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On Leadership and Democracy

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“Leaders are almost never as much in charge as they are pictured to be, followers almost never as submissive as one might imagine.”

John W. Gardner

“It is not wise to expect too much of political leadership, especially in a democracy.”

Henry Fairlie, The Life of Politics,
1968, p 58

“Those republics which in time of danger cannot resort to dictatorship will generally be ruined when grave occasions occur.”

N. Machiavelli

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Americans are rarely satisfied with political leaders nor with democracy. We view politics as unsavory, and politicians as unprincipled.

We are idealistic, we expect a lot, we want problems solved as soon as possible, – and preferably with as little cost to us as possible.

America has been an inspiration to the world as a developing democracy, yet we are all too aware of its many flaws.¹ Money is a curse in our politics. America's dependency on external sources of energy threatens both our independence and sustainability. Political equality is impossible to achieve. And the degree to which the average citizen understands government, politics and major public policy issues makes us squirm with embarrassment.

Then there is the necessity for politicians to represent and make decisions for us. We sometimes yearn for a system that didn't need political elites. Yet to imagine a modern democracy that might be run without the centrality of leaders ignores too many realities – realities that Machiavelli, Hobbes and Hamilton vividly addressed.

Democracy, like every other governing system, need leaders. But leadership and democracy coexist uneasily.

¹ See, for example, Ronald Dworkin, [Is Democracy Possible Here?](#), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). And Robert A. Dahl, [How Democratic is the American Constitution?](#), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), and also Dahl's [On Democracy](#), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.)

Egalitarians suspect that the art of leadership is merely the art of manipulation. They view those who are in power as mainly seeking to maximize and especially to retain their power.

Realists contend, however, that because humans are, or at least can be, violent by nature, there has to be a concentration of power in any community. Stability and order must come before anything else. Hard-headed realists go further; they insist that even in constitutional democracies it is necessary and legitimate to have hierarchy, discipline, secrecy, coercion (the right to punish) and, when necessary, duplicity.²

The central challenge of our constitutional democracy has always been the reconciliation of effective government with personal rights and liberty. The ambitious objective is to make government serve the preferences of the people and not the reverse. The American experiment in representative democracy at its best encourages large numbers of citizens both to have a say in the laws that regulate them and to participate in the great debates about major policy decisions. Although the mass of people can approve or disapprove of their leaders, and they can decide who will decide, the people themselves obviously cannot govern.³

²Machiavelli and Hobbes were preeminent realists. But see, too, the writings of Samuel P. Huntington The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) and Richard Posner's Not a Suicide Pact, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.)

³ I treat these dilemmas in my Direct Democracy: The Politics of the Initiative, Referendum and Recall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

We have exaggerated the contribution of legendary storybook leaders and overemphasized the Emersonian view that an institution or nation is merely the lengthened shadow of a notable person. This may on occasion be true.

Yet a nation – especially a democracy – is more likely the reflected tapestry of a large number of people interacting in complex ways.

In many ways leadership, the process whereby an individual or a few select individuals provide the vision and energy to make things happen, is at odds with the idealism and the more egalitarian and majoritarian notions of democracy.

The challenge is how to reconcile these concepts, and this is the focus here. Is democracy possible without leadership and elites? How is political leadership exercised in America? What do we think about politics and politicians? How do leaders of thought treat leaders elected by the people? And exactly how do things get done? How, more specifically, are innovations brought about in our large sprawling pluralistic democracy?

The American Political Culture

Americans cherish personal rights, and liberty and individuality, more than just about any people anywhere. We have prized local home-rule government over state and federal government. We are skeptical of big government and we have been less supportive of a welfare state than any developed nation.

We are notoriously tough in our expectations of, as well as evaluations of, national leaders. We realize national security and terrorism necessitate a strong

centralized government yet we fear the abuse of power just as much as those who fought against King George III.

James Madison and framers of the American Constitution understood this when they noted the essence of government is power, and power lodged as it must be in human hands, is always liable to abuse. Although we beguile ourselves into describing ours as a government by the people, Americans realize democracies are not self-executing; they need political leaders who have a sense of the past, who are willing to give of themselves, and who will work to advance the common good.

We fear power even as we understand it's centrality in the nation state. We love to unload most of our civic responsibilities on political elites, and on occasion we even yearn for bold and decisive leadership, yet we dislike being bossed around and we fret about granting political leaders so much power that it may diminish our rights and freedoms.

That's why we hold so many elections and celebrate constitutionalism, federalism, the rule of law, the consent of the governed and similar checks and balances. That's why we have the impeachment provision in our Constitution. Public opinion surveys, and today's even more aggressive media and aggressive blogosphere are additional auxiliary balances. Term limits and the recall exist for similar reasons.

Americans have always been suspicious of unfettered leadership. This fear is often manifested in our disdain for politicians. The framers of our Constitution wanted stronger governance capabilities than afforded under the Articles of Confederation. Still they had fought an eight year bloody war of independence to rid themselves of monarchy, royal governors and unresponsive hierarchical leaders.

Writers championing democracy have long resisted focusing on leadership. The idea that a few elites have the answers and that they, acting alone, have the abilities to make policy, clashes inevitably with cherished notions of political equality and majority rule. Champions of democracy even suggest that too much focus on the need for leadership is even subversive to democracy.

Democratic theory has neglected, if not resisted, an emphasis on leadership on a variety of grounds:

on ideological grounds – because this emphasis has seemed to imply that some men should lead and others should follow, a proposition which clashes with the traditional democratic commitment to equality and to majoritarianism. ... on moral grounds – because it has seemed to overlook the democratic conviction that power corrupts... on emotional grounds – because it irritates that populist strain in democracy which often includes an envy of superior persons.⁴

Leadership, as noted, is often viewed in America as elitist and therefore as un-American. Our notions of rugged individualism and equality make us suspicious of the idea that leaders can or should decide about our future, or make our laws, or get us into war. Plato, Machiavelli and other grand theorists might insist on the necessity of

⁴ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "On Heroic Leadership and The Dilemma of Strong Men and Weak Peoples" originally published in Encounter, 1960, and reprinted in The Politics of Hope (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 4.

winnowing out and training a select few for top leadership, yet this runs against the American grain. Americans often like to think that virtually anyone can become a leader.

Political theorist Benjamin Barber says we worry too much about not having enough leaders. Our real problem, he says, “is not having enough citizens.” Barber also contends strong leaders and a nation of strong central political institutions not only demean the nation’s commitment to political equality and make for a weak people – they ensure as well a thin or flabby democracy.⁵

American distrust of centralized leadership permeates the nation and, as McClelland suggest, it is deeply rooted in our heritage:

Many Americans originally came here to avoid tyranny in other countries. We have come to hate and fear authority in any of its forms because of its excesses elsewhere. As a nation, we are strongly committed to an ideology of personal freedom and non-interference by government. We cherish our free press as the guardian of our freedom because it can ferret out tendencies toward the misuse of personal power. In government, as in other organizations, we have developed elaborate systems of checks

⁵ Personal interview / conversations with Barber. See also Benjamin R. Barber, Strong Democracy (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1984) and his “Neither Leaders nor Followers: Citizenship Under Strong Democracy” in Michael Beschloss and Thomas E. Cronin, eds. Essays in Honor of James MacGregor Burns (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989), pp. 117-132.

and balances which make it difficult for any one person or group to abuse power. In government power is divided three ways – among the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches. In business it is divided among management, labor and owners; and in the university, among the trustees, administration, and students. Many of these organizations also have a system for rotating leadership to make sure that no one acquires enough power over time to be able to misuse it. A Martian observer might conclude that as a nation we are excessively, almost obsessively worried about the abuse of power.⁶

Americans, for example, suspect politicians of being ambitious, conniving, unprincipled, ruthless, opportunistic, and even corrupt – “just into politics for what they can get out of it for themselves.” A few years ago, some folks invented a board game similar to Monopoly with the cynical title Lie, Cheat and Steal: The Game of Political Power.

Poking fun at politicians is a national pastime. Cartoonists and comedians have long entertained us with the following barbs at elected officials:

-- “Don’t vote, it only encourages them!”

-- “Thank God only one of them can win!”

⁶ David C. McClelland, Power: The Inner Experience (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1975) pp. 266-267.

- "I am not a politician, and my other habits are good."
- "Old politicians never die, they just evade away."
- "A politician is a person who approaches every question with an open mouth."
- "The problem with political jokes is that they keep getting elected to Congress."
- "Politicians are there when they need you."
- "Politicians divide their time between running for office and running for cover."
- "A politician thinks of the next election; a statesman of the next generation."
- "I sensed in him a certain fluidity of principle."
- "He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career." (G.B. Shaw)
- "In one country it is said people can rise to public office only when they shoot a rhinoceros. In this country, people can win public office only if they shoot the bull."
- "Our local legislator is not exactly a liar. Yet he is the only person I know who needs someone to call his dog for him."
- "That state senator opens his mouth mainly to exchange feet."

