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Leading the Conversation: Leadership in a Democratic Society

The Perils of Progress: Leadership and Public Life, 1998

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American social critics have worried about the decline, absence, or insufficiency of leadership for a long time. In the 1830s, many mourned the passing of the founding generation and doubted that we should ever see their like again. In 1888, the British ambassador, James Bryce, published his anatomy of American politics, with its famous chapter, "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents." In France and Italy, he observed, "half-revolutionary conditions have made public life exciting and accessible," in Germany a strong civil service cultivated fine statecraft, and in England, an aristocratic tradition drew men of wealth and leisure to politics. Recruitment to American public life was not enhanced by any of these factors but ensnared in the corruptions of party politics.

Nearly a century later, in the wake of Watergate, "TRB" complained of a "leadership shortage" and political theorist Benjamin Barber pointed to an erosion of leadership—and the conditions for leadership (a point to which I shall return) dating to 1945. A succession of what were widely perceived as failed presidencies—Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter, together with a seemingly endless spate of political scandals, led to an outpouring of concern about political leadership in the 1980s.

It is hard to avoid concluding that this country was very fortunate in its founding generation, and that indeed there was an abundance of leadership at the founding of a quality that has rarely been equalled anywhere in the history of the world. With a beginning like that, it would be hard for any subsequent generation to measure up. But that extraordinary cohort aside, there has not been any obvious rise or fall of leadership capacities. If leaders seem to flounder particularly in our own era (but I am not sure that they do, they may just flounder in different ways), it has less to do with individual incapacity than with conditions that make the exercise of leadership especially difficult. That is the argument I would like to propose here. I think there are at least four inter-related factors that make leadership especially difficult in the United States for us today and at the same time make the difficulties of leadership unusually visible.

1. The vulnerability of public figures to publicity

This is a point no one neglects: that a combination of an aggressive news media, government prosecutors and inspectors newly created or newly empowered by government ethics legislation, increasingly restrictive ethics laws for public officials and others, increasing numbers of whistle-blowers in government (and in corporations) encouraged by norms of open-ness, honesty, and freedom of information, and increasing numbers of private watchdog organizations on the left, the right, and the "good government" center all have contributed to what Suzanne Garment calls "a self-reinforcing scandal machine. "[1] Garment, a political scientist and former *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, wrote an indictment of the "scandal machine" during the Bush administration, a time at which liberals were not particularly interested in what she had to say. They may be listening now, and certainly her blistering attack on the independent counsel law ("...that jewel in the post-Watergate crown, has become more trouble, more expense, and more danger than it is worth....The office has a vast capacity for making big scandals out of smaller ones, and this is something we no longer need") is echoed in liberal circles today.[2]

These developments in the intersection of government, legislation, and media have increased the personal risks and hazards for someone who dares embark on a political career. The scandal machinery has also contributed to a general public cynicism about politics which is, in Garment's words, "a corruption even more dangerous than stealing money from the public till." She argues that "a prosecutorial class with no sympathy for human frailties can be a much greater danger to a democracy than the simple peddling of influence."[3] On the other hand, recall where the scandal machinery came from: from the rise of investigative reporting when government was epitomized by Lyndon Johnson's lies to the American public about Vietnam and Richard

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[1]Suzanne Garment, *Scandal: The Crisis of Mistrust in American Politics* (New York: Times Books, l99l) p. 9. On the increase in ethics laws, see Garment p. 109; on the rise of federal inspectors general, see pp. 112-113.
[2]Garment, p. 302; Cass Sunstein, The American Prospect
[3]Garment, p. 303.

Nixon's contempt for the media and the democratic process; from the rise of public interest organizations dedicated to the protection of individual rights against governmental arrogance and intransigence on voting rights for African-Americans, equal employment opportunity for women, access to welfare for the poor, and consumer rights against corporations. These reforms have had some unintended and unfortunate consequences, but let's not forget the significant shortcomings of the political system they sought to repair.

