

8 The morality of leadership

Special questions related to political leadership will be examined in this chapter. Which morals do leaders have, and which should be striven for? In the first section, private morality and its consequences for politics and the nation are discussed. Next, we confront the morality in leaders' exercise of power. Finally, a judgement will be made of the requirements which should be placed upon political leaders in a modern democracy.

8.1 Leaders and private morals

Let us begin with some comments on a person who is widely associated with moral leadership, Dr. Martin Luther King. His political struggle was firmly principled, committed and, to a great extent, successful. Clayborne Carson, the author of a favorable autobiography of King, recently made a surprising discovery. King's doctoral dissertation was largely a product of plagiarism.<1> In addition, King's many amorous escapades gave him considerable difficulty with the Sixth Commandment. For a pastor who claimed to follow Martin Luther, these were grave misdemeanors, and it seems that he actually lived up to only the last word in his name - King - for the human rights movement and the ladies.

What, then, is the purpose of this paragraph? An attack on the civil rights movement with punches below the belt? It is, rather, to clarify how connections are made between a message and the messenger, and how easily the one can overshadow the other. What do the revelations about King imply for his dreams of a better society? Do they cast doubt on ideals, or do ideals brighten the individual's dark side? A simple solution, to accept the bearers of good visions as altruists, and to dismiss those of bad visions as egoists, would be intellectually indefensible.

We all have a strong tendency to attribute good qualities to people who offer good social proposals. Many a politician naturally tries to exploit this association in the opposite direction as well. If he can present himself as good-hearted, numerous voters will believe that his program is also good. The program may be supported by arguing that it derives from an excellent character, whose excellence and morality are in turn supported by the program. A positive circle is thus created - not to mention a circular argument. The link between the person and the program is often highly questionable, just as King's advocacy of nonviolence in human rights issues has a weak connection with his faults as a faithful husband and serious scholar.

Similarly, we transfer negative qualities between other people and their programs, and whoever holds a contrary opinion may be

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accused of various sins. The general habit of mixing facts with personalities is a common basis of political marketing activity. Our aim, however, should be to analyze such a pattern of thought and not to curse the politicians for utilizing it.

As a professional group, politicians do not seem to have passed through a moral screening process. The usual view of the public is probably that politicians are relatively suspect in moral terms. A survey in Sweden showed that only 7 percent regarded the leading politicians as honest - the lowest score among the professions assessed.<2> In a similar test in Britain, 6 percent of the electorate expressed confidence in the honesty of politicians. Frequently the morals of politicians appear to be quite dubious, and nonetheless extremely important, pointing to a paradox.<3>

There are also positive views about the private values of politicians, chiefly expressed by their own party apparatus. It is often said that a certain politician is a warm friend of nature, and that he sets great store by family life. This does not sound very bold, but whether it is a correct picture can be questioned. If the politician had an intense interest in nature and children, he would presumably have pursued it more directly by choosing a different profession. More plausibly, he is less interested in such activities than other people are on average - and more interested in belonging to associations, a trait that is less attractive for public relations.

According to a widespread notion, it is primarily Americans who worry about the private morality of politicians, whereas Europeans are more impartial. Some brief illustrations on the theme of love affairs may indicate great national contrasts. On the one hand, Senator Gary Hart lost his chance of being nominated as Presidential candidate for the Democratic Party in 1988, due to involvement with a beautiful model (on a boat appropriately entitled "Monkey Business"). On the other hand, Edith Cresson, the erstwhile Prime Minister of France, was persistently rumored to have been a lover of the country's President. Such a story is banned from print, but soon becomes a public secret. Few people are really shocked, and Mitterand generally had an image of progressiveness surrounded by strong personal loyalty. Yet the issue could easily be broadened from sexual morality to legal incompetence and private interest, in a matter as important as the choice of a Prime Minister. Cresson stirred up further press storms, but this scandal remained only potential.

In Sweden, the conviction that "it doesn't happen here" was long propagated. The truth had to be otherwise, but the media obeyed strict self-censorship. Per Albin Hansson, the wartime Prime Minister, died well before his bigamy came to light. Articles in respected foreign media about the female alliances of a more recent Prime Minister, Olof Palme, have not been available to the Swedish public. How it would have judged them may be wondered, but a lack of newsworthiness is not an obvious cause of the local media's discretion. A vague blend of corps spirit and social duty is more likely.

Leaders can avoid criticism of their private morality by imposing special rules on their sexual morality. This has been common in many

societies, notably when the authority of God is invoked. Divine attention to a leader's sexual life is conspicuous in small sects - such as that of Branch David in Waco, Texas. Its high priest, David Koresh, preached polygyny at first; but once established as a prophet, he invalidated all marriages with other men and created a sexual monopoly for himself over the sect's women.<4>

The Koran formally allows men to possess at most four wives. Less known is the fact that Allah granted the Prophet Mohammed a personal exemption from this rule. "For you, Prophet, all women are permitted whom you have bought, as by a gift, and so are the slave women Allah has brought you as prizes in war...so, too, every believing woman who delivers herself to the Prophet and whom he would marry. You alone shall have this freedom before the other faithful... You may disown whomever you wish, and take to wife whomever you wish, yea, even those you have disowned if you should again desire them. Nor is this a crime on your part. Its sole intent is to keep their eyes clear and their hearts without anguish, and they shall be satisfied with what you bestow upon each of them."<5> The leader's sexuality is not mere lust, but a sacred act of grace to his blessed women. David Koresh thought that the Biblical description of anointing a king's head with oil was a metaphorical encouragement of sex, to be heeded by a contemporary David as well. The Lord's ways are unfathomable, yet they curiously often run past the bedrooms of prophets.

