

What Makes a Good Leader?

by GARRY WILLS

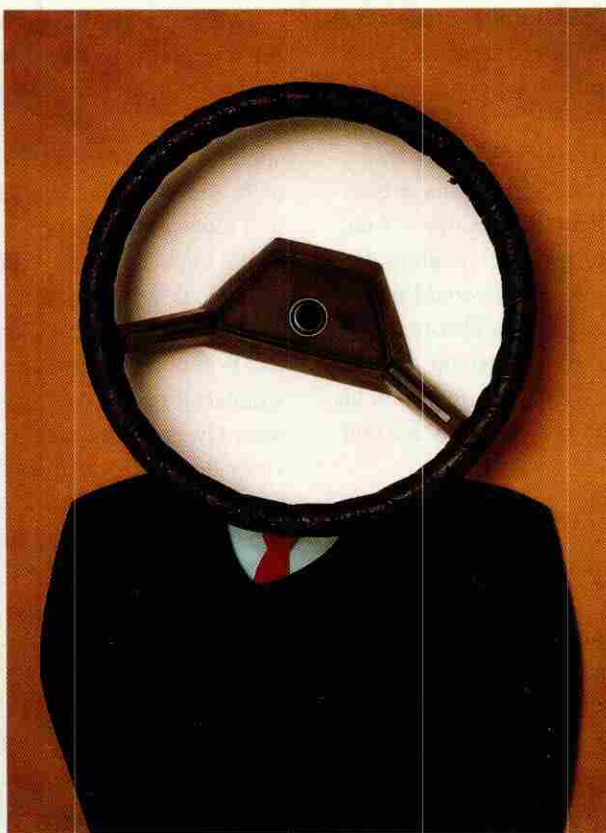
I HAD just turned seventeen, did not know Los Angeles, had never even driven in a big city. I had certainly never backed a trailer up to a loading dock. But my father gave me a map, marked a warehouse's location, and told me to deliver a refrigerator there. I would have to get someone to help me unload it when I arrived. It was very clever of him. I knew what he was doing. But I complied anyway.

I had a chip on my shoulder, since my father left my mother to marry a (much younger) Hollywood model. While I was in California for a high school contest, he asked me to work at his nascent business for the rest of the summer. But for that offer I would not have stayed. He knew that the way to recruit a resisting son-employee was to give me independence—not only in things like deliveries but in sales and the purchasing of household equipment. If I failed, that might break down my resistance. If I didn't, pride in the work might renew a bond that had been broken. Paradoxically, by giving me independence he got me to do his

Often, history shows, it is not the attributes—a rugged respect for principle, a refusal to govern by the polls—that we are prone to think we should want

equality between leaders and followers. Even ancient Athens, the first Western democracy, submitted to "the best man," according to Thucydides.

[Pericles], a man clearly above corruption, was enabled, by the respect others had for him and his own wise policy, to hold the multitude in a voluntary restraint. He led them, not they him; and since he did not win his power on compromising terms, he could say not only what pleased others but what displeased them, relying on their respect.



will. That is the way leadership works—reciprocally engaging two wills, one leading (often in disguised ways), the other following (often while resisting). Leadership is always a struggle, often a feud.

Why, after all, should one person do another person's will? The answer that used to be given is simple: the leader is a superior person, to whom inferiors should submit. But modern democracies are as unsympathetic to this scheme as I was to the authority of my father. Patriarchal society, it is true, was rooted in a radical in-

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Some still subscribe to that notion of leadership. How often have we heard that we lack great leaders now—the clearly virtuous kind, men like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln? The implication is that we could become great again with a great man to guide us. We would not mind submitting to anyone *that* good. (Of others we continue to be wary.)

I shall be arguing here that the Periclean type of leadership occurs rarely in history, if at all. Scholars have questioned Thucydides' description of Pericles' position—Athenians seemed quicker than most to ostracize leaders who thought themselves above the people. Why *should* people immolate their own needs and desires to conform to the vision of some superior being? That has happened in some theocratic societies, but then people were obeying God in his representative, and it was their belief in God's will that constrained them.

In a democracy, supposedly, the leader does not pronounce God's will *to* the people but carries out what is decided *by* the people. Some might object that in that case the leader is mainly a follower—he or she does what the community says when it speaks through elections, through polls, through constituent pressure. Because they are willing to compromise their principles, such leaders, unlike the Pericles of Thucydides, cannot displease their followers. They are bribed, if not with money then with acceptance, or office, or ego satisfaction.

We seem stuck, then, between two unacceptable alternatives—the leader who dictates to others and the one who truckles to them. If leaders dictate, by what authority do they take away people's right to direct their own lives? If they truckle, who needs or respects such weathervanes?

Most of the how-to manuals on leadership assume one or the other of these models—or, inconsistently, both. The superior-person model says the leader must become worthy of being followed—more disciplined than others, more committed, better organized. This sends aspiring leaders to the mirror, to strike firm-jawed poses and to cultivate self-confidence and a refusal to hedge.