Politicians, ironically, do more than their share of defiling the name of their profession. Thus, it is common for would-be-elected officials to disparage incumbents by calling them "mere politicians" or "political hacks." They often appear compelled to put down their prospective profession even as they try to enter it. And, once elected, politicians often deride their fellow colleagues for failing to rise above politics, as in

“you’re just acting politically” or “that’s just political!” No other profession, not even the field of law, heaps as much abuse on itself. It’s unlikely, for example, to hear a physician chiding a colleague of acting “medical”.

Politicians even try to claim they’re not politicians. California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, admittedly a maverick politician, once told MSNBC’s talk show host Chris Matthews that his biggest personal challenge was “never to become a politician,” adding ...”I am not a politician and never will be a politician.” Nice try.⁷

Laughing at politicians may be a favorite American sport yet the tradition is an ancient one. Insulting Athenian politicians was also a popular pastime. “The comic poets – who played something of the same role in Athens as independent journalists in our world – did it all the time” writes I.F. Stone, “to the intense enjoyment of Athenians.”⁸

Why do we laugh at politicians? We know someone has to forge compromises, solve public problems and help govern our committees. Yet, as noted, we dislike and fear the abuse of power. And we believe many if not most politicians are calculating liars.

One of the ways we cope with this dilemma is by laughing at politicians. Humor helps put politicians on notice that we are watching and are inherently distrustful. A

⁷ George Skelton, “Sorry Governor, You’re a Politician by Definition”, Los Angeles Times, March 17, 2005, p B3.

⁸ I.F. Stone, The Trial of Socrates (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1988), p. 86.

good joke at the expense of a politician helps level the playing field. It helps prick pomposity, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy. It can also, as Freud suggested, be therapeutic.⁹

Thus, for those who believe politicians should rarely be trusted, humor is a means of light-hearted fencing or even an unsubtle communication of disrespect toward politicians who are always craving flattery. Plus politicians not only make extravagant promises, they also do some silly, stupid and even pretty dumb things and we laugh at them to relieve some of the misery of the situation. We also laugh because it is healthier than crying about the situation.

Even politicians laugh at themselves. Thus this politician's prayer: "O Lord, give us the wisdom to utter gentle and tender words...for tomorrow we may have to eat them."

Are we fair to politicians? Hardly. Yet this is how the system works. We ask of them the impossible. They struggle and sometimes succeed, but we form our opinions, are judgmental, and laugh at their failures.

We place politicians in seemingly no-win situations and then laugh at them for what we wrongly (usually) assume they can do. Perhaps we are as much the hypocrites as the politicians – and if so, perhaps that's the real joke.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious

Over the years I've surveyed people on what they thought of "the typical American politician." Most responses were negative. Typical responses: The American politician is "male, middle-aged, and usually a lawyer," who is power hungry, on an ego trip, authoritarian, slick, two-faced, outgoing, glib-talking, superficial, evasive, unprincipled, self-serving, an opportunist, manipulative and mainly preoccupied with staying in office. Also, "he only listens to the voters when he thinks they might be angry enough to vote him out of office." And they always promise too much.

Asked to describe the ideal American politician, people responded as follows: The ideal politician is honest, humble, patriotic, principled, compassionate, sensitive to the needs of others, well-informed, competent, fair-minded, objective, intellectual, honest, a good listener, candid, a good mediator, self-confident, inspiring and courageous enough to stand up to narrow or selfish special interests.

An obvious gap exists between our conceptions of typical and ideal politicians. The gap exists in part because of excessive expectations. We want politicians to be perfect, or at least near-perfect, to have all the answers and to have the right opinions (preferably like ours). It is impossible for anyone to live up to these ideals. Politicians, like all individuals, live in a real world where perfection may be a goal, but compromises, policy and vote-brokering, logrolling, negotiating and incremental adjustments have to co-exist along with those staples of political life – ambition, self-promotion and fundraising.

We want politicians to solve our worst problems, yet we also make them scapegoats for all the things we dislike about government: taxes, regulations, bureaucracies, and any limitation on our freedom. Americans like their country yet do

not especially like their governments, especially the people in office. Politicians are the symbol of the things we dislike about governments.

We need to stop every once and a while and defend politics and politicians. If elected politicians often seem bewildered in dealing with controversial issues so do the rest of us. If they sometimes postpone things rather than directly confront them, so do we.

Moreover, politicians have to be ambitious and assertive--traits we often undervalue. There is a wrongheaded view that politics ought never to involve personal ambition; it should, we are told, be solely a matter of high principles and ideals. Yet we need to reconsider this and take another look at the indispensable role ambition plays in inspiring accomplishments. For personal ambition sparks just about any professional's efforts to excel. It motivates the problem-solving politician just as it motivates the talented composer, scientist or cyclist.

Indeed it is the politician's willingness to run, serve and to respond, within reason, to the voter's interests that is the indispensable link in making democracy work. For a central principle of democracy holds that those who exercise power and make the laws win the right to do so only by winning election.

Factions and partisan coalitions are a reality in every society. Politics is the art of accommodating the diversity and variety of public views and trying to build durable coalitions to solve public problems.

Politicians perform essential functions which most of us cannot perform and which we cannot do without. Among other tasks the politician tries "to reconcile the

multiplicity of conflicting interests and wills which exist in any free society, and to produce from their conflict a policy which if not approved will, at least for the time being, be acquiesced in by all of them.¹⁰ In simple terms, politics is the art of the possible, the art of pragmatically achieving the doable.

It isn't always pretty, yet politicians are the indispensable horse traders and agreement negotiators we employ to keep a diverse pluralistic society going.

Politicians who can work out acceptable compromises in effect prevent us from shooting at one another. It is in their mediating role that politicians are indispensable, and can be at their best.

There is no such possibility as "not having politics"; most of the great issues and policy controversies are ultimately political issues.

Without politics, there is little hope for freedom or stability. Without politicians and political debates, we have virtually no choices. Democracy requires politicians with guts, courage, drive and imagination to step forward, offer ideas and choices, debate and listen and be willing to put together political coalitions.

Paradoxically, we want our politicians to be like us – to be representative – yet to be better than us. We also, selfishly, want our politicians to do what we want, and to ignore what other people want. We also, of course, want political leaders to bring out the best in us.

¹⁰ Henry Fairlie, The Life of Politics, (New York: Basic Books, 1968) p. 23.

“A great nation is not led by a man who simply repeats the talk of the street-corners or the opinion of the newspapers,” said Woodrow Wilson. “A nation is led by a man who hears more than those things; or who, rather, hearing those things, understands them better, unites them, puts them into a common meaning.”¹¹

In the real world there can be few breakthroughs, progress or freedom without politics and politicians. Thus fragmentation and dispersal of powers, especially in constitutional democracies, absolutely requires politicians, elected and unelected alike, to mediate among factions, build coalitions, and work out compromises among and within branches of our government to produce responsible politics and action.¹²

Citizens in democracies will rarely be satisfied with their politicians. Nor should they be. The ideal politician is doubtless a mythical character. For the ideal politician would be able to please absolutely everyone. Such a person would also be able to make conflicts disappear. Such a person could exist only in a small community where everyone shared the same ideas, ideals and interests. But the very liberties that exist in

¹¹ Woodrow Wilson, address on the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln’s birth “Abraham Lincoln: A Man of the People”, 1909, in Ray Stannard Baker and William El. Dodd, eds. College and State Educational, Literary, and Political Papers. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925. Vol. 2. p.99.

¹² For more on the art and necessity of politics and politicians see Bernard Crick, In Defense of Politics, revised edition, New York: Penguin Books, 1983; Rexford G. Tugwell, The Art of Politics, Garden City, New York. Doubleday & Co.: 1958; Daniel Kemmis, The Good City and The Good Life, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995; Joe Klein, Politics Lost, (New York: Doubleday2005); and William M. Bulger, While The Music Lasts: My Life in Politics (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

a democracy such as ours invite diversity and therefore conflict. Further, a two party or multi-party system positively encourages conflict as well as choices. Hence, politicians, as well as the people they represent must have different, contending ideas about what is best for the nation.

On The Separation of Brain and State

Part of the hostility toward politicians arises because writers and intellectuals deplore the techniques of politics. Intellectuals and artists are less interested in the art of the possible and more interested in what ought to be. In a sense, too, many of them are interested in the art of the impossible. Politicians are inclined to tell us what we want to hear whereas prophets, poets and intellectuals claim to tell us what is true and right. Garry Wills notes that the “useful politician is never a man in advance of his times” yet this is precisely what intellectuals find so scornful in the politician.¹³

Politicians, the point is, are different from poets and prophets.