Modern and ancient monarchs are also relevant for our inquiry into the relationship between private morality and political performance. Does the filching of personal pennies result in the looting of public coffers? On the most prolific level, one finds a number of leaders who confuse state funds with their own pocketbooks.

Louis XIV of France succeeded in centering a whole government around his personality. The highest favor to a prominent individual was that of attendance at the Sun King's dressing, to slip a stocking over the royal foot; at the "Golden Cage" of Versailles, the court comprised 20,000 souls. President Mobutu of Zaire has filled his Swiss bank accounts with an estimated sum of seven billion dollars. This servant of the people is now even richer than his government or, indeed, than the royal house of Belgium which previously owned the country. Communist dictators have been more cautious with the flight of capital, but place the same priority on themselves at the expense of other citizens. Ceausescu's slaughter-like hunting of specially imported animals, and Castro's hunting with bush-beaters in army helicopters, were representative examples. If profligate tyrants ever went through a phase of penny-pinching, it quickly passed.

Two more archfiends, however, can hardly be overlooked when discussing power: Hitler and Stalin. The virtual puritanism of their private lives is striking. Stalin slept on a settee in his study. His wife was shot on his orders, or driven to suicide, but in other respects his affairs were tidy and proper. Perhaps his worst luxury was a private salon for showing mostly forbidden American films.

Hitler also cut an austere figure. His liaison with Eva Braun culminated in a wedding just before their demise. During the final

days, he gave up much of the bunker to Goebbels, who brought in a large family. Moreover, Hitler was a vegetarian and adored animals. He had a mania for collecting art works, which were bought by the hundreds - but the aim was to fill huge public halls in his home city of Linz, not a private gallery. Hitler never took out his salary as Chancellor of the Reich, an exceedingly unusual phenomenon among heads of state. Thus, in regard to personal indulgence, these two dictators were of a Spartan scale. Could it be that idealists are not necessarily good?

An instance of the connection between private morality and other activities is provided by Adolf Eichmann, the top bureaucrat in the extermination of Jews. His professional life became notorious through a trial at Jerusalem in 1961, which also revealed his character. One might have expected a dissolute crook, but he proved to be a loyal and zealous civil servant with solid personal morals, according to such analysts as Hannah Arendt. When his mother once got a ride in an official car, Eichmann himself calculated the benefit and deducted it from his salary. Here we have a rare specimen who, for moral reasons, would not steal a penny from the taxpayers; and still it is difficult to look upon him as a paragon.

Most dictators start out as famished freedom-fighters and turn into paunchy potentates. They doubtless tend to retain this egoistic ambition all the time, without being so foolish as to mention it. But Hitler and Stalin demonstrate emphatically that, even if a leader is not motivated by private luxury, his austerity is no insurance against catastrophe. Evidently, the will to power can be something else than a tool for egoism in the sense of material welfare.

Stalin's elimination of his comrades in the Politburo may be interpreted as a ruthless power struggle for personal interest. But the mass murder of kulaks? Neither is it credible that Jewish property was what drew Hitler to the Holocaust. If a theft can be committed without murder, the murder requires a separate motive. Banal egoism, though typical of tyrants, seems a poor explanation for their actions. Another illuminating example is the sect leader Jim Jones, who took his disciples to a new community in the South American jungle, and ended it with a collective suicide that included himself. In this case, egoism would be a misnomer for glowing idealism.

A victor can always be accused of obsession chiefly with his victory and throne, so a shadow of suspicion for egoism must fall on those who claim to be virtuous. They avoid it by suffering and dying for a good cause. Privation and sacrifice become paramount, while positive results are secondary. Mortification, drab colors, tasteless food, and a serious face are integrated with this altruistic pretense, which begins to suggest ethical masochism. There is a common denominator of Jesus, Jim Jones and Ché Guevara.

8.2 Morals in public life

Two diametrically opposite views exist as to what is characteristic

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and desirable for the morality of leaders. The classic approach is to see a leader as a model for all human attributes. Such an image is very often advertised as a reflection of reality, ranging from old heroic sagas to the tales about modern tyrants. Its frequency does not make it strong or rationally valid, but demands that we set limits on groundless supposition.

A ruler's idolization of his own personality has repeatedly given rise to a mass religion. The Pharaohs sprang from the gods, and a secularized religion such as Communism is not far behind them. Ceausescu, an atheist, transformed his parents into saints of the Orthodox Church. Further steps were taken by a tribute to Stalin:

"I would have compared him to a white mountain - but the mountain has a summit.

I would have compared him to the depths of the sea - but the sea has a bottom.