Or the leader is taught to be ingratiating. This is the salesmanship, or Dale Carnegie, approach—how to win friends and influence people. It treats followers as customers who “buy” the leader's views after these have been consumer-tested and tailored for maximum acceptance.

The followers are, in this literature, a hazy and not very

estimable lot—people to be dominated or served, mesmerized or flattered. We have thousands of books on leadership, none on followership. I have heard college presidents tell their student bodies that schools are meant to train leaders. I have never heard anyone

profess to train followers. The ideal seems to be a world in which everyone is a leader—but who would be left for them to be leading?

Talk of the nobility of leaders, the need for them, and our reliance on them raises the clear suspicion that followers are *not* so noble. In that view leaders rise only by sinking others to subordinate roles. Leaders have a vision. Followers respond to it. Leaders organize a plan. Followers get sorted out to fit the plan. Leaders have willpower. Followers let that will replace their own.

We have long lists of the leader's requisites—determination, focus, a clear goal, a sense of priorities, and so on. We easily forget the first and all-encompassing need—followers. Without them, the best ideas, the strongest will, the most wonderful smile, have no effect. When Shakespeare's Welsh seer, Owen Glendower, boasts, “I can call spirits from the vasty deep,” Hotspur deflates him with the commonsense answer, “Why, so can I, or so can any man. But will they come when you do call for them?” It is not the noblest call that gets answered but the answerable call.

Leading by Listening

ABRAMHAM Lincoln did not have the highest vision of human equality in his day. Many abolitionists went further than he did in recognizing the moral claims of slaves to freedom and recognition of their human dignity. Lincoln had limited political goals, and he was willing to compromise even those. He knew that no one who espoused full equality for blacks could be elected in or from Illinois—so he unequivocally renounced that position:

I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races. . . . I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor of intermarrying with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

But for that pledge Lincoln had no hope of winning office.

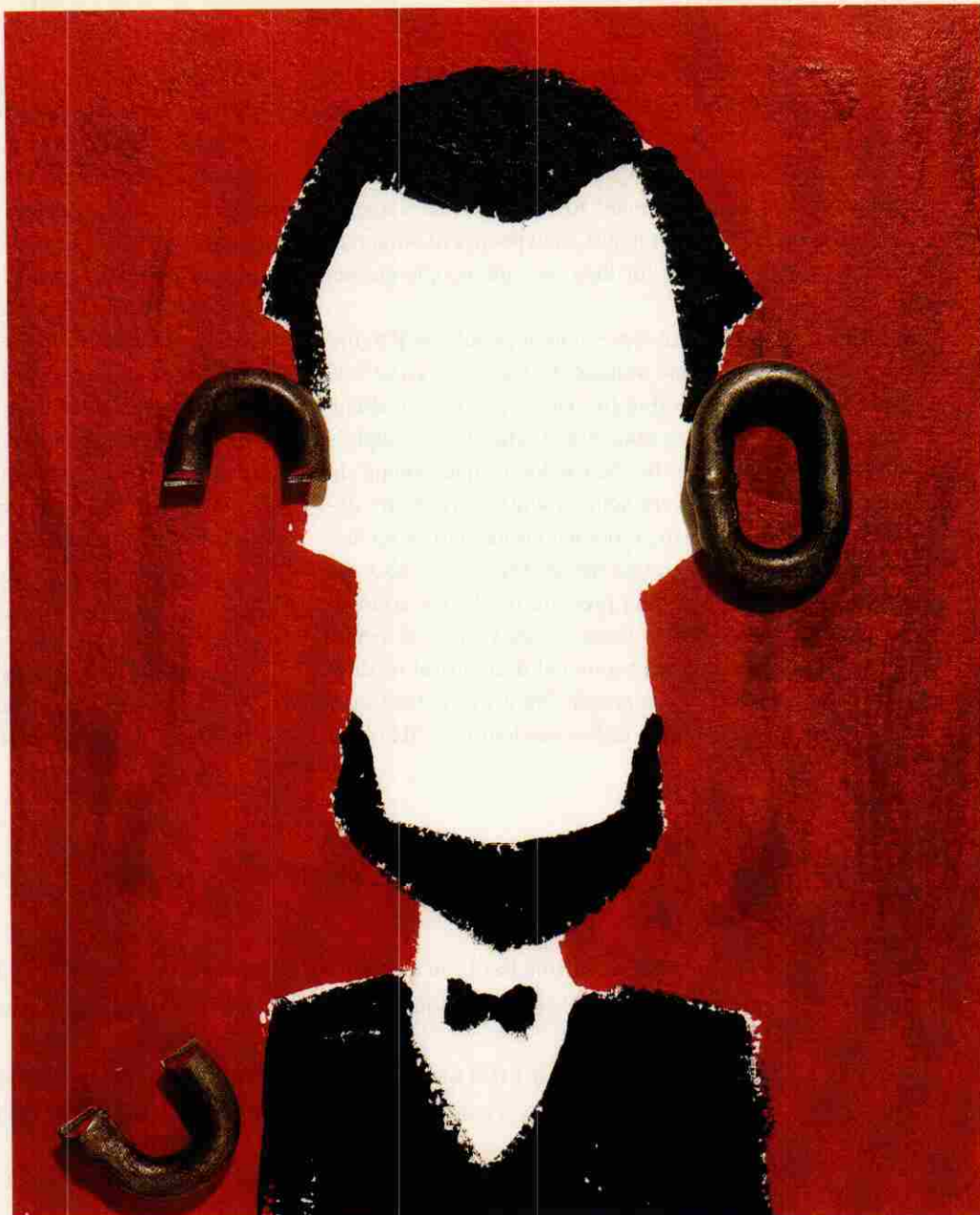
The followers were setting the terms of acceptance for their leader. He could not issue calls they were unprepared to hear. (He *could* do it, of course—as Owen Glendower can shout summonses down into the deep. But it would be a waste of time.)