All of the remarks are focused on formal political leadership, but leadership in other fields has suffered from similar developments. A good case is medicine where, for the same 30-year period, historian David J. Rothman argues that the main development in medical practice is that "the discretion that the profession once enjoyed has been increasingly circumscribed, with an almost bewildering number of parties and procedures participating in medical decision making. "[4]

Rothman cites a large number of contributing factors, from popular resentment over the rapid rise in physicians' income after World War II, to highly publicized scandals from 1966 on over medical research conducted without the informed consent of subjects to technological innovations that contributed to the intensification of ethical quandaries over extraordinary life-support measures at both the beginning and end of human life. Most of all, in Rothman's analysis, after World War II physicians became more connected to hospitals and hospitals less connected to religious, ethnic, and neighborhood communities; the "professional isolation and exclusivity" of doctors greatly increased. The symbolic measure of this isolation was the rapid decline of the house call, which represented less than one percent of doctor-patient contacts by the early 1960s. Then, after the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s, government became the primary purchaser of medical services and newly scrutinized the self-regulation of the medical profession—often finding that organized medicine operated as a self-protective guild more than a self-policing profession.

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[4]David J. Rothman, *Strangers At the Bedside* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991) p. 1.

At the same time, as part of the rights revolution spawned by the civil rights movement, "patients' rights" became an activist watchword and by 1972 the American Hospital Association adopted a Patient Bill of Rights. Dramatic changes in medical practice ensued—in 1960 a minority of physicians informed patients when they had cancer; by 1980, informing the cancer patient was the rule. A rights-orientation had entered medical practice and, with it, both an increase in bureaucratic and legal controls over medical decision-making and a growing climate of distrust.[5]

It cannot be said of the hospital today as historian Charles Rosenberg wrote of its nineteenth century predecessor that "boundaries between hospital and home were...indistinct" or that the hospital superintendent "would see every patient every day, that he would know all their names and be aware of their personal situations, just as he knew the cook and laundress and coachman, all of course resident in the hospital."[6] Of course, the early nineteenth century hospital provided little in the way of effective therapy and its paternalism provided only "ambiguous benefits."[7] The pre-World War II hospital was utterly dominated by physicians and a professionally modulated paternalism. Contemporary medical practice suffers from a newly intensified vulnerability to the market, but also from a newly institutionalized accountability to the individual patient, community and media review of the ethics of practice, and governmental oversight. Leadership in medicine is confined more than ever—and for some very good reasons—by the requirement that it must listen to, please, or placate a wider range of publics than ever before.

2. The lack of common national purpose

Political theorist Benjamin Barber argued in 1975 that the short supply of leadership has to do most directly with the absence of consensus on national purpose. "For the past thirty years we have witnessed a gradual but sure erosion of America's common purpose and national consensus. There are today

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[5]Rothman, pp. 108-109, 126-128, 145-147, 158, 257.
[6]Charles Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: BasicBooks, 1987) p. 339.
[7]Rosenberg, p. 11.

no leaders, only heads of factions; there is no leadership of ideas, only a competition of ideologies; there is no consensus, only an unstable balance of opposing interests. "[8] This strikes me as rhetorical, the sort of thing that might have been written (and probably was) in any decade of our history. But Barber's general point is well taken: leaders do not exist in a vacuum; in a democracy, they personify and articulate group purposes. They lead by listening, they initiate by responding, they inspire by their sensitivity to the public. If groups have no coherent or identifiable purposes, the possibility of leadership is denied.

Today, when a wider array of stakeholders than ever before now play legitimate roles in decision-making—where the very term "stakeholder" has a currency as never before, where there is difficulty in presuming consensus because more and more people want to be consulted, lack of common purpose is as much a strength of present culture as a defect. No doubt the flourishing of "identity politics" poses new dangers to the commonweal, but it also represents a genuinely affirmative new cultural recognition of elements of the American mosaic that had essentially no place in public discourse a generation ago: evangelical Christians, gays and lesbians, Latinos, Asians and other new immigrant groups. Most importantly, astonishingly, and troublingly of all for reigning preconceptions about the character of American society, African-Americans and women have achieved civil rights and political power. It is just thirty years since enforcement of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 began to change the politics of race in this country, and not yet thirty years since an organized women's movement began to transform relations between men and women at home, in the workplace, and in the legislatures. All of this contributes to a lack of common national purpose that makes leadership difficult. This does not imply that we should want to recover the common national purpose of the 1930s, made possible by a great depression, or of the 1940s, made possible by a world war, or of the 1950s, made possible by the complacency of old-boy parties and community elites.

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[8]Benjamin Barber, *A Passion for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) p. 113. The essay from which this is drawn was published originally in 1975.

