the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. By the early twentieth century, indirect election of the Senate had lost democratic legitimacy. Women eventually acquired the right to vote. In consequence of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the political realignment it brought about, the interests of the "common man" trumped those of America's traditional elites, and the welfare state was born. Today's political movements on behalf of the rights of minorities and women continue this trend, while radicalizing it in significant ways.

Most important here is the rise of the feminist movement, and the increasing sensitivity of American politics to the concerns and outlook of women in general. Feminism of course takes many forms, but it tends to unite in questioning the legitimacy of traditional male leadership, whether in the public arena or the home. In such a view, the leading role assumed by men in virtually all societies in the past—"patriarchy"—is inherently oppressive, failing to acknowledge both the fundamental equality of women and their specific nature and needs. Feminism's milder variants tend to minimize male-female differences and focus on policy issues that are thought to empower women in the workplace and their private lives generally and thereby restore gender equality. More radical versions, on the other hand, make a more provocative claim—that women are in fact better suited to the exercise of political power than men. This is because women are allegedly less competitive or aggressive than men, more compassionate, and better at understanding and accommodating the need of others. At the extreme, the argument is sometimes made that women should be welcomed as political leaders, for nations then would never go to war.[3]

Such beliefs are almost certainly not widely shared, in America or elsewhere; but they have made their mark on politics and the wider global culture. Politicians, mindful of the voting strength of women, cater to their interest in such issues as education and health care. They tend to shy away from discussing policy matters women supposedly find frightening, particularly national defense. And they craft their own political personalities to be "unthreatening," caring, and compassionate. Hence the growing tendency in the United States for politicians to couch all public policy issues in terms of their impact on children.

Is all of this simply a passing cultural style? Or does it reflect a more fundamental shift in the character of contemporary politics—a kind of "feminization" of democratic leadership? It is not necessary to decide this question to wonder whether leadership can really be leadership if it is wholly lacking in such traditionally manly qualities as competitiveness, aggression, or for that matter, the ability to command. Women of course have no monopoly on compassion; it is a distinctive feature of our politics generally. It is the democratic virtue par excellence.[4] The problem is that it is not a political virtue and, in fact, tends to be at cross purposes with the requirements of prudent and effective political leadership. Leadership that is not prepared to disadvantage anyone is hardly leadership at all.

Contemporary circumstances undoubtedly make leadership harder. Do they make it impossible? A backward glance over the last quarter of a century reveals surprising if not conclusive grounds for optimism.

By the late 1970s, it had become fashionable in the West to lament the "ungovernability" of contemporary democracies.[5] Rising popular expectations of the welfare state were proving difficult for political leaders to meet in an economically responsible manner. President Jimmy Carter, frustrated by his inability to win public or congressional support for his reform initiatives, famously invoked a national "malaise" in assigning blame for this state of affairs. On top of that, the democracies seemed increasingly in the grip of an institutional crisis of governance. In the United States, questions began to be raised about the fundamental adequacy of the nation's traditional political structures. The deepening antagonism between the executive and legislative branches of the government, it was alleged by some, had led to a kind of political paralysis that could be broken only by far-reaching constitutional reforms to restore the possibility of effective political leadership.[6] Others doubted whether Western leaders had the political will to confront the challenge of rising Soviet military power and global ambitions.

With the arrival of conservative governments in Washington and

London at the end of the decade, such talk soon faded. Indeed, a new era seemed at hand. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher led a revolution in economic policy and (more important) in popular attitudes toward free markets and the role of government in their respective countries. No one should have been unduly concerned at the feminization of contemporary leadership during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as prime minister of Britain. Thatcher's successful assault on the power of the labor unions early in her term stunned the entire political class and established her personal authority to push forward an agenda of free-market reform; and her conduct of the Falklands War of 1982 demonstrated courage and strategic leadership of a high order. Reagan, his successor George Bush, Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, Helmut Kohl, and Yasuhiro Nakasone in various ways brought extraordinary leadership skills to bear on the key global geopolitical challenge of the day, the tottering Soviet empire. In the Gulf War of 1990–91, President Bush gave a further demonstration of political and military leadership in the decisive victory won by the United States and its allies in the largest international armed conflict in four decades. The collaboration of Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk that led to the peaceful dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa is an extraordinary story of moral leadership and skillful political engineering. Moral leadership was a critical ingredient of the transition to democracy in central Europe—in the role played by Vaclav Havel and other former dissidents in circumstances of tremendous stress and uncertainty. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin's courageous defiance of a coup attempt in August 1991 by forces loyal to the old Soviet order will also be remembered as a decisive act of contemporary leadership.