This Lincoln has disappointed people who think followers should submit to a leader's superior vision—those who want the leader to be active and the followers passive. Lincoln's leadership was a matter of mutually determinative activity, on the part of the leader and the followers. Followers have a say in what they are being led to. A leader who neglects that fact soon finds himself without followers. To sound a certain trumpet does not mean just trumpeting one's own certitudes. It means sounding a specific call to specific people capable of response.

Does this remove or reduce the heroic note in Lincoln's leadership—as if he were only *allowed* to lead, by followers who could refuse to respond? Well, what is the alternative—people who cannot refuse to follow? If that were the case, the leader would be marshaling automaton, not voluntary respondents.

It is odd that resentment should be felt toward the demands of followers when the limiting power of circumstance is so readily accepted. Even the most ardent hero-worshippers of Winston Churchill admit that he needed an occasion for the exercise of his skills. But for the Second World War we would never have known how he could rally English spirit. Yet followers conform more closely to a leader than a leader does to external circumstances. The leader can have both the skill for his or her role and the occasion for its use and still lack followers who will respond to the initiative or the moment.

So much for the idea that a leader's skills can be applied to all occasions, that they can be taught outside a historical context or learned as a "secret" of the control of every situation. A leader whose qualities do not match those of potential followers is simply irrelevant: the world is not playing



his or her game. My favorite example of this is the leadership of Syrian holy men in the fifth century A.D. Those men, who made policy for whole communities, were revered for their self-ravaging austerity. The man who had starved himself most spectacularly was thought the best equipped to advise pious consultants. So delegations went to consult Simeon the "Stylite" ("pillar-man"), perched in his midair hermitage. Leadership was conditioned entirely by the attitudes of contemporary followership. Who would now write a manual called *The Leadership Secrets of Simeon Stylites*, telling people to starve and whip and torture themselves into command positions?

Closer to our time, Thomas Jefferson thought that the French Revolution had been less successful than the American one, not because the French lacked leaders but because they lacked discerning followers. A corrupt people is not responsive to virtuous leadership. The French spirit had been sapped, he claimed, by superstition (Catholicism) and despo-

tism (monarchy). Napoleon, to retain the people's allegiance, had to revert to both, calling on the Pope to crown him Emperor.

It may seem that the Lincoln example has moved us too far from the Periclean "best man" toward the Dale Carnegie accommodator. If the leader is just an expeditor of what other people want, a resource for their use, the people are not being *led* but *served*.

But Lincoln had no clear expression of popular will to implement. He had to elicit the program he wanted to serve, and that always involves affecting the views one is consulting. Even pollsters, seeking to understand what is on people's minds, affect the outcome by their mode of questioning. In Lincoln's constituency were some abolitionists, many defenders of slavery, and many more who wanted to avoid facing the issue of slavery. Unlike the abolitionists, who were leaders of a small elite putting pressure on the government from outside, Lincoln had to forge a combination of voters who would join him in at least minimal disapproval of slavery. He had to convince some people that it was in their own interest not to let the problem fester—he told them that they

could not afford to take Stephen Douglas's hands-off attitude.

Many voters resisted Lincoln—as I did my father in the summer of 1951. Lincoln deferred to some of their prejudices—left them independent in that sense—in order to win agreement on a policy of at least some hope for ultimate manumission. He argued in terms of his listeners' own views. They celebrated the Declaration of Independence, with its claim that all men are created equal. How could they stay true to their political identity, based on the Declaration, if they did not at some level oppose slavery? By keeping this option open for gradual approximation, Lincoln was able at a later period to take more-direct action. He temporized not to evade the problem but to prevent its evasion. G. K. Chesterton's *What I Saw in America* perfectly captured the delicacy of his operation:

He loved to repeat that slavery was intolerable while he tolerated it, and to prove that something ought to be done while it was impossible to do it. . . . But for all that this inconsistent consistency beat the politicians at their own game, and this abstracted logic proved most practical of all. For, when the chance did come to do something, there was no doubt

WHAT THE LIVING DO

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there.
And the Dräno won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we spoke of.
It's winter again: the sky's a deep, headstrong blue, and the sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heat's on too high in here and I can't turn it off.
For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street, the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it.
Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called *that yearning*.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to pass. We want
whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless:
I am living. I remember you.