I would have compared him to the shining moon - but the moon shines at midnight, not at noon.

I would have compared him to the brilliant sun - but the sun radiates at noon, not at midnight." <7>

Reality often exceeds the crudest irony.

In a democracy the glorification of leading politicians must stay within certain bounds, but they are still praised to heights which are hard to reconcile with a democratic outlook. Although demonization of them provides a counterweight, it too is exaggerated.

A more advanced attitude was expounded by Niccolò Machiavelli in his book "The Prince". Addressing realities rather than virtues, he argued that politics - especially foreign affairs - are best conducted by a person who proceeds with the cunning of a fox. One's chances of success are increased by playing the game with guarded cards and maximum freedom of action. Machiavellian strategy contradicts the panegyric cult of leaders, but again it focuses narrowly upon the leader. Instead of a very good hero, he is now a very smart hero. The need for a Machiavellian morality of leadership deserves discussion, starting with some historical examples.

Two Frenchmen

In sixteenth-century France, a long war occurred between the Catholic regime and the Protestant minority, or Huguenots. Eventually it was resolved in a way that allowed Henry of Navarre, the leading Huguenot, to hold the throne on the condition that he became a Catholic. He did so, and was crowned Henry IV - a decision which has been both criticized and applauded. Did he show proof of good or bad morality?

Four centuries later, in the late 1950s, another French leader confronted a choice that raised similar moral questions. Charles de Gaulle sought expanded powers for the presidency, and was elected to it with a new constitution - the Fifth Republic, which gave him

substantial power. During the campaign, he had advocated the continuation of French rule in Algeria. Once in office, however, he supported Algerian independence. This decision was hailed as courageous and visionary by the majority, but as double treason by others. Among the effects was a series of attempts on de Gaulle's life.

These examples are selected because they exhibit two features. The first is the great speed of a leader's conversion. There was no gradual change from a promise to a goal, to a hope, to a reconsideration, to a revision; the leader must have known all along that he was playing a double game. Secondly, the final political decision can be regarded as good in itself. If seen as a bad decision prepared by treachery, it would be only a double blunder, without the complexity of a dilemma.

Henry of Navarre symbolizes a familiar problem: does a politician abandon a viewpoint in order to help his career, rather than to obey his convictions? An affirmative answer is generally thought to be reprehensible. Henry's famous comment - "Paris is well worth a mass!" - may be understood as a calculation, not a conversion; but the question remains of whether it should be condemned. To draw a parallel with the world of commerce, we scarcely find a shadow falling upon an industrialist who admits that his choice of products is determined by a market study, instead of by his own preferences of what should be bought. Analogously, it can be judged both praiseworthy and realistic that a politician is influenced by the voters' desires. There are, of course, limits to how much adaptation is acceptable. Yet if one focuses less on the politician as a central figure, the issues of how, when, why, and how much he thinks about certain topics become relatively insignificant for an election campaign, and more pertinent to his biography. The primary interest is in which policy he ought to pursue.

Some of life's realities involve compromises. A politician may seem to be a bad negotiator since he makes too many concessions in return for too few. And this is impossible to rebut. If the entire electorate were to sit at the table, there would always be efforts to squeeze out further advantages.

In Henry of Navarre's case, the agreement concerned - the Edict of Nantes - was supposedly very good for the Huguenots, and was a personal triumph for Henry. The criticism that it is morally deficient to gain such an advantage for oneself can be ignored. Assuming that his Protestantism was passionate, his conversion should count as an admirable personal sacrifice. Otherwise, it was not a painful self-denial and his detour into Catholicism amounted to paying a farthing for a fortune.

As for de Gaulle, his actions are more puzzling. Is it permissible to mislead the electorate deliberately in a crucial situation? This is clearly an instance where a double game may be considered justified - the French nation was not ready for the "real" decision. After the solution had been carried out, popular support confirmed in retrospect that the leader was right. On those grounds, it is essential to determine the right decision about a fateful issue, not to present the

decision correctly to the public. In their sympathy for innocence, people will vote for happy goals such as cohesiveness, harmony, peace and greater welfare. Then their leader should take care of the difficult choices which are necessary, and which can paralyze weaker souls with fright.

But there is much to say for a contrary morality. If politicians were to explain pros and cons, would this be so certain to scare the voters? Quite possibly, it might raise the level of debate. With his strong position, de Gaulle had rich opportunities to bend public opinion toward the decision he favored, which could have become part of a democratic decision rather than a coup-like turn of events. In several ways, sudden reversals of policy are worse in regard to fateful issues than to prosaic ones, as the latter are easier to revise if it turns out that the leader was not ahead of the electorate but heading in another direction.

Democracy is impoverished if it can only choose the oarsman without having correct information about the direction he will row in. Equally disturbing is that the United States went into World Wars I and II, as well as the Vietnam war, under presidents whose main election promise was to keep the country out of these wars. A contrast to President Roosevelt's eulogy of peace and isolationism is the agitation against Nazism by his prominent ally Winston Churchill. Even when pacifism and appeasement were most fashionable in the 1930s, Churchill stuck to his view that a war against Germany was inevitable. In many situations where a proper course has to be charted, the majority of politicians adopt a dangerous form of opportunism, with good-hearted optimism replacing sober analysis. It is then that the exceptional leaders become noticeable.