From the perspective of the present, to be sure, such optimism may seem misplaced. Most of the leaders of the 1980s and early 1990s are long departed; few had worthy successors. At the same time, the achievements of the outstanding leaders of those years were rarely unalloyed or, for that matter, lasting. Thatcher was unceremoniously ousted as party leader and prime minister, thus ending the conservative resurgence in Britain. Nakasone's energetic leadership broke on the rock of Japanese political culture (for reasons we shall shortly explore). Revelations of financial improprieties and autocratic behavior threatened to eclipse Kohl's achievement in reunifying Germany. The first generation of Eastern Europe's new democratic leaders foundered in various ways on the wreckage left by the old order, opening the way for a return to power of former Communist apparatchiks. In Russia, Yeltsin failed spectacularly to manage the transition to stable democratic institutions and a free-market economy; rather than the "normal" Western country most Russians wanted and expected, what they got was a bizarre system of personalistic rule that was nonetheless unable to curb the rising power of the new barons of finance and the media or reverse the leakage of Moscow's authority to regional bosses or the collapse of its military power.

Much could be said in criticism or praise of these figures and their successors. For our purposes, though, the case of Reagan is critical. Reagan has been much criticized in the United States and elsewhere both for the policies he pursued and for his governing style. At the extreme, his apparent accomplishments (particularly the fall of Soviet Communism) have been chalked up to mere luck, and his presidency seen as little more than an actor's performance scripted by others. There can be little question that such a view is fundamentally wrong. Reagan certainly relied heavily on words as an instrument of governance, but he showed (by contrast with Carter) how presidential rhetoric could be used effectively to rally the nation behind a political agenda. The enactment of Reagan's reform economic program in 1981 was a classic instance of presidential leadership both of the country as a whole and of a politically divided Congress. Reagan's personal conviction that tax cuts combined with a severely anti-inflationary monetary policy could restore the American economy to health—a conviction shared by virtually no one else in his own administration, let alone by outside economists—proved essentially correct and laid the groundwork for the unprecedented prosperity of the later 1980s and beyond. Also unlike most of his advisers and conservative supporters, Reagan sensed the vulnerability of the Soviet Union to economic and political challenge. He consistently pursued a two-track policy of rearmament and negotiation with the Soviets that satisfied few of his critics or supporters yet in the end proved decisive in bringing a bloodless end to the Communist experiment. In fact, Reagan's presidency as a whole proved the most successful since at least that

WHY LEADERSHIP IS STILL POSSIBLE

of Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s. Of the gallery of twentieth-century presidents, his achievement can be compared only to that of his original political hero, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.[7]

It is true that the lessons of the Reagan years are not without ambiguity. Reagan's personality and leadership style were key elements in his dominance of the political arena and helped to obscure or compensate for problems encountered in other areas. Reagan's relation to the Republican political establishment was tenuous, and he never succeeded in shaping the party sufficiently in his own mold to ensure the political survival of conservative ideas. In spite of an unprecedented effort to control the federal government through presidential appointments, the bureaucracy remained a significant obstacle to the implementation of the president's program, as indeed did the Congress; and in other respects Reagan's intragovernmental leadership left much to be desired.[8] Finally, the hostility of the media and the nation's cultural and intellectual elite sharply limited what he and his closest advisers proved willing to undertake (this was the primary factor behind the issueless reelection campaign of 1984). These problems all contributed significantly to the administration's mishandling of its Central America policy and Reagan's political near-death experience in the Iran-Contra scandal. None of them could easily have been remedied.