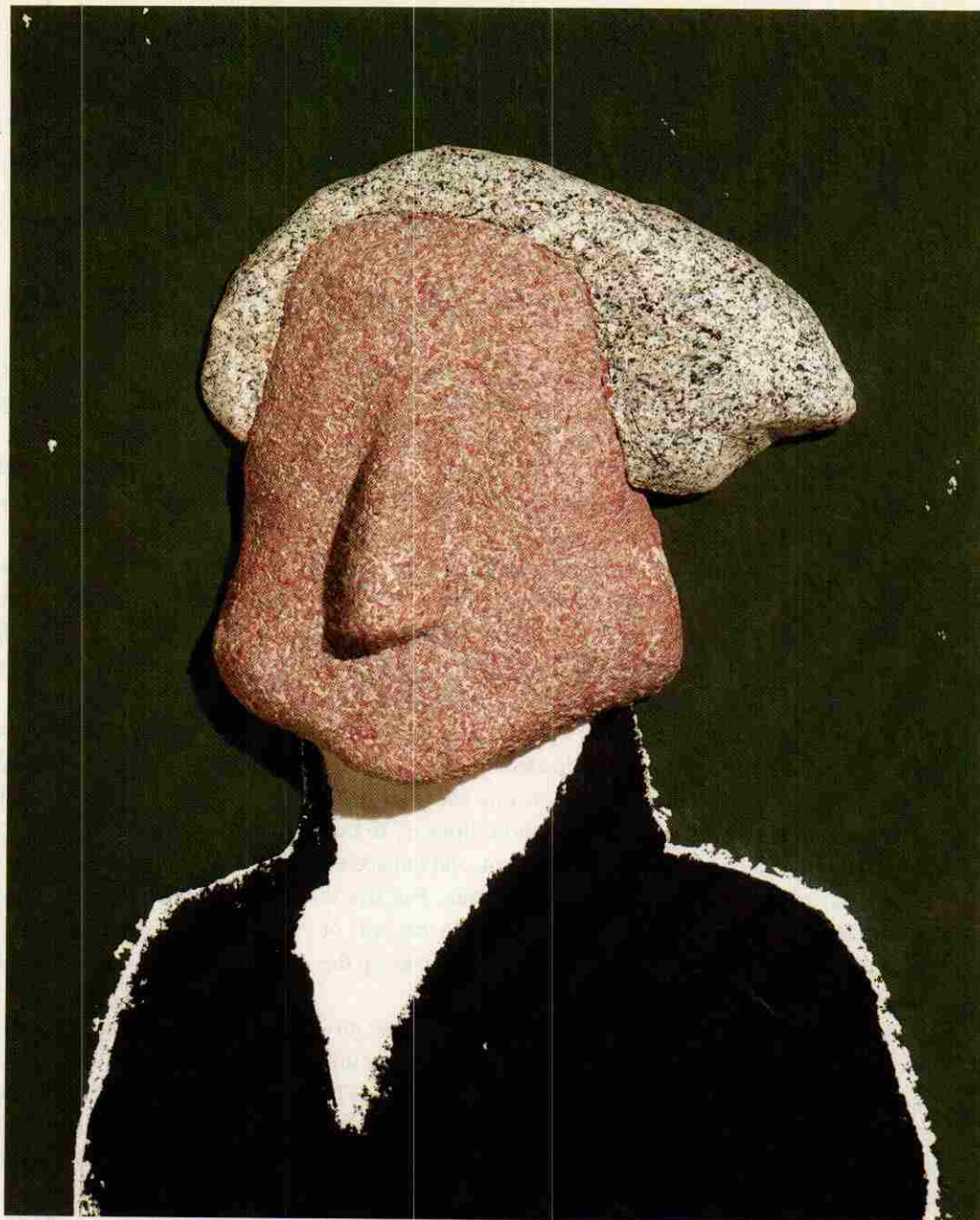
—MARIE HOWE

about the thing to be done.
The thunderbolt fell from the
clear heights of heaven.

In order to know just how far he could go at any moment, Lincoln had to understand the mixture of motives in his fellow citizens, the counterbalancing intensities with which they held different positions, and in what directions those positions were changing moment by moment. The leader needs to understand followers far more than they need to understand him. This is the time-consuming aspect of leadership. It explains why great thinkers and artists are rarely leaders of others, as opposed to influences on them. The scientist absorbed in the solution to a problem does not have the energy or patience to understand the needs of a number of other people who might be marshaled to deal with the problem. That is something the popularizer of the great man's thought usually does. More important, the pure scientist does not tailor his view of (say) the atom to whatever audience he hopes to influence, as Lincoln trimmed and hedged on slavery in order to make people take small steps toward facing the problem.

My father was a natural leader who acted in small arenas. Even as a child, I thought it childish of him to want to get his way all the time. I did not notice then that he got his way by entering into the minds of others and finding something there that would respond to his attentions—as, on a vastly different scale, Lincoln found a grudging acceptance of the Declaration's pledge on which to build his strategy of emancipation. My father's tactics were different with me, with my sister, with the golfing friends I observed him with while caddying. There is something selfless in the very selfishness of leaders—they must see things as the followers see them in order to recruit those followers.