In foreign affairs, the Machiavellian line is not conspicuously successful. Much energy is spent on secret diplomacy, bold initiatives, cleverly ambiguous agreements and breathless summit meetings. But the results are amazingly often neutral or negative. In cases where leaders have followed an open, farsighted and consistent policy, it has tended to work better. Although the right decisions may be delayed or rejected by the voters, a compensation is the elimination of other decisions which are hasty or wrong. This is not an objection to Realpolitik, but to a diplomacy limited by personalities, circumstances and secrecy.

Domestic politics yield the same implication: a Machiavellian morality reduces the debate to a matter of marketing and hides the problems from the voters. They are supposed to choose calmly between harmless, and if possible altruistic, goals while the tough decisions are taken behind locked doors, by men who are prepared to do the necessary political work - which the electorate should not have to dirty its clear conscience and muddle its meager mind with. After the election, what remains is sheer hope that the chosen leader will find smart solutions. Democracy is thereby not spared a strenuous debate, but is given grounds for disappointed dissent.

An examination of leadership morality would be incomplete if it were to neglect the most publicized and scrutinized moral scandal of politics in recent decades, namely Watergate. This actually had two

aspects, a petty burglary and a political responsibility, both of which are worth review.

Watergate

A thought-provoking description of the burglary's background appears in the book "Influence" by Robert B. Cialdini.<8> Two members of President Nixon's reelection committee, Mitchell and Magruder, took the decision to further their aims by breaking into Washington's Watergate complex. They had received three options from an imaginative activist, Liddy. First, he proposed kidnapping and blackmail, as well as bugging of the Democratic Party headquarters. This rejected, he pared it down to a plan that was also refused. The third, still less ambitious, involved "only" bugging, and was accepted with the subsequent argument that he was owed something for his efforts. An opposing vote was cast by the last member of the committee, Larue, chiefly because he saw nothing to be gained; neither had he attended the two previous meetings. So the outcome was not a deep conspiracy, but a choice made by people with weak moral principles who fell for a classic sales trick - to ask for a lot and get a little. This technique exploits reciprocal feelings that lean toward a compromise. The crucial moral weakness in the decision-makers is unprincipled benevolence.

Nixon was to be criticized, not for having participated in the decision, but for trying to mislead an investigation of the burglary by giving unofficial counterorders instead of supporting it. This criminal "cover-up" became the essence of Watergate.

One component in the excited emotions surrounding the affair is a personal and political antipathy to Nixon among journalists. Another, of special interest from our own book's perspective, is the yearning for a good leader - one who plays with an open hand and fine intentions, inflicting no pressure or moral problems on his fellow human beings.

The basic question is whether people in official positions are capable of drawing boundaries between cooperation, or personal loyalty, and moral obligation. Each of us has been assigned a task that entails both personal loyalty to the assigner and general duty to an organization. Pressure from the boss is commonly felt, but the requirements of faithfulness are obviously greater toward the task than toward the individual who mediated it. Every party leader must hope that an investigation which might hurt his party will be fruitless. As a rule, he also presumably has an unofficial willingness to encourage others to take appropriate action, and this is clear to his collaborators even if he says and does nothing.

A civilized society rests upon a healthy supply of civic courage to resist such explicit or tacit pressures. Yet society does not stand or fall on the issue of whether the man at the top is an angel, who neither possesses nor utters evil desires, or whether he does both. Democracy was not threatened to death by Nixon's wish that the Watergate inquiry would have no result damaging to himself.

Granted, crimes should be prosecuted and their planners suitably

punished. That Nixon was more interested in winning the election than in solving a crime is, however, fairly natural. His counterorders to the investigating authorities were wrong and call for criticism, as well as for an apology - but not for his resignation. A democratic mandate is too important to be set aside by a trivial incident. The alternative reminds us of Latin America, with its traditions of toppling a dangerous political rival by exposing him as a tax-evader. Despite any guilt a candidate bears for such a crime, this ought not to render him ineligible for office.

Watergate revolved partly around the demand that Nixon's tape recordings be surrendered to Congress. Many people backed the demand in moral indignation, without considering the consequences. A similar problem had been discussed in the "Washington Post" during the 1950s, when Senator Joseph McCarthy wanted Congress to look into President Eisenhower's activities. The newspaper then concluded that this was unreasonable, but Watergate totally changed its tune.<9>

The critics of Watergate began with a declaration that leaders of a major political party should not be involuntarily eavesdropped upon by their opponents. Here was a crime against a principle of moral integrity. The bugging - ideally, of course, to reveal improprieties - was the intention that made the burglary a political scandal, not just an intrusion. But it soon turned out that the critics did not have any general moral objection to undesired bugging.