What is an intellectual? There are countless definitions. These range from the uncharitable depiction of intellectuals as people who take more words than necessary to say more than they know, to the more charitable definition of the intellectual as a person devoted to matters of the mind. An intellectual is a person who enjoys ideas and values, thinks about them, talks about them, worries about them, breaks them down and builds them back up in different recombinations. In a larger sense, intellectuals connect

¹³ Garry Wills, “Hurrah for Politicians” Harper’s Magazine (September, 1975), p. 48.

ideas in order to build models and theories about the meaning of life, the universe, truth, beauty and justice.

An intellectual is also, in part, a philosopher, a lover of truth and knowledge; someone interested in ideas for the love of wisdom. An intellectual has an innate love and curiosity for knowledge and seeks ends beyond the immediate, short term practical needs of society. Intellectuals question conventional assumptions and view things in the longer, higher, and wider sense of “truth” and “justice”. Philosophers from Socrates to Chomsky, regularly assume the responsibility to speak truth to power, to fight, or at least disdain, established intellectual political and social practices.

Paradoxically, a philosopher or intellectual is influential as a “leader”, only when free from the desire to be a political leader.

The American Republic was shaped by intellectual activists. John Adams, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, James Wilson, James Madison, and others helped invent this new nation. Yet the intellectual has more typically played a detached role, often skeptical, critical, or even outraged by the misuses and abuses of political power and national leadership institutions.¹⁴

Can an intellectual become a national leader and exercise political power without losing the perspective and integrity of the disinterested analyst? Many intellectuals

¹⁴ An exception are a few intellectuals who have temporarily joined the White House staff. See Tevi Troy Intellectuals and The American Presidency (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

doubt it. It is as if public power and leadership responsibilities corrupt one's sensibilities. Listen to some of the old sayings about what happens to someone who becomes a popular leader: "A friend in power is a friend lost"; "Power will intoxicate the best hearts, as wine the strongest heads"; and "Power turns good persons into bad and bad persons into worse."

The distaste for leadership and power is seldom more tenaciously held than by artists and intellectuals. The distrust leads to what might be called a "separation of brain and state."

Intellectuals commonly disparage many of the required practices of politics: compromise, pragmatism, bargaining, cunning, manipulation and the endless squabbling and deliberation that make up politics. Shakespeare set the tone with his epithet of the "scurvy politician" in King Lear (Act IV, Scene 6) and again in Hamlet (Act V, Scene 1) – "A politician...one that would circumvent God."¹⁵ Henry Adams wrote that nobody in politics could be trusted, and he contemptuously satirized the American politician in his Democracy: An American Novel.¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau wrote that

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Lear (New York: Pocket Books, 1957) p. 99, and William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (New York: New American Library, 1963) pp. 151-152.

¹⁶ See Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co. 1918) Henry Adams, Democracy: An American Novel (New York.: Henry Holt and Co., 1883).

what is called politics “is comparatively so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized it concerns me at all.”¹⁷

The poet Shelley claimed that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”¹⁸ “Writers legislate the interior world, they tell us the secret meanings of places and things as well as our morally immense human secrets...” writes E.L. Doctorow. “We writers may be unacknowledged as legislators, but the politicians hold no lifetime office as we do, they rise and fall and their works crumble, and as it turns out, the truth is more likely to inhere in literature.”¹⁹ At their best, the intellectual critic is a shadow or opposition government. The task of the artist and writer, in Solzhenitsyn’s words, is to sense more keenly than other citizens the harmony and beauty of the world, and the outrage man and his governments have done to it and poignantly to let people know.

Solzhenitsyn speaks with first hand experience when he writes, “The great writer is, so to speak, a second government; that is why no regime anywhere has ever loved its great writers, only its minor ones.”²⁰ Others say the artist teaches the rest of us to

¹⁷ Quoted in Charles A. Madison, Critics and Crusaders (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), p. 184.

¹⁸ The Shelley quote and related themes come from William M. Gibson, Theodore Roosevelt among the Humorists. W.D. Howells, Mark Twain and Mr. Dooley (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980.).

¹⁹ E.L. Doctorow, “The Case For the Writer As Politician” The Washington Post National Weekly, May 28-June 3, 1990, p. 25.

²⁰ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize address, 1970.

see. “A writer often has to take the place of the weak or nonexistent parliaments, unions, free newspapers, and so on,” says novelist Carlos Fuentes. “The writer has to say things that would otherwise be silence...A writer is frightened of silence. Silence is death.”²¹

Intellectuals are usually removed from the seductions of political power. Indeed, as suggested above, their powerlessness may be the precondition to their imagination and wisdom. Spirited critical discussion about leaders and their use of power is extremely important for the preservation of honest government. Artists, poets, critics, scientists, writers and scholars of all kinds can help us as a society determine whether we are using power, or whether power is using us.

In a sense, however, the intellectual as a critic, “is alienated from the society he criticizes, at odds with the complacency and self-satisfaction of (some of) his fellows,” writes Michael Walzer. “The critic challenges friends and enemies alike, he is self-sentenced to intellectual and political solitude.”²²

²¹ Carlos Fuentes, interviewed in Claudia Driefus, “Silence is Death, Carlos Fuentes Speaks Out...” Mother Jones (January, 1986), p. 25. See also, his satiric novel on Mexican politicians and their advisers, The Eagle’s Throne (New York: Random House, 2006).

²² Michael Walzer, The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and political Commitment in the Twentieth Century (New York: Basic Books, 1988) p. 8, p. 12. See also the similar notion’s about science being an inherently subversive activity, a threat to establishments of all kinds, Freeman Dyson, The Scientist as Rebel (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007).

Walzer asks the critic to expose the hypocrisy of his own society, to suggest the ideals that should guide us.

The intellectual may necessarily be detached from ordinary people, but this is not to say they cannot serve the people as a counterpoint to those who wield power. Writers and intellectuals may be oppositional or even subversive figures but they need not be, and customarily are not, the enemies of the people. Indeed great and liberating literature often emerges as the voice of a silenced people triggered by political and social repression. Consider the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Solzhenitsyn, Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, George Conrad, V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer and others. “Almost all of the best fiction in the second half of the 20th century,” writes critic George Steiner, is more or less explicitly political and “it is precisely in the societies under the severest and most philistine governance” that much of this imaginative, critical literature is created.²³

Stating that the responsibilities of the intellectual require him or her to renounce the pursuit and exercise of power may take the argument too far. Yet close observers of politics warn us it is nearly impossible to mix the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of power. “Those who have tried it, “ wrote Walter Lippmann, “turn out to be very bad politicians or they cease to be scholars.”²⁴

²³ In Michiko Kakutani, “Where Literature and Repression Mix: Writers Who Shook A Government” The New York Times (February 8, 1990), 2. p.B.2.

²⁴ Walter Lippmann “The Deepest Issues of Our Time” Vital Speeches, (July 1, 1936).

Woodrow Wilson, while still at Princeton University, spoke to this problem. While he tried to reconcile (both in his talk as well as in his life) the divide between the “men who write” and “men who lead”, he appreciated that uncompromising thought is the luxury of those in the ivory tower. “Untrammelled reasoning is the indulgence of the philosopher, of the dreamer of sweet dreams.” We need to make a sharp distinction, Wilson adds, “between the literature of conduct and the literature of the imagination.”²⁵

Wilson defines the problem:

The men who write love proportion; the men who act must strike out practicable lines of action, and neglect proportion. This would seem to explain the well-nigh universal repugnance felt by literary men towards democracy. The arguments which induce popular action must always be broad and obvious arguments. Only a very gross substance of concrete conception can make any impression on the minds of the masses; they must get their ideas very absolutely put, and are much readier to receive a half truth which they can promptly understand than a whole truth which has too many sides to be seen all at once. How any man whose method is the method of artistic completeness of thought and expression, whose mood is the mood of contemplation, for a moment understand or tolerate

²⁵ Woodrow Wilson, talk at the University of Tennessee, June 16, 1890, reprinted in Arthur S. Link, ed., The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) vol. 6., p. 663.

‘the majority’ whose purpose and practice it is to strike out broad, rough-hewn policies, whose mood is the mood of action.²⁶

Thus the world of prophets, poets, philosophers and many scientists as well are usually at odds with political practitioners. The pursuit of new ideas and new ideals, and knowledge for its own sake, invariably brings the intellectual into personal and professional conflict with the political mainstream. Politicians for their part, typically dismiss academics and poets as unrealistic theorists preoccupied if not obsessed with the world as it should or might be and are largely ignorant of the world as it is.

Thus, a partial separation of brain and state persists. Politicians prize loyalty, gradualism and realism. Philosophers and critics prize skepticism, idealism and detachment, and are averse to pragmatism and compromise.