If the followers get marshaled toward action by a leader, the leader need not be loved or admired, though that can help. I had no great admiration for my father when I found myself responding to his initiatives. Conversely, one can admire or love people who are not, by virtue of that love, leaders.



An Indispensable Element: A Shared Goal

IMAGINE a meeting called to consider a course of action—let us say, to mount a protest against an employer whose hiring and promotion practices discriminate against women. A speaker rises who is stunningly eloquent. Listener A knows and admires the speaker, would go anywhere to hear her speak, hopes to emulate her eloquence in his own way; but he does not care about the issue, and the speech does not bring him any closer to caring. Listener B, on the contrary, has never met the speaker, does not particularly like her, is disposed to resent the employer but had no hope of finding allies to resist him, and is now heartened to act in conjunction with others responding to the speaker. Who is the follower here? If, as seems certain, it is Listener B, then admiration, imitation, and affection are not necessary to followership. Agreement on a *goal* is necessary.

**Those who wanted ideological consistency,
or even policy coherence, were rightly exasperated
with Roosevelt. He switched economic plans
as often as he changed treatments for his polio.**

So far I have been discussing just two things—leaders and followers. That is better, at least, than discussions dealing with only one thing—leaders. But the discussions cannot get far without the goal. This is not something added on to the other two. It is the reason for the existence of the other two. It is also the equalizer between leader and followers. The followers do not submit to the person of the leader. They join him or her in pursuit of the goal. My father and I were working together for the success of his new business. Of course, he had separate motives for wanting me there, and I had motives for not wanting to be there; by definition, we could not share those motives. It was the thing we could share that created the possibility of leadership.

It is time for a definition: the leader is one who mobilizes others toward a goal shared by leader and followers. In that brief definition all three elements are present, and indispensable. Most literature on leadership is unitarian. But life is trinitarian. One-legged and two-legged chairs do not, of themselves, stand. Leaders, followers, and goals make up the three equally necessary supports for leadership.

The goal must be shared, no matter how many other motives are present that are not shared. Go back to the meeting that called for a protest against employer discrimination. The speaker may have had many ancillary motives for speaking—to show off her rhetorical style, to impress a sexual partner in the audience, to launch a larger political career. Her listeners would surely have many motives—some to improve their prospects with the employer, or their standing among fellow workers. But the followers become followers only insofar as they agree with the speaker on a plan of action against the employer.

This plan is cast in terms of justice, though it is easy to think that this is only a rationale for the various motives, some shared, some not. Each is in this to get something different. David Hume, the eighteenth-century philosopher, said that people obey others for their own advantage; this writhing of various wormlike urges for advantage is far from the picture of idealistic leaders and docile followers.

Yet Hume, perceptive as he was, knew that people follow most reliably when they are convinced that what they are doing is right. He knew the utility of that belief. If, at the meeting to discuss discrimination, only those who would benefit directly from the protest were to join the speaker, that would limit the followership from the outset. And that small number would always be fraying away. The boss could buy off dis-

sent by special favors to a few of the activists, or threats to the weakhearted. Once a given person got what she wanted, she would have no future motive for supporting her sisters. Private advantage shifts constantly, and is a poor basis for public action. That is why Lin-

coln based his policy on the moral claim of the Declaration of Independence. Some thought that he did not go far enough, others that he went too far; but the moral ground of the Declaration was both broad and narrow enough to accommodate many positions while remaining fixed itself.

Lincoln had to persuade voters. He could not force them. Where coercion exists, leadership becomes unnecessary or impossible to the extent of coercion's existence. Loose use of the word "lead" can mislead. We talk of a policeman leading his prisoner to jail. But the policeman is not a leader in our sense—he is a captor. Though he is mobilizing another toward a goal, it is not a goal they share. The prisoner's goal is to get as far away from the prison as possible.

A slave master buying labor can "lead" slaves to his plantation, but that does not make him their leader. He is their owner. If I had worked for my father only because I needed the money and could get it nowhere else, I would not have been a follower, just an employee. Coercion is not leadership any more than mesmerism is. Followers cannot be automatons. The totalitarian jailer who drags a prisoner into confession of a crime has not led him to some shared view of reality.

Nor does a leader just vaguely affect others. He or she takes others toward the object of their joint quest. That object defines the kind of leadership at issue. Different types of leaders should be distinguished more by their goals than by the personality of the leader (the most common practice). The crisis of mere subsistence on a life raft calls for one type of leader, democratic stability for another, revolutionary activity for still a third. Lincoln's compromise and flexibility were appropriate for *his* kind of leadership.

**A Great Leader in Our
Century: FDR**

WE like to believe that in some golden age there were leaders of such recognized integrity that the American people simply accepted their determinations, issued from on high. But even George Washington, in the deferential eighteenth century, was solicitous enough of public opinion to be called cowardly by some of his critics.