Watergate is widely regarded as a symbolic event in which the United States was cleansed of an awful stain and morally reborn. For many others, though, it is a cardinal example of quack healing. When morality goes unrecognized in large issues, small ones are magnified. The politicians can waste billions of dollars with impunity by taking truly terrible decisions, which only provoke more noise from their professional opponents. Yet if a leader is caught in the wrong bed, says something insulting, or makes any tiny mistake, a journalistic tornado can blow him away. These standards are less than laudable. The mass media are bound to be attracted by a significant double role as prosecutors and judges. Nixon's departure may be viewed as a loss for democracy, whose elected representative was sacrificed to symbolism.

Our inference from Watergate disagrees radically with the conventional picture. The crime seems paltry, not devilish or far-reaching; it was a pointless Machiavellian pirouette. What purpose could the bugging have served? Petty theft does not place society in peril, despite the headlines it can inspire. Political misdemeanors are best stopped by simple freedom of press and by an electorate that dislikes swindling. This disposal of rubbish should not entitle the media to appoint themselves as white knights, saints and executioners. Or does cleanliness mean chopping off the hand of whoever throws a cigarette butt on the sidewalk?

Hunger for power

There are two possible attitudes toward politicians and power. One is

to try and distinguish individuals who are primarily concerned with acquiring high positions, and to favor instead those who want power as a tool for attaining certain goals. The other is to consider power a sort of widespread disease, rather than a dangerous attribute of some people. The latter view has been held by such thinkers as Thomas Hobbes, who spoke of "a generall inclination of all mankind: a perpetual and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death."<10>

This idea may need elaboration. In modern society, most people evidently value power over themselves more highly than power over others. The preference for personal integrity and public tolerance is important, but all too seldom praised. Desire for power is not always perilous and destructive; it can embody the love of freedom.

Stronger doses of power do, however, cause infinite addiction. As Lord Acton observed, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." It is essential to see this as a universal phenomenon, not chiefly as a personal flaw in particular individuals. Not only is a dictatorship created by a dictator; he is a product of his dictatorial prerogatives. Good dictators are extraordinarily rare, and we should pay equal attention to Lord Acton's next sentence: "Great men are almost always bad men."<11>

Already in the seventeenth century, James Harrington stressed that a sound system is built upon good laws, not good leaders. The opposite approach of relying on leaders - "give us good men and they will make us good laws" - he called the maxim of a demagogue.<12> Priority for good systems over good leaders was established, for example, by the Bill of Rights in the state of Massachusetts: "to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men."<13>

The will to power must have some objective beyond itself - at the very least, an attractive vision. On the scene of World War II, Mussolini emerged as a Machiavellian glutton of power, regarding his vision mainly as an instrument for acquiring it. By contrast, Hitler and Stalin doubtless sincerely believed in their visions, seeing themselves and their power as tools for realizing those visions. Yet whether vision brings power, or the reverse, is a question like that of "the chicken and the egg". Vision is hardly an alternative to the hunger for power, but a mighty magnet pulling in the same direction.

Hence, the first attitude mentioned above - an attempt to separate primary from secondary quests for power - is unproductive. Both kinds of hunger can easily become destructive. A negative method, to seek politicians who have no interest at all in power, would not be profitable either. Politics, by definition, is about the power to make or prevent decisions. Priests and mullahs who disclaim worldly power, or populists who "merely wish to dissent", have often proved to be megalomaniac politicians. The aim should therefore not be to measure politicians' concern with power, but to distinguish good from bad policies and avoid giving leaders a free hand.

Most importantly, the distinction between a message and its messenger ought to be maintained. We have cited Churchill's remark that idiots are sometimes right, and the mirror reflection is no less

valid. Intelligence, knowledge and insight do not guarantee that their owner has a wise manifesto. Cicero pointed this out long ago: "Nothing can be said which is so foolish that it has not already been said by a philosopher."

8.3 Democratic leadership

When one reviews the qualities that generally attach to democratic leadership, one is struck not by the length of the list of good and necessary characteristics, but by the number of traits that the voters could do better without. First, as suggested earlier, leaders' private behavior is of doubtful significance in political contexts. To wonder about the consequences of personal sins in the near or distant future is to risk lowering the level of debate. How should we react to an old film which shows a prospective Minister of Defense brutally attacking another six-year-old with a sand bucket? Can we now rely on the same person in a highly responsible post? Given the fascination with trivial biographies, a more principled discussion is required in which every participant assesses what is important and what is not. Until then, well-known curiosities and trifles may be decisive factors.

Mysticism is a further personal dimension that does not suit democratic politicians either. Just as with Greta Garbo, there is a potential interest in trying to comprehend an enigmatic politician who remains enigmatic. It is often regarded as commendable that a politician has a mystical side, an unknown inner space, which also provides the mass media with inexhaustible room for speculation. The truth never emerges, so exciting new hypotheses can always be raised without finding any more confirmation than denial. Once again we encounter the leader as a figment of imagination, the laconic hero with a past that he does not talk to pieces.