Yet one of the great dilemmas for society is that intellectuals seldom have a monopoly on the truth and political leaders rarely have all that much power, at least for long. Thus “speaking truths to power” is always a challenge.²⁷

Philosophers and intellectuals have inspired political change throughout history. No one disputes the importance – or in the long run the political influence – of

²⁶ Woodrow Wilson, June 15, 1890, op. cit., p. 647.

²⁷ Benjamin R. Barber, The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001). I draw here, too, on Derek Ball, “Philosophers and Political Leadership” December 9, 2001, an unpublished paper written for a seminar at Whitman College.

Machiavelli, Locke, Marx and many others. While the philosopher – leader of Plato’s Republic is doubtless impractical it is equally clear that in the cave of political reality, to borrow from Plato’s famous parable, it is always harder to see.

So How Do We Reconcile Leadership and Democracy?

People want responsible and accountable leaders; leaders who listen and act in ways we admire or will, in due course, admire.

Democratic leadership at its best recognizes the fundamental wants and needs of citizens, encourages citizens to a fuller consciousness of their higher needs and helps convert the resulting aspirations into practical demands on other leaders.

“Leadership acts as an inciting and triggering force in the conversion of conflicting demands, values, and goals into significant behavior” writes James MacGregor Burns. Leaders act as catalytic agents in arousing citizens, discerning their hopes, grievances and wants.²⁸

A democratic leader consults, listens and engages with fellow citizens to bring them to a heightened political awareness.

The optimal leader in a democracy moves away, when possible, from hierarchical commands and conventional superior-subordinate relations and instead inspires and mobilizes fellow citizens and participants to join in and partake of common problem-solving tasks. Democratic leaders recognize that the empowering of others

²⁸ James MacGregor Burns, Leadership, (New York: Harper & Row, 198) p. 38.

may mean sharing of authority and power, yet they accept this as a welcome trade-off, especially if problems are being solved.

Conceived this way, democratic politics is a forum for responsibility and leadership, in which by acting together, citizens and citizen-leaders attain shared ends and remain free. Politics in this sense is not a necessary evil, but rather a valued and realistic opportunity. Politics is, as Bernard Crick reminds us, the preoccupation of a free people, and its existence is a test of freedom.²⁹ Politics at its best transcends the selfishness of narrow interests and conventional power arrangements and provides citizens with the opportunity to enact programs for the common good and for the reasonable ordering of liberties.

Democracies in practice, need all kinds of leadership. Opportunities to serve exist at every level of government. Visible popular leaders in a democracy are empowered by the ideas and movements that arise on their own. Elected leaders exploit and adopt these bubble-up developments far more than they create or shape them. Indeed, popular leaders at all levels are interpreters of events and opportunities

²⁹ See, in general Bernard Crick, In Defense of Politics, 2nd edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), and Burns, Leadership, op. cit. Note also the useful observation by Clinton Rossiter: "No America without democracy, no democracy without politics, no politics without parties, no parties without compromise and moderation." in his Parties and Politics in America (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 1.

more than they are the producers, directors or choreographers of the events over which they preside.

Countless situations call for a few select people to make critical decisions on behalf of the public. While power does tend to corrupt, systems that are powerless or leaderless for too long can often experience another form of corruption, namely a paralysis or anarchy that is every bit as destructive to the community as having too much power lodged in centralized authorities.

Governments throughout history have been governments not of and by the masses, but of and by, elites. The question is not whether elites will exist and remain influential, but whether leaders will govern on behalf of the many or on behalf of the few. Similarly important is whether those who govern will be intoxicated and corrupted by power. Responsibility and accountability are as critically important as they are hard to guarantee.

If intellectuals and citizens have historically been suspicious of political leaders, this is because leaders in the past have been self-serving or even done harm as often as they have served just and liberating ends. Leaders, in this sense, have to be mistrusted, and held to strict account. None are infallible. Power is often like an addictive drug that distorts vision. Moreover, as poets and novelists remind us, unquestioning subservience to those who wield public power can corrupt the human spirit.

Still, leadership of one type or another is indispensable in democratic regimes of consent. Masses of citizens are structurally incapable of direct self-government. "They must delegate their power to agents," writes Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. These leaders, or

agents, must devise remedies and policies that will both work and elicit the consent of the governed. “Democratic leadership is the art of fostering and managing innovation in the service of a free community.” Democratic leaders, ideally, help clarify free choice against the supposed inevitabilities of history.³⁰

The challenge of reconciling leadership and democracy is part definitional, part attitudinal and part behavioral. Americans, as discussed earlier, have long held views of leaders that are hierarchical, personalistic, and upon which followers are dependent. That conception is both unhelpful and also antithetical to our democratic aspirations. The very word “follower” is in many ways a negative and demeaning word and it too deserves redefinition. A nation of subservient followers can never be a democratic one. A democratic nation requires educated, skeptical, caring and engaged citizens who are willing to lead as well as follow, willing to point the way as often as they join the rank and file.

More than any other form of government, democracy requires a peculiar blend of faith in the people and skepticism of them. It requires a faith in the common human enterprise; a belief that if the people are informed and caring, they can be entrusted at least to some extent with their own self-government. It requires, too, an optimism that

³⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Chapter 14 “Democracy and Leadership” in his Cycles of American History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985) pp. 427, 428. See also James MacGregor Burns Leadership, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) for similar themes, and in general, Bertrand Russell, Power (New York.: Allen and Unwin, 1938), Chapter Two.

when things begin to go wrong, the people can be relied on to set them right. Yet a robust, healthy, skepticism of government is equally needed. Democracy requires everyone, not as true believers but assertive citizens, to be questioning of leaders and any group with too much power. However much we may prize majority rule, we have to be vigilant against a majority that opposes the freedom of the individual. The spirit of freedom is the spirit that is never too sure that it is always or even mostly right.

Democratic leadership can be of an enabling, facilitative kind. Leadership, reconceptualized as an engagement among equals, as a collegial collaboration and partnership can empower and liberate people, and can define and enlarge people's choices and freedom.

Broadly Dispersed Leadership

Innovative, policy leadership seldom comes from those in the White House or senior leaders in Congress.

New ideas come from a variety of sources, from experiments in states, cities or in other nations, from research breakthroughs, from think-tank research, from enterprising legislators and their committee staffs who are always on the prowl for new measures, from interest groups, from political and social movements, and from rebels and mavericks.

Elected officials and their aides are agents who consciously serve pluralities and majorities. They have fought to win elections by appealing in broad terms to as many groups and sectors as possible. Candidates for the White House and other high offices view their campaigns as strategic fights to win broad-based support and less as

occasions to spell out in any great detail the vital policy initiatives needed in the next decade. In a sense, too, we never know what problems elected leaders will have to face specifically, thus we elect leaders who seem competent and trustworthy and let them deal with policy dilemmas as the situation demands.

As a politician friend of mine put it, “elected officials are winners not leaders.” That is, they are cautious and rarely want to stir up divisiveness in the nation. Most of the time presidential candidates phrase what they might do in vague terms: “I shall go to Korea”; “Let’s get the Nation moving again”; “I have a secret plan to win the [Vietnam] war”; “I’m not a lawyer, I am not from Washington, and I will not lie to you”; “We can do better!”.

Breakthrough ideas, as noted, seldom come from the White House. “No sophisticated student of contemporary American policy making” writes Nelson Polsby, “believes that policies normally spring fully formed from the overtaxed brow of the President or even from his immediate entourage”.³¹

Just as in the private sector, new ideas or invention come from a variety of places, often emerging from unexpected sources. Large brand name organizations are often less likely to invent major new products than smaller, newer, more risk-taking and entrepreneurial outfits. Thus the automobile was not invented by the transportation experts of that era, the railroaders. The airplane was not invented by the automobile

³¹ Nelso Polsby, Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Institution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 5.

experts. Polaroid self-developing film was not invented at Kodak. Personal computers were not invented or first marketed by the computer giant IBM. Digital watches were not invented by the old watchmakers. Federal Express and FAX systems emerged from outside of Western Union and the telegraph companies. Google and Yahoo emerged not from the Microsofts or Hewlett-Packards but from young start up entrepreneurs. The list is long and the lesson is important.³²

Domestic policy ideas are seldom invented at election time. Campaigns are occasions, or so it usually seems, for appeals to patriotism, nationalism and, sadly, sometimes bigotry, fear, greed and chauvinism. Complex social problems are unlikely to be clarified when two candidates lusting in their hearts after the White House are trying desperately to win over the swing voters in the suburbs of Ohio and Florida, or among blue-collar workers, or first-time voters.

Major policy change often takes place over a lengthy period and sometimes it seems as though the White House is the last to learn about the pending change. This is in part because we have created a presidency that is necessarily a brokerage institution: it waits for other groups, individuals, and institutions to take the lead. The White House responds to ideas and suggestions for change, yet usually not until such ideas or proposals have gathered substantial support; health insurance and Social Security reform are examples.