Only one twentieth-century President is consistently rated among the top three or four chief executives of our history—Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He has been taken as a model of leadership by many authors, notably Richard

Neustadt, who wrote, in *Presidential Power*, the most influential modern book on that subject,

No President in this century has had a sharper sense of personal power, a sense of what it is and where it comes from; none has had more hunger for it, few have had more use for it, and only one or two could match his faith in his own competence to use it. Perception and desire and self-confidence, combined, produced their own reward. No modern President has been more nearly the master in the White House.

The emphasis is all on the leader's internal qualities—mainly his confidence, ambition, and determination: "Roosevelt had a love affair with power"; "Roosevelt's methods were the product of his insights, his incentives, and his confidence." Neustadt describing Roosevelt sounds like Thucydides describing Pericles—here, at last, is a ruler who can, by sheer mastery, impose his views on the multitude.

But another school of historians—including the eminent Richard Hofstadter—has described Roosevelt as one who veered with shifting popular responses. "He was content in large measure to follow public opinion," Hofstadter wrote in *The American Political Tradition*, because he was "a public instrument of the most delicate receptivity." Roosevelt proved that "flexibility was both his strength and his weakness." The result was great energy employed in "harum-scarum" ways: "Hoover had lacked motion; Roosevelt lacked direction."

Some more-recent treatments of Roosevelt, notably Kenneth Davis's multivolume biography, have been more hostile than Hofstadter was in describing Roosevelt's subservience to public opinion. And, in fact, FDR's record seems hard to reconcile with the Neustadt picture of firm control. In New York politics Roosevelt first opposed and then cooperated with the Tammany political machine. He supported and then opposed Al Smith; promoted and then abandoned the League of Nations—"the first Democratic candidate [for President] who explicitly repudiated the League," Hofstadter writes. He fluttered back and forth on Prohibition. As President he reversed himself on the balanced budget, on business consolidation, on farm subsidies, on labor protection, on aid to Europe. Friends as well as foes, from both the right and the left, noticed that the pro-business "First New Deal" of 1933 was profoundly at odds with the pro-labor "Second New Deal" of 1935—and many ascribed the change to Roosevelt's fear that the populist Huey Long was taking away some of his support on the left.

Which is it to be—the masterful Roosevelt of Neustadt or the scambler after popular acceptance of Hofstadter? Can the two be reconciled? Not if we keep as our ideal the Periclean man, above the need for popular acceptance. If Roosevelt had power, it came precisely from his responsiveness to public opinion. And that came, indirectly, from the crushing blow that took from him, at the age of thirty-nine, all future use of his legs.

Forced Maturation

STUDENTS of Roosevelt are agreed that the polio attack of 1921 profoundly changed him. He might have become President without having had to surmount that obstacle, but it is unlikely that he would have been a great, or even a good, President. Before he was crippled, Roosevelt had been a genial glad-hander, an acceptable politician considered lightweight by the pros (men like Al Smith)—too anxious to please, clumsily ingratiating. Even in pictures from that time he seems a dithery Bertie Wooster in his straw boater. His caustic cousin, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, called him a sissy and a mama's boy. As the sole child of the frosty patrician Sara Delano Roosevelt, he had been sheltered from hardship, cushioned in privilege.

At the least, then, the struggle to walk again—always defeated but never quite given up—toughened Roosevelt. His legs withered away, but from the waist up the willowy youth became a barrel-chested man able to swing the useless parts of his body around to give an artful impression of overall strength. Some say that the suffering deepened his sympathy with others who were afflicted—and that was certainly true among his fellow "polios" (their favored term) at Warm Springs, the Georgia clinic Roosevelt established for his and others' use. He had a comradeship in that setting never experienced elsewhere: with its patients he shared his otherwise lonely fight to achieve mobility.

While granting all this, we should resist the sentimentalism that creeps into much of the discussion about Roosevelt's polio. Some talk as if polio sealed him with a redemptive mark of suffering. The Byronic hero is marked by deformity or defect in a way that drives him from the comforts of the prosaic world into the enforced solitude where genius creates an entirely new human vision, brilliant even if one-sided. The artist suffers, but he gains from his suffering, because it severs him from the herd.

Roosevelt's polio did not separate him from others but drove him out toward them—and not to crave sympathy. He would accept no pity. The shrewdest judges of polio's impact on Roosevelt are two authors who themselves suffered from polio—Geoffrey Ward and Hugh Gregory Gallagher. There is no sentimentality in these men's views of Roosevelt. They both see that what polio did was to make him preternaturally aware of others' perceptions of him. This increased his determination to control those perceptions. People were made uncomfortable by his discomfort. He needed to distract them, to direct their attention to subjects he preferred, to keep them amused, impressed, entertained. That meant he had to perfect a deceptive ease, a casual aplomb, in the midst of acute distress. He became a consummate actor.