A "great international name" is another leadership quality that the voters could dispense with. This is not only because domestic politics are most important as a rule, but also because the personal connections of leaders are superfluous or prejudicial in foreign affairs. It is naturally attractive for anyone to get a friendly reception as a person, not merely as a representative. To acquire additional dignity, a leader must himself apply the philosophy of forceful friendship. Leaders and diplomats in all countries become anxious to emphasize how essential their colleagues are for relations between nations; they sow in order to harvest mutual flattery and good publicity. Thus the foreign affairs of both large and small countries have unjustifiably turned into a private hobby of prominent politicians who attempt to create the impression that their personal connections are pivotal for the international climate. Mass media keep watch, and conjectures about the personal chemistry between two heads of state are as galvanizing as that between glamorous actors who are paired in a film. If, instead, a country's policy is conveyed by a diplomat who, despite his label, manages to get across a clear,

concrete, and possibly negative message, the mission is accomplished.

Finest among politicians are those who rank as "statesmen". The very term implies that they virtually stand above much of the craft of politics, rather like monarchs. Often the statesman is a leader larger than life, and his personal abilities are thought to exceed his working duties. At best, he is said to be too big for his country. In reality his weight is seldom measurable by specific programs or achievements - but it has a metaphysical magnitude that lies on nearly the same lofty plane as universal goodness, being typified by words such as judgement, responsibility and trust. And the greatest of these is trust.

Personal traits do possess a certain value. The main thrust behind this orientation toward personalities, however, is that it is far easier to adopt a position on people than on issues. We have no trouble in feeling sympathy or antipathy about the figures we see on television, and the personal emotions radiated by politicians are extremely influential. They need only display an understanding of immigrants, anger over crime, pity for the handicapped, commitment to the Third World, belief in a dynamic business sector, and deep worry by environmental destruction. The problem is that the attitudes in question can instigate a wide range of quite different policies.

Describing one's own character invites falsification. The irresolute politician depends on special sales support for an energetic reputation that will render him acceptable to voters. Such personal profiling gives rise to smokescreens which blur his policies, as well as to poor practical decisions. In most situations it is wise to distinguish between issues and personalities, but in politics one endeavors to associate the two. Solutions are judged in terms of who proposed them, and the assumed intentions - good in one's own politicians, bad in others - determine the judgement as frequently as do the expected effects. It can also be asked whether personalities are so crucial for the result from the voters' perspective, although self-glorifying politicians readily persuade themselves that this is true.

Due to the strong focus upon individuals and their attitudes, which cast a shadow over significant policies, it would be liberating to see a firmer concentration on the issues and to regard personal judgement of politicians as a by-product. Less attention to political figures is a plausible means of obtaining both better policies and better politicians.

A politician does not need to be ponderous or humorous, let alone idealistic. He should be neither a divine nor patriarchal substitute, but simply an applicant for an independent job. As employers, the voters should primarily decide what they want done, and give the job to whoever has the best realistic ideas. A competent person who takes the wrong course is often more harmful than a muddler, but even someone with a few faults may succeed if the course is right. Many assistants surround a politician, and sheer awareness of his own defects can go a long way.

Having examined the things a democratic leader ought not to be,

we must consider the qualities that are desirable in him. Opinions will vary as to what is good and how to bring it about. But every politician should view his task as that of the people's servant - full of knowledge and initiative, yet nonetheless a servant. A politician should renounce the ambition of being a popular educator who saves the citizens from their sordid self-interest. The function of political differences is to generate creative proposals with solid chances of yielding positive effects for the voters' self-interest.

Two qualifications are worth stressing in particular. The ability to lead a working group is important, since the head of a government - and of a party - must instill clarity and capacity at work. In a democratic organization, this involves a combination of sensitivity to what is feasible and dedication to working out policies and getting internal acceptance. The second key trait is being able to communicate the party's ideas intelligibly: what should be done, which advantages or drawbacks a proposal has, and how to set priorities. Here the politician is rather dependent on his colleagues and the media. If he cannot endure any confessions of negative consequences of his proposals, because they will hang like millstones around his neck, his subtlety will suffer. But if some politicians are honest and the media are careful, a critical pressure will instead develop against whoever builds a campaign on turgid sympathy and warped solutions, and make him look like a misplaced trickster.

Politicians are wary of concrete programs. They give numerous reasons: an inquiry must be conducted before any proposals are possible, a pattern of economic growth must be confirmed first, and so on. Their attitude is probably a serious mistake - a triumph of flexibility over policy. An opposition party should thus present definite proposals which the incumbent party can try to defeat. Otherwise, the proposals are strengthened by a debate that matters most, because it influences the voters' choice. To hold the debate early can accelerate change, and this is desirable. Democracy becomes unpredictable when changes occur at the end of a government's term, leaving the effects for the next government to confront.