³² This point is suggested in David Campbell, Take the Road to Creativity (Allen, Texas: Argus, 1977), p. 94.

Does this mean presidents are followers more than they are leaders? This is usually the case. Yet to put it this bluntly doubtless overstates the case. Presidents plainly exercise leadership in emergency situations (although not all of them do so decisively or prudently) and often in secretive diplomatic and national security situations. Presidents can also assist those who advocate policy innovation. By their tone and example they can nurture, or dampen, a national debate and in doing so can often expand or contract public support for an idea whose time has yet to come.

There have been presidents who have surprised people by their tenacious advocacy of pet causes: Theodore Roosevelt and preserving national forests or Reagan's infatuation with a Strategic Defense System. Still, most of the time presidents are cautious. They respond to crusades and movements; they rarely lead them and almost never start them. They fear being in advance of their time. They are preoccupied with appearing prudent, practical, sensible, and effective. Hence they act upon ideas for which they can gain congressional passage, public support, or bureaucratic compliance. In effect they spend political capital and use their personal leverage at the margins, to lift a cause over the threshold of acceptability, yet mainly when it is almost there.

Presidents Cleveland, Harrison and McKinley, for example, were clearly not leaders of the grand women's suffrage movement of their day. Presidents from Hoover to Kennedy were hardly civil rights leaders. Nixon was scarcely an environmentalist and he most assuredly was not an anti-war leader. Yet he was in office when the environmental and anti-war movements burst upon the national scene and he had to

respond and, in his own way, join up. Policy leadership and incubation is always going on throughout the nation, often in activist and vigorous ways.³³

Lincoln is a somewhat harder case. Yet Lincoln's prudence rather than boldness, his political dissembling rather than intellectual or moral leadership are well documented. Even his African-American admirer, Frederick Douglass, portrays Lincoln as at best a reluctant mediator between the forces of slavery-advocating insurrectionists and the liberating abolitionists.

He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country...

Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the utmost...When he tarried long in the mountain, when he strangely told us that we were the cause of the war; when he still more strangely told us that we were to

³³ It is often going on in major interest groups and reflected in Congress, and in the opposition party. See, for example, James L. Sundquist, Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Years (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1968).

leave the land in which we were born; when he refused to employ our arms in defense of the Union...³⁴

Douglass, who in many ways was the Martin Luther King, Jr. of his day, was enormously frustrated by the way Lincoln groveled before the foul curse of slavery. Yet Douglass appreciated that the often lonely and melancholy Lincoln was constantly assailed by slaveholders, abolitionists, by people wanting peace at any price, by those who wanted a more ruthless prosecution of the war, by those who wanted it to be a war of abolition, by those upset when it became a war of abolition and on and on. “He was often wounded in the house of his friends” Douglass observed. “Reproaches came thick and fast upon him from within and from without, and from opposite quarters.”³⁵

Significant changes in national policies as a rule come between elections. There are exceptions, but most social, educational, and domestic political breakthroughs are nurtured by policy activists or professional experts at the neighborhood, city and statewide levels long before they attract solid backing from state and national “leaders.” This is as true for issues of policy approaches advanced by the political right as by the political left.

³⁴ Frederick Douglass “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln” April 14, 1876, reprinted in Lewis Copeland and Lawrence W. Lamm, eds, The World’s Great Speeches, 3rd edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), p. 808, p. 809. See also Richard Hofstadter’s The American Political Tradition (New York: Vintage, 1948), Ch. 5; and David H. Donald’s Lincoln (New York: Simon + Schuster, 1995).

³⁵ Douglass, ibid, p. 812.

Thus the suffragettes won support out around the country in places as unlikely as Wyoming and Colorado before succeeding in the nation. The same has been true for abolitionists, civil-rights reformers, consumer and environmental protection advocates, property tax reformers or Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

Presidents and other national leaders are pragmatists of the first order, cautious and ever fearful of rocking the boat, or going outside the traditional boundaries on most policy issues.

Top elected officials have critically important roles to play. They can lead and their leadership makes a difference. But they rarely provide the kind of cutting edge leadership that prophets, poets, rebels and movement organizers can and do provide. Nor should they. A movement or reform should pass the trial stages at lower levels before national implementation.

Act I, Act II, and Act III Leadership: A Frame of Reference

Policy ideas usually go through a series of stages prior to their gaining acceptance by top elected officials. To borrow a metaphor from the theater, policy change typically requires leadership in at least three distinct phases. In Act I, policy ideas are formulated; in Act II, they are spread and support for them is mobilized, in Act III, power brokers modify the ideas and gradually intervene to oversee their enactment and implementation.

Russian writer Anton Chekhov once suggested that playgoers should watch for the gun on the wall in Act I. If there is a gun on the wall in Act I, he predicted it is highly likely to go off in Act III. This metaphorical warning is similarly apt for students of

political and policy leadership. For we are usually insufficiently attentive to what goes on in the “off Broadway” phases of policy evolution. The storybook myths of heroic or failed presidential leadership too often focus on Act III leaders and assume, wrongly, that Act III leaders perform just about all the leadership that occurs. Such oversimplification is misleading and wrong.

Table 4.1

Illustrative Roles and Jobs of Act I, II and III Leaders

<u>Act I:</u>	<u>Act II:</u>	<u>Act III:</u>
Agitators	Consciousness-raisers	Power-brokers
Rebels, dissidents	Coalition-builders	Office-holders
Crowd-gatherers	Alliance-educators	Elected officials
Inventors	Lobbyists, promoters	Govt. advisers
Policy-prophets	Policy advocates	Policy-announcers
Movement founders	Movement organizers	Political party leaders

Innovative discoveries in a whole variety of fields often come from the edge, or fringes, of a particular field rather than emerging from the mainstream. Virtually all organizations, and most nation-states, begin with an infusion of new ideas and ideals but as they gradually progress from Act I to Act III status they rigidify and become less open to new ideas or innovations. When this happens the breakthroughs are inevitably

more likely to come from outside the orthodox leaders and conventional paradigms of the day.

“It is precisely the ability to perceive change when most of one’s contemporaries are still unable to do so that would enable a leader to take advantage of new opportunities as soon as they arise,” writes economist Albert Hirschman. In such situations, a leader often appears to create such opportunities single-handedly.³⁶

In the American revolutionary period, it was people like Sam Adams, Patrick Henry and Tom Paine who saw need for change, agitated and rebelled in classic Act I behavior. They gathered crowds, gave impassioned addresses and stirred things up as they performed the indispensable catalyst role in founding the revolutionary movement.

Yet, the talents needed in Act I activities are different from those required for implementing the cause, or of governing, or staying in office and protecting the gains later on. Agitation and mobilization necessarily give way to leaders of the struggle (in the Revolution’s case – to the Washington’s and Jefferson’s) and to those who build the foundations for the new order, exemplified by the work of Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and James Madison. Taking both the American and Russian Revolutions into account for comparative purposes, the performers or players in the three acts would like this.

³⁶ Abert O. Hirschman, “Underdevelopment, Obstacles to the Perception of Change, and Leadership” Daedalus (Summer, 1968) p. 933.

American Experience

Soviet Experience

Act I	Locke, Paine, Sam Adams, Patrick Henry	Karl Marx
Act II	Thomas Jefferson George Washington	Lenin, Trotsky
Act III	Hamilton, Madison, John Adams	Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Putin

Act 1 Leadership

Some historians have suggested what might be called crank theory of political change, suggesting it is the cranks on the fringes who come up with the novel ideas or inventions that elude the mainstream experts. The cranks or rebels, working on the edge of a field, do not have the boundary constraints specialists in the mainstream have. Since they are not burdened with the “conventional wisdom” of the day, they are not biased against new, different or revolutionary ideas. Those who view new evidence through old paradigms are often unable to understand the true nature or implications of changing conditions. Also, since they are not inhibited by the same paradigms as the experts; they see things insiders do not see.³⁷

³⁷ See the general treatment of this in Thomas Kuhn The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), and in Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro, Beyond Reason (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), and James L. Adams, The Care and Feeding of Ideas (Stanford, California: Stanford Alumni Association, 1986).

The process of inventing new paradigms and the cycle of new discoveries and their acceptance by the mainstream relates closely to the theory of Act I, II, and III leaders and the way in which innovations, policy change and major political shifts are brought into operation.

Act I leaders are dreamers, visionaries, rebels, heretics, cranks, quacks, and creative catalysts who initiate, invent, and innovate. It is they who question the status quo and reject prevailing paradigms. Often it is simply a discovery that “Hey, we don’t have to accept things as they are; we can do it our way.” They have an outsider approach which can see what is ludicrous, or even lucrative, in the things others take for granted. Act I types precisely because they do not have responsibilities of running large-scale systems are measurably less inhibited in taking risks. They are blessed with the flexibility to reason, to explore, and to discover new ideas and thereby to provide the basis for new movements.