3. Perennial democratic ambivalence about leadership increased by a set of traumatic shocks to faith in institutions

The founding fathers distrusted government only slightly less than they feared anarchy. They approved a Constitution that they believed in only because it sought to blend a necessary level of energy in government with a large number of checks upon it, checks internal to the federal government in the separation of powers, checks written into the Bill of Rights, and checks in a federal system that continued to locate most political power in the separate states. Their distrust in government would soon be coupled with a distrust of the people who dared aspire to run it; the vote-seeking politician has never enjoyed a high reputation in America. Even in the heyday of the American political party in the nineteenth century, an anti-party mentality inherited from the founders could not be expunged.

A perennial distrust of politicians and government was exacerbated by John F. Kennedy's assassination—and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. to follow. The President's assassination, as Suzanne Garment observes, "played a large role in arranging the discontents of those years into a pattern of systematic suspicion about established institutions. "[9] We should not overestimate the importance of a single event to explain broad social and cultural changes; at the same time, we should not let the uncongeniality of such explanation to the social scientific mind blind us to its importance. The nation was truly traumatized November 22, 1963. Something that could not happen here happened here, and no ethics law, no good will, no investigative reporting, and no political reforms could ever put this humpty dumpty together again.

The specific traumatic events of the 1960s helped torpedo public confidence in government. Confidence levels, as measured by opinion polls, declined rapidly between 1964 and 1974 and have by no means regained the levels of the early 1960s. In 1964, 75 percent of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time—compared to 15 percent in 1995. But a

[9]Garment, p. 29.

general deterioration of traditional cultural authority was also underway. Confidence in universities droped from 6l percent to 30 percent, 55 percent to 2l percent for major corporations, 72 percent to 29 percent for medicine, and 29 percent to l4 percent for journalism.[10] Deference declined as norms of participation, of sunshine decision-making, of explicit and well defended individual rights were all reaffirmed and taken with new seriousness. I do not think students or even, in most cases, faculties participated in choosing college presidents before the 1960s; now the diverse stakeholders in a college or university are routinely consulted and often have formal voting rights in presidential selection. College presidents may be formally responsible to a board of trustees but they are also accountable on a day-to-day basis to every other constituency in the academic community, as the various stakeholders are only too willing to remind them.

4. The decentralization of power and the decomposition of the leader

Leaders have fewer autonomous options and less power than ever: this is true of committee chairs in Congress, university presidents after the Free Speech Movement, CEOs after the Chrysler bailout, the press after Vietnam and Watergate, physicians and biomedical researchers after Medicare, Medicaid, Tuskegee, and Karen Quinlan, and teachers and principals after *Tinker v. United States* and the Americans With Individual Disabilities Act. In Congress and in the federal administration, leaders have larger staffs than ever, with consequently more impersonal relationships between staff members and legislator or secretary. This makes for declining staff loyalty; coupled with enhanced opportunities for employees to go public to the news media. The new social relations of politics are compost heaps for scandal-making.[11]

At the same time, the authority structure in Congress has been flattened. Internal reforms in the 1960s weakened committee chairs, created a proliferating array of subcommittees, and helped empower freshman legislators rela-

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[10]Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Introduction: The Decline of Confidence in Government," in Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 1.
[11]Garment, p.

tive to veterans. What has been seen as a "new politician" style in which representatives emphasize constituent-services more than policy leadership has helped incumbents create safer seats and has increased their independence from the pressure of the White House or party leadership in the Congress.[12] If that makes for individuals with greater job security, it also gives them less reason for cooperation, or even civility, with their colleagues—let alone with the executive branch.

Conclusions

It would seem, at first glance, that it is better for journalists to be probing and critical than not; that it is better for students, the disabled, ethnic minorities, medical patients, and others to have identifiable rights than not; that it is better that government officials be held accountable for infractions of the law or public moral codes than not; that it is better that the various stake-holders to vital political and ethical decisions have a voice in those decisions than that the decisions be made by paternalistic authorities behind closed doors. It therefore would seem, at first glance, that the American political and cultural world has seen remarkable progress in the past thirty to forty years.

In my own view, all this is so. The social changes of the past two generations have been extraordinary. At the same time, irony is part of the human experience, and it should not be surprising that progress exacts a price. In the case of the flattening and democratizing of cultural authority in our day, part of the price has been to thwart public leadership, to gridlock public action, and to muddle public conversation. My own sense is that whatever solutions we may contemplate for making leadership more possible (and followership more respectable) should show a measure of patience with the novelty of the present conditions for leading.

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[12]See, for instance, Eric L. Davis, "Legislative Reform and the Decline of Presidential Influence on Capitol Hill," *British Journal of Political Science* 9 (1979): 465-479.