In spite of all this, however, there is a sense in which Reagan's achievement surpasses even FDR's. In 1932, almost everyone agreed that the nation faced a dire economic crisis, that strong measures were needed to deal with it, and that such measures had to involve a greater degree of government intervention in the economy than seen before in the United States. Reagan, by contrast, lacked a clear popular mandate for fundamental change and was navigating into a strong headwind of political and intellectual resistance. Listen to Machiavelli: "It should be considered that nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders. For the introducer has all those who benefit from the old order as enemies, and he has lukewarm defenders in all those who might benefit from the new orders. This lukewarmness arises partly from fear of adversaries who have the laws on their side and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not truly

believe in new things unless they come to have a firm experience of them. Consequently, whenever those who are enemies have opportunity to attack, they do so with partisan zeal, and the others defend lukewarmly so that one is in peril along with them."[9] This perfectly describes Reagan's relationship with the American political and media establishment. If the achievement fell short in various ways, what is surprising is that he could do so much.

The twentieth century has been called the century of the common man. It was also a time marked by uncommon leaders. Some of these were revolutionaries who set out to advance utopian projects or agendas of national liberation. Others sought to save democracies from their enemies—or themselves. In the United States, three great reforming presidents—the two Roosevelts and Woodrow Wilson—made industrial capitalism safe for democracy and ensured democracy's survival in a world increasingly hostile to it. Great wartime chiefs in Britain and France—Churchill and de Gaulle—provided inspiration that overcame defeatism and strategic leadership that secured victory. And after World War II, two more American presidents defeated challenges in Europe and the Far East and laid the groundwork for the unprecedented peacetime alliance that held the ring against Soviet communism until its final collapse; they were aided in this endeavor by a generation of far-sighted leaders throughout what would become known as the free world. This story is of course so familiar that it ceases to amaze—or instruct. Yet the forces arrayed against the democracies were formidable indeed, and their internal weaknesses profound. That they prevailed is a powerful commentary on what democratic leaders can accomplish.

But revolutionaries and democrats do not exhaust the spectrum of contemporary leadership. Machiavelli takes it for granted that republics as well as principalities are in need of a founding prince.[10] The great state-builders and modernizers of this century may be ambiguous figures in the annals of democracy; nevertheless, their peculiar greatness and lasting impact should not be underestimated. Kemal Ataturk built a modern, secular Turkey on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire—a state that has inspired fierce loyalty in its citizenry and endures today as a key strategic ally of the West. In the course of his long reign, King Hussein of Jordan crafted a nation from unpromising

materials, defended it adroitly against powerful domestic and foreign adversaries, and created the framework of parliamentary democracy in a part of the world not noted for it. Lee Kuan Yew did the same for Singapore.

None of this is to suggest that the characters or actions of any contemporary leaders are without blemish. Indeed, one of the most striking things about outstanding leaders in any historical period is the extent to which the failed or incomplete aspects of their political projects may be traced to flaws in their personalities rather than to any inexorable constraints imposed by the age. If Ronald Reagan was a democratic visionary, he was also a gentleman who shunned personal confrontation and thought only the best of his associates and staff; admirable as these traits may be, they contributed to much unnecessary infighting and confusion within his administration. Thatcher, by contrast, never known for her modesty, argued vehemently with her cabinet and sometimes humiliated them in public; not surprisingly, the resentments this caused led directly to her downfall.

It seems safe to conclude that the scope for effective leadership in today's world, though no doubt diminished in significant ways compared to earlier times, remains ample enough. Yet it is well to remember that leaders are fragile instruments. As in classical tragedy, their very virtues often contain the seeds of failures and disasters; and self-knowledge is not generally their strongest suit. If this is so, however, it is worth asking whether, other things being equal, leadership is something contemporary societies should actually want. In particular, we need to explore further the question of the relationship between leadership and democracy.