Living or existing on the edge, the Act I types do not have to adhere to the constraints of the orthodox establishment. They give rise to visions which challenge prevailing norms. Yet having these iconoclastic visions accepted by the mainstream depends to varying degrees on whether or not Act II leaders will emerge, with quite different skills, to promote, lobby and build movements that will advocate and advance the ideas introduced by the Act I types.

Act I rebels are continually struggling to make our society live up to its ideals of freedom, social justice, or productivity. They often do what the rest of us would like to do but don’t dare to do. The rebel fights not only for the relief of fellow citizens but also for integrity and authenticity. These Act I types appeal, usually with passion, to our

moral ideals and point out the inconsistencies between our ideals and our practices. Poets, priests and intellectuals perform some of these Act I responsibilities.

Psychologist Rollo May helps us understand the human dimension of the rebel:

The rebel...is one who opposes authority or restraint: one who breaks with established customs or tradition. His distinguishing characteristic is his perpetual restlessness. He seeks above all an internal change, a change in the attitudes, emotions, and outlook of the people to whom he is devoted. He often seems to be temperamentally unable to accept success... He may, as Socrates did, refer to himself as the gadfly in the state – the one who keeps the state from settling down into complacency, which is the first step toward decadence...

He rebels for the sake of a vision of life and society which he is convinced is critically important for himself and his fellows. Every act of rebellion tacitly presupposes some value. The rebel does not seek power as an end and has little facility for using it; he tends to share his power...³⁸

In the case of the civil-rights movement, Act I leaders were angry abolitionists and insurrectionists who believed everyone should immediately be granted equal rights under the law, regardless of their race. William Lloyd Garrison, Nat Turner and John Brown could not have cared less about majority public opinion. They knew what was

³⁸ Rollo May, Power and Innocence (New York: Mentor, 1972), p. 221.

right and this was what mattered. “He was not one to be affected by the opinion others had of him” Charles Madison writes of Garrison. “He pursued his destined course with an inflexible will that made him, like the prophets of old, the scourge and conscience of his generation.”³⁹ Garrison saw himself as a renouncer of lies and a restorer of truth.

In the case of the environmental movement, Act I leadership is illustrated in the writings of the late Edward Abbey, especially in his novel The Monkey Wrench Gang (1975). Abbey became a cult figure for radical environmentalists who believed, we should keep things the way they used to be. This meant fighting development on most fronts. Walt Whitman’s aphorism “Resist much, obey little” became their motto. The idea of “monkey wrenching” was to blow up Glen Canyon Dam, a structure Abbey believed ruined a wonderfully pristine stretch of the Colorado River’s most scenic canyons. “He had the soul of a true believer and the stinger of a scorpion in defending a natural, free, unmanaged, unmanhandled wilderness of his chosen country,” wrote Wallace Stegner in a letter read at Abbey’s memorial. “He was a red-hot moment in the conscience of the country, and I suspect the half-life of his intransigence will turn out to be comparable to that of uranium.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Charles A. Madison, Critics and Crusaders: A Century of American Protest (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947), p 14.

⁴⁰ Wallace Stegner letter, in Richard Manning “Abbey’s Clan Gathers to Rededicate Itself” High Country News (June 5, 1989), p. 3.

Abbey's writings have inspired eco-minded terrorists to blow up John Deere tractors at development sites, place steel spikes in redwood trees to prevent sawing, and dynamite dam projects.

Other Act I "officers" of the environmentalist movement are supporters of "ecotage," sabotaging environmentally harmful practices or organizations, in order to save whales, dolphins or other species. One such rebel is Paul Watson, a Canadian who was thrown out of Greenpeace because he advocated more violent means than Greenpeace would condone. Watson rammed his ship, Sea Shepherd, into whaling vessels, dyed seal pup furs, blew up certain commercial fishing buildings and invaded the waters of foreign nations all with the intent to preserve species he was willing to die for. He viewed himself as part of a legion of Don Quixote's fighting greedy "corporate Goliaths." Watson was arrested on a number of occasions and accused of being a dangerous "environmental terrorist" yet he viewed himself merely as a crusader dedicated to stopping senseless killing. "I probably am a madman" Watson admits. "I go into these actions prepared to die because I know if I'm not afraid of death I can accomplish a lot."⁴¹

⁴¹ Paul Watson's comments at Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 18, 1989. For other viewers on ecotage and on Earth First! Movements see Jim Robbins, "Saboteurs for a Better Environment" New York Times (July 9, 1989) (p.6.E), and Eric Holle "Earth First! Spiritual Heir to Tarzan" in High Country News (July 19, 1989). p. 14.

A variety of dissidents helped to undermine Communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn exposed the lies, terrorism and brutalities of the Stalin period. Dissidents who fought for political and religious freedoms and suffered jail sentences, exile or death, signaled both internally and externally that repression would not be tolerated forever. The role of the church, intellectuals and the trade union-led SOLIDARITY movement in Poland illustrate other examples of Act I leadership, without which major political change could not have developed.

The earliest suffragettes, who voted when it was illegal and submitted to arrest and jail terms, were also activists in Act I.⁴² The early activities of Howard Jarvis in the 1960's before he became known as the father of the California Proposition 13 tax revolt measure illustrate yet another Act I example.⁴³ The populist organizers of coal miners in the 1880s qualify as well, as does Cindy Sheehan, an outraged mother of a U.S. soldier killed in Iraq who led vigils against President George W. Bush in protest of that war

In case after case, Act I types become defiant and reject the way things are. They dream dreams of how things ought to be. They willingly become outsiders and willingly take risks in order to protest the status quo and share their visions of change.

⁴² See, for example, Alma Lutz, Susan B. Anthony: Rebel, Crusader Humanitarian (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

⁴³ Howard Jarvis, I'm Mad as Hell (New York: Times Books, 1979).

They transform themselves into voices of protest. They adopt the role of agitator, crusader, populist or rebel in defiance of an order they refuse to accept. They are hell bent on stirring things up in hopes of unlocking new possibilities.

Not every Act I leader or cause deserves to succeed. To say that major breakthroughs often come from the fringes is not to say that cranks should all win, or that those in Act I are always right. Cranks and prophets of all sorts also work on behalf of radical causes that often are, and deserve to be, lost causes. “Most daring new ideas are foolish or dangerous and appropriately rejected or ignored” says Stanford University Professor James G. March. “So while it may be true that great geniuses are usually heretics, heretics are rarely great geniuses,”⁴⁴

Note, too, that Act I leaders often pay dearly for being in advance of their times. Countless civil rights leaders from Nat Turner and John Brown through Malcolm X were lynched, executed or assassinated. And for every Solzhenitsyn there were thousands of others, talented and untalented, who were left behind to rot in Soviet gulag prison camps. The celebrated American physician Jack Kevorkian, champion of physician-assisted suicide, spent most of his last decade in prison. Others have paid the price of ostracism and rejection by their families and communities as payment for their agitations. Act I leaders often operate in ways that the majority considers reckless. However much we may later grow to admire what these visionaries have done, most of

⁴⁴ March, quoted in Diane Couth, “Ideas as Art” [Harvard Business Review](#) October 2006, p. 85.

us gladly assign ourselves much more conventional, conservative and comfortable roles and responsibilities.

Still many social, economic and political breakthroughs have welled up from Act I policy prophets before they get attention in the more publicized and more “accepted” Act II stage of policy-leadership evolution.

Act II Leadership

The handiwork and legacy of the Act I types, or some modified version of it is typically picked up in Act II by mobilizers, organizers, lobbyists, activist researchers and educators with an interest in policy. Act II people are Susan Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Jarvis of the Proposition 13 Tax Revolt movement, Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund and U2’s Bono. They and hundreds lesser-known individuals like them are the alliance-builders who bring pressure on the elected legislators and political establishments of their day.

Their goals are seldom accomplished in short periods. Such efforts usually span years, decades and sometimes generations. Act II leaders seek to educate the public and to raise consciousness by demonstrating the validity of an idea, no matter how long it will take.

Popular writers occasionally perform some aspects of the Act II role. Thus Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin aroused and rallied the abolitionist cause just as it educated and focused the public’s consciousness on the racism of her day. Rachael Carlson’s eloquent Silent Spring likewise educated thousands of activist-citizens who in turn would mobilize, lobby and protest in the ranks of the environmental

movement. Similarly, in different ways, the writings of Milton Friedman and Ralph Nader helped to spur on tax reformers and pro-consumer activists in the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

Act II leaders seldom run for political office; they seek to change the thinking of both officials and electorates. They understand what a veteran member of Congress once told me: "Don't rely on Congress to start anything." And they know the truth, too, that most elected officials are preoccupied with getting reelected and listen attentively if not primarily to their past and prospective campaign contributors.⁴⁵

Act II leaders understand few truly bold measure begin at the top. And that few Act III people have original ideas. This is in large part due to the structure of American politics and the incentive system that rewards caution and low-risk behavior and is conditioned by the next Gallup Poll, federal election as well as fundraising realities. Act II leaders willingly enlarge and amplify conflict, whereas Act III leaders (elected officials, for example) are specialists in avoiding or diffusing conflicts. The power of the Act II types lies in their ability to swell the ranks, and they do this by arousing people and convincing them of the validity of their visions.