For Roosevelt to "walk" in public, he had to balance on his locked braces and pretend to be using his legs while he was actually shifting back and forth from his cane to the man (often one of his sons) whose arm he gripped on the other

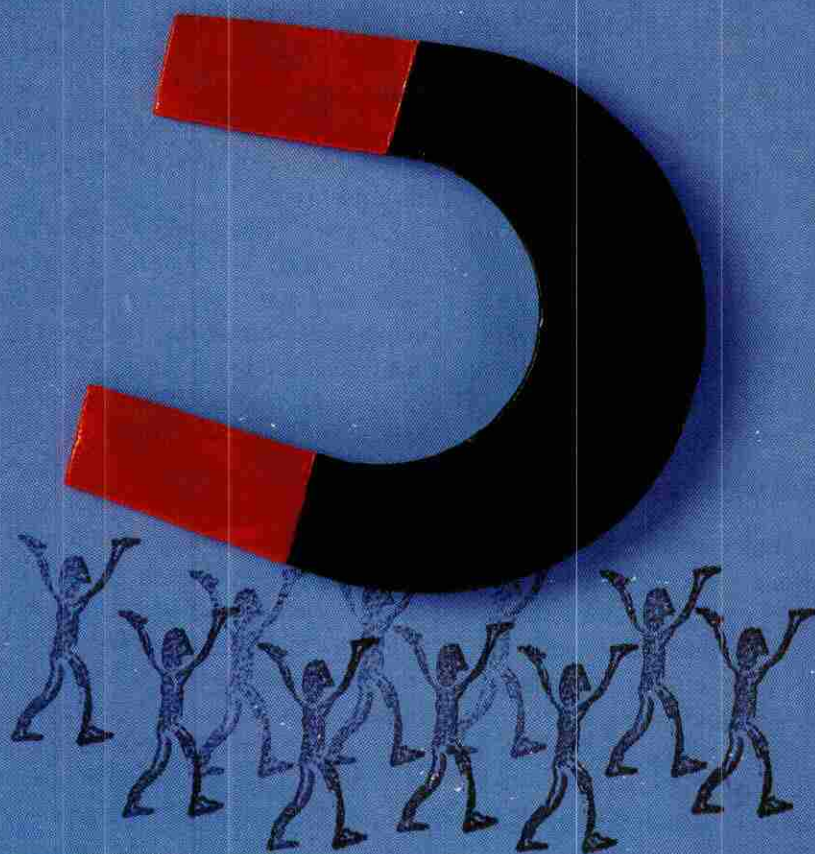


side. The strain always left his suit soaked with sweat, the hand on the cane shaking violently from the effort, the son's arm bruised where his fingers had dug in. And all the while he would be smiling, keeping up pleasant banter, pretending to enjoy himself.

The danger was always there. His sticklike legs in their metal binding could snap easily if he fell. It was almost impossible for one person to raise him, with his heavy braces locking the legs in an unbending position. When he fell in the lobby of his office building, his chauffeur could not pull him up off the slippery floor, and Roosevelt had to recruit two other men in the lobby for help. The surprised men were the recipients of a flow of jokes and chatter that made it seem like Roosevelt was treating the episode as a particularly funny game. When they got him propped up again, Ward writes, "still smiling and laughing, but with his knuckles white on the handles of his crutches and his legs alarmingly splayed for balance, he said 'Let's go!' and started for the elevators

once more." Roosevelt rarely fell in public, partly because he gave up the attempt at public "walking" as the years went by. But each time he did fall, it was a searing crisis to those few who understood how truly helpless he became.

The iron control of his own reactions, necessary for handling such a crisis, was something Roosevelt had achieved by the time he ran for President. While he was sitting in an open car in Miami in 1933, a would-be assassin, standing within twelve yards of the President, fired at him five times. Roosevelt stared at the man, unflinching, while Mayor Anton Cermak, of Chicago, who had been standing next to the car, fell, mortally wounded. The Secret Service tried to move the car away, but Roosevelt stopped it and had Cermak put into the seat with him. He then ordered the car to the hospital and tried to revive the dying Cermak on the way. FDR's calm command of the situation came from more than a decade of sitting in judgment on the passing scene, ready to make the proper moves to keep people from panicking at



the sight of his helplessness. Franklin Roosevelt had always wanted to imitate his admired cousin Theodore, and had usually failed—at Harvard, as a warrior, as a writer. But that day he displayed the same sangfroid Teddy had when an assailant wounded him during the 1912 campaign; TR gave his scheduled speech anyway, though blood was oozing from his shirt.

In less dramatic daily ordeals FDR kept control of others' reactions when he was lifted in or out of cars, carried up stairs, or straightened up again when he had tilted over in a seat without arms. He did this by telling jokes, or locking their eyes to his, or teasing others, making them think of their own vulnerability—as one polio has called it, “walking on your tongue.”

When he had no one to carry him upstairs, he sat on the bottom step, reached backward to the higher step, and pulled up his body with his powerful arms, engaging in distracting talk as if he were not doing anything extraordinary. Some-

one had to be with him always. He was uneasy when no one could respond to a sudden threat—an accident, or the need for help to the bathroom. He was especially worried at the thought of a fire in his house or on his boat. Despite this extreme dependence on those around him—he was carried to and from bed, lifted into and out of his bath, clothed by others—Roosevelt kept up a tiring regime of public activity, during which he looked only slightly inconvenienced. This “splendid deception,” as Gallagher calls it, involved careful stage-management of all his appearances, ruthless suppression of any camera in his vicinity until he had settled into the pose he wanted to strike, and carefully constructed ramps, bathrooms, and rails wherever he was going to appear.