Before we bury the subject of the leader's personality, more should be said about "great decisions". Experience commonly shows that the great decisions in our own lives have been taken with limited insight. We often realize only in retrospect that they were great decisions. Most of us are relatively rational when making moderate choices - say of a consumer item or a holiday spot - where we can weight diverse factors, evaluate them, and then reach a fairly sensible choice. Investigations of how people take decisions have revealed that very few factors enter the judgement, and that some are discarded if others are added.<14 >

We hope, of course, that politicians will be more clever at foreseeing great decisions and taking them with farsightedness. Unfortunately, this hope is not so well-founded. Axel Oxenstierna, the famous Chancellor of Sweden, put the point plainly 350 years ago: "Ah, my son, if you knew with what little wisdom the world is run." Many of us share the son's delusion. A leader's working conditions

alone make it difficult to believe in high-quality decisiveness. He bears an enormous administrative burden and has countless people to consult or inform, engage or discharge. Endless symbolic acts must be performed, of scant constructive value but filling gaps of presence and participation that would have deleterious effects. In such a predicament, the leader is supposed to tackle new and complex issues - with intuition, or divine guidance? Improvisations are often awful. A decision which is usually held to illustrate inspired leadership was President Kennedy's declaration that the United States would put a man on the moon within ten years.¹⁵ It was reportedly taken in a short time, on an ideological impulse. The difference between our fragile decisions and a leader's is that the latter will be backed up by overwhelming material power, giving them as rational an appearance in hindsight as their significance demands.

Nor does a democratic debate succeed in sifting all the wheat from the chaff. Yet there are good reasons to believe that this is the most quality-promoting procedure. After plenty of painful attacks and critiques, a constructive phase begins and criteria are established. The intuitive path is shortest, and most comfortable for a leader, but everything indicates that its results are worse - an argument against the merits of enlightened despotism, whether in a democracy or a dictatorship.

High ideals are an aspect we have treated earlier. It is tempting to draw a conclusion opposing convention, namely that lofty and radical ambitions are a monopoly of the crooked, the crazy and the cold-blooded. We might recall the words of a leading revisionary socialist, Bernstein, when he tried to turn the German social-democratic party away from Marxist catechism and toward reality: "What are usually called the goals of socialism mean nothing to me; the movement means everything."

One of the chief problems is to coax the democratic debate to abandon its "high" level of hopes, ambitions and attitudes. The questions that politicians will answer with concrete decisions are the most important. The relevant issues lie precisely on this middle level, between petty symbolic or personal matters and lofty illusions or ambitions. An altruistic morality is devoted, sadly, to just these two extreme levels.

In general, a realistic expectation is that a politician strives to enrich himself with the state's resources and/or to exercise his ego at the citizens' expense. The system should therefore take for granted that the thief is a child of opportunity. Its aim must be to prevent abuse of power by maintaining a proper model - not to yearn for individuals who are beyond material or carnal desires - and to control the instinct which is presumably strongest in politicians: the urge for power.

If we were to find a politician who resembled a saint, we would soon infer that he had no future as a politician. Saints are fine in heaven, but fools on earth. Specific achievements for the benefit of voters are not facilitated by believing that everyone can do good. There is also something paradoxical in the occasional emergence of saintly individuals into the limelight. Gandhi and Mother Teresa are

renowned for their humility, sacrifices and meekness. They must have had public-relations men with quite contrary traits, for the praise is partly a disproof of the myths. Both the saint and his, or her, voters risk great disappointment.

Conversely, even a politician who has got drunk, evaded taxes, been unfaithful, and smoked hashish may have a good proposal and be able to make it a reality. Hence, not much is gained by conducting tests for saintliness. Perfect honesty is not necessarily an essential quality. The skeptic would say that a blameless past is more probably due to inadequate allurements than to impeccable morals. We still need protection against the theft of silverware.

Politicians in a democracy are restrained, not by their personal morality, but by the dangers of prosecution, bad publicity, and being kicked out by the party or the voters. To be sure, politicians are personally irritated by expressions of what is called "contempt for politicians". From the standpoint of democracy, though, such contempt is a valuable check on abuse of power. Likewise, suspicion is a virtue and trust a vice.

Private morality, as well as other "good" personal traits, play all too large a role in public debate. A leader should not become one's best friend, or a father figure. His individual profile should be restricted to that of an adept administrator, who works along the lines he has spoken for and the electorate has voted for.

8.4 A cautionary tale

Once upon a time, long ago, there lived a king who was very worried, because his tiny realm faced huge problems. He wished to cover the roof of his castle with gold, so that all the world would tell of it. Indeed, it might prove the equal of a Pharaoh's pyramid. The egoistic townfolk did not understand such greatness, and resisted the necessary rise in taxes. The army, too, was dominated by narrow-minded selfishness. A neighboring city had desecrated the royal coat of arms, so the nation's honor was at stake - but the soldiers had shown no fighting spirit whatever, and carried out a short, half-hearted siege. No brave storming, no heroic deeds, nothing! Yet they could fight. When the same city was attacked some years earlier, the lust for battle was boundless. Now the King felt surprised and betrayed. Something had to be done.

Thus he sent a call across every land to find the wisest of counselors. A high reward was offered, drawing many to the castle: magicians, medicine-men and bearded prophets. The King listened intently, and he was a far from silly fellow. Soon the error became crystal-clear.

Egoism had closed its grip on the people. They wanted to pay taxes only for what benefited them. They would fight only to protect their loved ones, not for national honor and kingly pride. In social life as in the marketplace, they were willing to part with something only if they got something attractive in return. Decadence had gone so

far that they discussed the King's role in society. Many were critical, though the printer boasted that he had sold piles of pamphlets about the little princesses: there were, after all, advantages in having a king. When the King heard his spies report these low arguments, he fell into a fury.