Act II leaders are intermediaries who, although not exactly part of the mainstream, are nonetheless savvy enough about the ways of the establishment to win

⁴⁵ See the classic by David Mayhew, [Congress: The Electoral Connection](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) and Kevin Phillips, [American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century](#) (New York: Viking, 2006)

converts to their cause. They can translate fresh approaches and new values into at least tentative propositions that will be entertained if not entirely embraced by top power brokers.

The Act II leader is the coalition-builder, the one who takes the ideas or innovations of the Act I types, sees their potential and attempts to make them into a viable force, a movement. The Act II types are more practical-minded than Act I types, yet creative enough to see the possibilities of new, even radical ideas. The Act II leader is, in a sense, the mobilizer or coalition-builder the one who takes the inventor's (or crank's) discovery from the workbench to the workplace, and attempts to market it to the society at large.

In the case of the American Revolution it took military leaders like George Washington and public relations alliance-building geniuses like Thomas Jefferson to put the revolutionary spirit of the disorganized Act I types into a galvanized, strategic movement that could rally the new states and mobilize them in battle.

In the case of the civil rights movement it would take a legion of people like Frederick Douglass, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young and countless more to build and sustain a nationwide civil rights

movement that eventually would win multiple legislative and court victories in the 1950s.⁴⁶

Russian scientist and human rights advocate Andrei Sakharov fought tirelessly as an Act II leader in the Soviet Union. His efforts throughout the 1970's and 1980's paved the way for much of what Gorbachev, Yeltsin and others would do after him. Few if any leaders were as effective in advocating fundamental change in the Soviet system.

In like manner, Nelson Mandela who started as an Act I leader in his younger day emerged as South Africa's leading black Act II leader both before and after he was released from his 27 years in prison. Mandela eventually became a remarkable Act III leader in his later years.⁴⁷

Gandhi performed exceedingly important Act II mobilizing and consciousness-raising functions in pre-independence India. Lech Walesa, in the 1980s before he became Poland's president, was a classic Act II type in the battle to bring down the communist government in Poland. He built upon the foundation of labor leaders,

⁴⁶ See, for example, the examination of a large number of crucial leaders in David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Juan Williams, Eyes on The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965 (New York: Viking, 1987); and Taylor Branch, Parting of the Waters (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1988)

⁴⁷ Tom Lodge, Mandela: A Critical Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

intellectuals and church organizers who set the stage for his efforts by their work in the 1960s and 1970s.

In American politics, Eugene V. Debs, Norman Thomas, Saul Alinsky, Michael Harrington, and gun registration and waiting period advocate Sarah Brady all were Act II leaders and organizers on the left.⁴⁸ Alinsky, for example, dedicated much of his career, as well as two books, to instructing people on “how to create community organizations to gain political and economic power and share it with the people.” Alinsky, who may be best characterized as a borderline figure straddling late Act I and early Act II often talked as a revolutionary yet in practice was a pragmatic organizer. “When those prominent in the status quo turn and label you an ‘agitator’ they are completely correct”, wrote Alinsky for that is, in one word, your function --- “to agitate to the point of conflict.”⁴⁹

There have been plenty of conservative or libertarian populists on the right who served in the Act II tradition. Russell Kirk, William Buckley and his National Review,

⁴⁸ For useful biographies of some of these rebel-organizers and their contributions see Sanford D. Horwitt, Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky – His Life and Legacy (New York: Knopf, 1989); Nick Savatore, Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); and Murray B. Seidler, Norman Thomas: Respectable Rebel (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1961).

⁴⁹ Saul D Alinsky, Rules For Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 117. See also Si Kahn Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

anti-ERA leader Phyllis Schlafly, moral majority organizer Jerry Falwell, Focus on the Family leader James Dobson, Fox news pundit Bill O'Reilly and radio talk host Rush Limbaugh have crusaded, agitated, educated and organized on behalf of conservative principles and platforms. Populist advocates of the "secure our borders" campaigns such as TV's Lou Dobbs and maverick congressman Tom Tancredo are also actor Act II types.

Act II types often defy facile left and right labels. Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin, the famed radio priest of the 1930s, were of the left, right and center depending on the issue.⁵⁰ Candy Lightner, who founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving illustrates another type of Act II activist-organizer. Her 13 year old daughter was killed by a drunken driver on a quiet street near Sacramento as she walked to a school carnival. Lightner was told by a highway patrol officer that it was doubtful that the driver who killed her daughter would spend any time in jail. "That was just the way the system worked" he said, Lightner was so furious she decided to organize. She became, in her own words, an "angry raging mother" who stormed her state capitol with picket signs. She later helped build MADD into an organization with hundreds of chapters around the world.⁵¹

⁵⁰ See the splendid treatment of Long and Coughlin and their followers in Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, and Father Coughlin and The Great Depression (New York: Vintage 1983).

⁵¹ Torri Minto, "She Rages No More" San Francisco Chronicle (October 3, 1999), p.B.3.

Rockstar Bono of the Irish rock band U2 became an indefatigable consciousness-raiser for debt relief and financial aid for struggling African countries. He relished the role of being an agitator and coalition-building lobbyist on behalf of the impoverished Africans. And he was unusually effective in using his celebrity status to lecture and exhort Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and cabinet heads to take up his issue.⁵²

The Roosevelt (FDR) and Kennedy presidencies are often criticized for becoming conventional power brokers and for succumbing to the traditional practices of Act III office – holders rather than serving as bold innovators challenging the established orthodoxies of the day. The disappointment is generally one of yearning for Act I and Act II style leadership from an Act III office.⁵³

If Act I types are rebels and revolutionaries, Act II types are best characterized as evolutionaries. Act III types are pragmatic power-brokers and incremental fixers.

Act III Leadership

Act III leaders, the epitome and very symbol of the mainstream establishment, take the once radical ideas of Act I leaders, now softened, refined and modified as well

⁵² See. For example, Alan Light, “Bono: The Rolling Stone Interview” in Rolling Stone, March 4, 1993, pp43-46, and p.77. And Ron Suskind, The Price of Loyalty (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) ch. 7.

⁵³ Illustrative examples of this type of analysis are James MacGregor Burns Running Alone (New York: Basic Books, 2006), and Bruce Miroff’s Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy. (New York: David McKay, 1976).

as vigorously championed by those in Act II, and refashion them in politically acceptable ways.

Political leaders in Act III strike the bargains and gauge public and legislative sentiment for what is doable. Possessing insider skills, status, and credibility, they formulate new approaches that can be merged with existing policies and standard operating procedures. “We nudge it along. This is the real world. Things are complex,” as a high-ranking national party operative put it.⁵⁴

Act III people are elected officials or hold high appointive and advisory positions. Considerable positional authority comes with such jobs. And they regularly operate under the glare of public attention. Consequently, Act III leaders are highly sensitive, perhaps too sensitive, to what the public thinks and wants. Act III types are poll readers and know that on a certain range of issues they must follow public opinion more than they can mold it.

Act III leaders spend considerable time trying to understand their followers. This, as Garry Wills points out, “is the time-consuming aspect of leadership.” And it helps explain why great thinkers and artists are rarely the leaders of others.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Personal interview, with author 1990.

⁵⁵ Garry Wills, Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994) p.

Officials performing in Act III typically talk about their responsibility and accountability to those who elected them. They view themselves as agents, as delegates, as coordinators on behalf of the larger public and they translate their responsibility to their constituents as an incentive to be cautious. This is in marked contrast to Act I types who feel responsibility primarily to their conscience, to principles and to the truth.

Act III leaders must balance and reconcile competing claims about how best to serve the public interest. They become preoccupied too with what is do-able and with the pragmatic adjustments they believe the system needs.

Act III types typically view Act I and II types as adversaries, and as irresponsible. “Who elected then?” they might say. Paradoxically the heavy set of expectations on Act III leaders to act responsibly and to serve the public places constraints on them as inventors or agents of innovation. Moreover, Act III people live in a world where they rarely have the time and energy to think about original and fresh ideas. Act III types seldom write or read books, they read polls, one-page memos and headlines. They react to events. They respond to crises, movements and the urgencies they find in their “in-baskets”.

Act III officials, with few exceptions, are dull speakers. In part this is because they are inhibited by the hazards or responsibilities of their Act.