When he could not get out, he drew others in around him, maintaining a crowded schedule of interviews, entertainments, meetings with members of Congress, with the press, with celebrities. His press conferences were frequent, two a week or more, well staged to seem informal. The reporters

clustered around Roosevelt's desk, so he did not have to move. They could not quote him directly, but that made the banter on both sides freer and more revealing. Roosevelt probed and learned from them while showing his dexterity in avoiding their attempts to learn anything he was not ready to say. His aides marveled at the bits of information he had managed to acquire. He liked to keep some mystery about his sources: it was another way of demonstrating that he was in touch.

To avoid podiums, where he might fall, Roosevelt invented the "fireside chat." Again, he could sit at his desk while the world came to him. For people used to seeing political oratory on newsreels or hearing speeches broadcast from auditoriums, where the acoustics and the size of the audience made for slow and pompous delivery, Roosevelt's seated-in-the-same-room-with-you style gave a shock of intimacy. Cousin Theodore had been a tub-thumper. Woodrow Wilson was mellifluous but exalted. Herbert Hoover was pinched and pedantic. People felt that Roosevelt, unlike his predecessors, was confiding in them and consulting them. The man who seemed immobilized had ghosted himself into their front rooms.

Invaluable Histrionics

SOME might think it an insult to call a President an actor. It was certainly intended that way when Ronald Reagan was dismissed as "just an actor." But all politicians need some of an actor's abilities. They must feign welcome to unwanted constituents' attentions, cooperate with despised party allies, wax indignant at politically chosen targets. This is the work not of inferior politicians but of the masters. The three Presidents normally at the top of historians' lists—Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt—all had strong histrionic instincts. Roosevelt could not go to the theater—or to church, for that matter—because of his logistical problems; but Washington and Lincoln were both avid theatergoers. Washington's favorite literature was Joseph Addison's play *Cato*. Lincoln's was *Macbeth*. Lincoln read aloud the speeches of Shakespeare to anyone who would listen to him.

Washington was a master of the telling theatrical gesture. Even his Christmas Eve assault on Trenton was more a *coup de théâtre* than a strategically meaningful step. His various resignations of office were choreographed. When he could not count on a response from his audience, he hesitated to act. Lincoln knew the impact of his haunting features, and loved to pose for photographers. A great storyteller, he could milk a line for laughs as surely as Roosevelt did in his Fala speech—the one that feigned shock that enemies would think his Scottish terrier a wastrel.

An actor is not, as such, a leader. The appreciation of an audience is not motion toward some goal shared with the actor. Fans are not followers. But a popular leader must use

some tricks from the actor's stock. Above all, a good leader must know what is appealing to followers and what risks losing that appeal. Roosevelt had that sensitivity to others' reactions, developed to an almost morbid degree, because of his awareness of their attention to his physical condition. He had to know, to a centimeter, the line that divides pity from compassion, condescension from cooperation, mere sympathy from real support. The French philosopher Denis Diderot said that the best actor sits inside his own performance as a cool spectator of the effects he is creating in an audience. Such actors will sense if an audience thinks they are playing a scene too broad, and will rein in the effects. The actor is working at several levels of awareness—fiery in the character's emotions, icy in the adjustment of those emotions to the intended effects on onlookers. Feigned tears must be used to elicit real tears.

Roosevelt's manipulation of others' reactions to his own body perfectly prepared him to be an actor in Diderot's sense. He could change pity into admiration. He could keep intruders into his privacy off guard by a teasing challenge that made them look to their own defenses, too flustered to advert to his problem. He could put people at their ease or deliberately cause discomfort. He controlled people by the use of nicknames (a familiarity not to be reciprocated).

As President, Roosevelt ministered to a sick nation. Economic cures were being proposed on all sides, and Roosevelt was ready to try any of them, often in bewildering succession. He was criticized as an ignoramus because he hesitated between competing promises of cure. But he knew that the soul needed healing first, and the brand of confidence he had instilled in the patients at Warm Springs was the most measurable gift Roosevelt gave to the nation during the Depression. He understood the importance of psychology—that people have to have the courage to keep seeking a cure, no matter what the cure is. America had lost its will to recover, and Roosevelt was certain that regaining it was the first order of business.

In 1932–1933 a long interregnum between the election and a March inauguration was still constitutionally mandated. Poor Herbert Hoover had to lead the country as a lame duck for a third of a year. He tried to recruit Roosevelt's support for measures that FDR was in fact considering and would finally himself take—bank regulation, manipulation of farm prices, monetary control. But Roosevelt would not be drawn into these plans, sound as they might have been. He realized that the nation needed a clean break, a slap in the face, a sense that the past was being repudiated. It took cool nerves to watch the country slide farther into trouble, knowing he would have to pick up the pieces. But Roosevelt was confident to the point of foolhardiness in all his ways, and that was the thing called for in this desperate situation. When he took office, he closed the banks, imposed regulations far-reaching enough to be called (in time) unconstitutional, and filled the nation with a bustle of make-work, fake work, and real work.

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