How should this plague of egoism be combated, to give people back their readiness for sacrifice in the service of king and country? A man with a shaved head stood, and spoke as follows. Folk had to realize that the material trappings they desired were meaningless illusions. Life was a phantom, a few whirlpools in time's river. Its sole driving force was the will to live. The point was to get free, with the insight that nothing had any significance.

The King mulled it over. Making an ideal of apathy was a bold stroke. It might take the wind out of certain young cocks, who would make less trouble if they sat by the river and stared at the water. But this solution did not promise the active support he sought.

Another man got up and said: "Give them a reward, something big in the future." The castle's pragmatic bailiff objected: "The price will drop if we offer cash payment. And paying late will raise it."

"Let the reward lie well in the future, but be of enormous size," suggested an ascetic - and a thoughtful calm ensued, showing that profound words had been uttered.

"How is it to be paid?" asked the bailiff, who was not as intelligent as the foreign advisers.

At last the King announced pensively: "Sacrifices today, and rewards in time." After a while, a murmur was heard. "War today, peace tomorrow. A great war for a thousand-year peace..."

The bailiff rubbed his jaw. "Whoever works today, without knowing when he'll be paid, is bad off." A smart seer rejoined: "Naturally, but here's a remedy. We'll turn poverty into a virtue worth striving for."

"Those who are really poor will be better at fighting," claimed a fat man with thick whiskers. "They have nothing to lose but their chains."

"They can lose their lives if they fight," snorted the bailiff, and the fat man sat down with an awkward blush.

The ascetic broke the silence: "We can offer them the opportunity of eternal life, so they need not be afraid." At this, the bailiff, a thinker of limited scope, began to wonder if too much wine had been served. Yet the King perceived that the talk was on the right track.

"A guarantee ought to be given that one who dies for the good cause will go to Paradise," said a camel-rider from afar.

"The poor shall have priority at the pearly portals", pouted the ascetic.

The King nodded, and meditated, then objected. "Those ideas are nice enough for the people, but how do they help me? I do not wish to be poor, or to die unnecessarily." He was interrupted by a salvo of protests. Several in the assembly saw a vision which filled them with joy.

"It is easy to arrange a number of exemptions, not least Your

Majesty!"

"The present can be the antithesis of the future. Democracy tomorrow, through dictatorship today!"

"Do not be anxious, Your Majesty. To speak well of poverty will earn even higher praise than to experience poverty."

The pattern was becoming evident to the King. Petty egoism would be shaken out of the myopic bourgeoisie by offering them something much better. Paradise was the obvious prize, for eternal life made the offer impossible to surpass. A special role with a free hand for the leader should also be quite attractive. Like a majestic father, he might embody the people's will - and in view of his gigantic task, he must be entitled to demand modest sacrifices. Any apprentice knew the cost of high quality, and Heaven could not be entered for free.

The King compensated his excellent counselors lavishly, and the best were sent out to address the masses, which they did with skill. Eventually the taxes flooded in, enabling him to build the golden roof which is so admired by posterity. A bit later, his troops stormed and conquered the city which had insulted him. In this way the King saved the people from its blinkered perspective, and he lived happily ever after.

8 Summary

It seems that many of us, when judging a leader, can do so more easily in terms of his personality than of his program, and a tactical politician works hard to create an altruistic image, often by advocating good and lofty goals. There is also a tendency to glorify leaders, seeing them as virtually infallible. But this places high requirements on a leader and he sometimes stumbles over a symbolic issue, such as a clumsy statement, or over defects in his private morality. We have proposed a more balanced view of leaders in this chapter, arguing that the crux is whether his policies are realistic and viable, whether he fulfills his assignment as a politician, and not whether he is faultless as a person.

Politicians are frequently accused of hunger for power, and it appears to be a plausible belief that politicians, on average, are more interested in power than other professionals are. However, if the urge for power is interpreted, consistently with previous chapters, as a general human trait which can realistically be expected, it follows directly that laws and systems must be established to prevent the abuse of power, without regarding this as a specific problem about individual leaders. Perhaps the most important function of a democratic system is that leaders with despotic proclivities get no chance to do colossal damage.

1. *Newsweek*, November 19, 1990.
2. SIFO opinion survey.
3. *Newsweek*, October 11, 1993.
4. *Newsweek*, March 15, 1993.
5. The Koran (Koranen in Swedish, p. 208).
6. See the discussion of Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on Banality of Evil* in Brown, *Social Psychology*.
7. A Soviet poet on Stalin, in Schmandt, *A History of Political Philosophy*, p. 425
8. Cialdini, *Influence*, p. 44.
9. Johnson, *Modern Times*, p. 762.
10. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 161.
11. Lord Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies*.
12. Harrington via Schmandt, *A History of Political Philosophy*, p. 250
13. Rand, *Capitalism* p. 53
14. An illustration of this is the critique of Baye's theorem. The theorem states that previous judgements of probability have some influence on a current decision even if additional information is considered more important. Several investigations have, however, shown that prior judgements are discarded and that only the prime information is taken into account. Thus, human behaviour does not seem to be guided by complete, but by bounded rationality.
15. Johnson, *Modern Times* p. 629.