Seldom are his comments on the world amusing or clear-cut. Distrustful even of an audience of friends because he knows that every sentence from his mouth may be taken some day by itself and used to harm him, he is bound to the formula for dullness.⁵⁶

Former Governor and current California Attorney General Jerry Brown captures the essence of the Act III performance in this observation:

I think politicians are reactors...if you come down to it, it's a rather prosaic role, and we pick up thoughts that have been well chewed over and digested. We then, after a long period of time, turn them into bureaucratic institutions, and modestly effective laws and tax programs. And that's all we do. And that by the nature of things, is a rather common denominator. This is not the purity of the prophet, it is not the excitement of an agitator or revolutionary, and it's not even the contribution of an artist or a scientist. It is merely the prosaic muddling through of compromisers and coalition negotiators that politicians are -- even though we would like to think of ourselves as perhaps men on "white horses."⁵⁷

The most serious charge against many of the Act III types is that they are simply horse traders, bargainers or fixers. They are often pictured as unprincipled, moving in

⁵⁶ Stimson Bullitt, To Be A Politician (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1961), p. 11.

⁵⁷ Jerry Brown, a Bill Moyers Interview, PBS, May 7, 1979.

whatever direction the wind is blowing, as opportunists willing to sell out to the highest bidder in money or votes. This charge is doubtless overstated yet a core truth remains. Act III types act as policy and power brokers to provide the glue for the system to work. The American political system, in common with most democracies, has so much built-in conflict, so many representatives of competing or warring constituencies, so much tension between liberty and equality, between community and efficiency, between individualism and fairness, and so many checks and balances that higher level adjustment and compromise are essential.

Presidents, governors and mayors are invariably criticized for not providing leadership for all scenes, acts or seasons. On the other hand, a more realistic appreciation of how leadership works in a constitutional democracy should lead to an understanding that most highly visible elected officials necessarily operate predominantly in the Act II and a-half to late Act III range. They are, far more than we appreciate, dependent on both their dependents and on timing. They are necessarily dependent on other types of leaders to generate the inventions and the movements that help a nation renew itself.

Act III leaders strike us as unprincipled when, for reasons of political survival, they claim they must refrain from taking sides on controversial issues until it becomes clear to them that they will lose more votes by straddling the fence or being labeled indecisive than they will lose by taking a stand. Thus most Act III types, in their efforts to avoid risk, regularly look and act as if they are presiders rather than leaders.

Leadership, as performed by the Act III leader, is interpretation. Such a leader continually reads the common pulse. The Act III leader's attention is more fixed, on

relationships with constituents, rather than on grand ideas or ideals. The ear of the contemporary Act III leaders rings with the voices of the people. Woodrow Wilson, once defined the operational code of the Act III leader/politician this way:

The legislative leader must perceive the direction of the nation's permanent forces, and must feel the speed of their operation. There is initiative here, but not novelty...

Practical leadership may not beckon to the slow masses of men from beyond some dim unexplored space or some intervening chasm: it must daily feel under its own feet the road that leads to the goal proposed, knowing that it is a slow, a very slow, evolution to wings, and that for the present, and for a very long future also, society must walk...⁵⁸

Conclusion

Leadership in America is broadly dispersed and much of the leadership we need – on many occasions – is not leadership from the top, but adversarial, movement, group, and entrepreneurial grass roots leadership from outside of governmental and other establishment organizations.

⁵⁸ Woodrow Wilson "Leaders on Men" address, in The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, edited by Arthur S. Link, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), Vol. 6., p. 660 and p. 661. Wilson's leadership in conduct as similar in a way to Eric Hoffer's practical men of action who tame the recklessness of the fanatics. See Eric Hoffer, The True Believer (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Ch. 17.

Those who look for charismatic leaders should appreciate that charisma, when found at all, is more likely found in Act I and Act II. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mandela are examples of the appeal. Complex institutions and charisma are often incompatible. To be sure there can be theater and drama surrounding celebrity – personalities such as JFK, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton. Still most UN chiefs, presidents and other leaders in developed nations are prototypical Act III office holders. Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush are prime examples.

Act I leaders come in all varieties but they are frequently introverted and highly intuitive in their dispositions. Act II types are a mixed collection of introverts and extroverts, yet lean more in the extrovert direction. Act III leaders are extroverts and practical types – typically preoccupied with their relationships, images and consensus.

Act I leaders reject the conventional ends and means or practical goals and methods of the day. They are, like Socrates and Joan of Arc, willing to die for their beliefs. Act II types accept most of the ends but reject existing means. They are more moderate in their taking of risks; they may be willing to fail but do not want to put their life on the line. Act III leaders, in contrast, accept both the ends and means of the existing order. Further, they are risk-averse and are constantly concerned about losing power, losing office, and losing face. “I was always concerned about my image and my acceptance... I always wore pinstriped suits and was concerned about moving up politically,” said a former Act III officeholder. He added: “I didn’t take risks and I took how I was viewed as the major or overriding consideration.”

What is fascinating about this Act III official is, after he had been indicted for conflict-of-interest legal problems and was forced to resign office, he transformed

himself – almost as in a reawakening or a spiritual rebirth – from an Act III into an Act II issue activist. His story is instructive:

When I had the run-in with the law and I was eventually thrown out of office, I learned who were my true friends. Those phony “mirror people,” the people who used to treat me as their pal and best friend turned on me and acted as though they never knew me...

That was a turning point for me. That’s when I began to think for myself, and what was important and what I really believed. I became, frankly, a skeptic, a question-raiser, and I became more of an outsider – but I felt emancipated and I dressed and talked and lived the way I wanted to. Today I’m my own man...⁵⁹

As this example suggests, an individual may move from one act to another. All of us have Act I, II and III impulses from time to time. We generally accentuate patterns that fit into one of the Acts. The Reverend Jesse Jackson has over his career performed in all acts, although we commonly label him an Act II star. He performed Act I functions when he was an outspoken young lieutenant in the Chicago civil rights movements, served as an Act II organizer of Operation Push and had brushes with Act III in 1984 and again in 1988 when he sought the Democrat Party’s nomination for president. Notice he had to broaden his coalition, as – sometimes calling it the Rainbow

⁵⁹ Personal interview with a former city councilman in a large West coast city.

coalition – as he sought higher office, which required him to moderate, tone-down and polish his formerly radical appeal. Nelson Mandela, as noted earlier, was a rare and notable leader in all three acts, albeit over a 60 year period.

Examples discussed here are almost exclusively from government and politics yet the Act I, II and III process also takes place in businesses and nonprofit organizations. The celebrated co-founder of Apple Computers, Steve Jobs, performed in all three acts as he helped to invent the Apple and Macintosh computers and eventually ran a company that became a multi-billion enterprise before he left. But he was eventually thrown out of his own company in 1985. What he really liked to do, he later reflected, was to gather bright people together and invent new products. He acknowledged at the time that innovators are not necessarily the best people to run large corporations. Yet in one of the most remarkable comebacks in corporate history Jobs went on to form another hugely successful company and still later was welcomed back to both run and lead Apple to impressive new successes⁶⁰

Garry Wills aptly suggest that our disapproval of Act III politicians “is misguided when it focuses on the political operator’s hedging or hesitating ways.” Washington, Lincoln and FDR all obfuscated, hesitated and compromised – and they were all devious.

⁶⁰ On Steve Jobs, see Virginia Brackett, Steve Jobs: Computer Genius and Apple (Springfield, N.J.: Enslow, 2003).

What seems lacking nowadays, says Wills, “is not the skills of the operator but the goal toward which those skills should, all the while, be working.”⁶¹

Until politicians can supply an important and valid sense of mission for their very skills – these skills such as they are – “will look cheap and cheapening. It is time to rescue the good name of politics, not by renouncing the dubious means that politicians have always used, but by coming up with ends that make the means worth using.”⁶²

In sum, leadership in the broad sense of the term rarely happens conclusively in any one act. Important political and policy leadership is the result of activities that emerge over the course of a multi-stage process. Visible, popular “Meet the Press” leaders are dependent, more than they realize, on Act I and II types for ideas and new initiatives. Yet so also Act I and II types depend on presidents, governors, mayors and other Act II leaders to bring about the compromise or brokered agreements that permit breakthroughs in legislation, court decisions, or executive actions. While we yearn for heroic leaders to challenge injustice and the inevitabilities of history, leaders -- especially in Act III positions -- will primarily be pragmatists balancing the appeals and ideals of contending constituencies.

Transforming leadership in a democracy, then, rarely comes from a single person or a single institution. Leadership is dispersed, and leaders in a democracy are

⁶¹ Garry Wills, “Dishonest Abe” Time October 5, 1992, p. 42.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 42.

extraordinarily dependent on colleagues and other leaders to help shape, develop, and implement the policy changes a society needs. Those who favor renewal, and progress, yet are impatient with agitation as well as evolution are, as Frederick Douglass once said in a similar context, people “who want crops without plowing up the ground...and they want rain without thunder and lightning.”⁶³

⁶³ Frederick Douglass quote.