

ETHICS

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Politics have no relation to morals.

—Niccolò Machiavelli

The presidency is predominantly a place of moral leadership.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

The chief role of the executive is, as Chester Barnard reminds us, to manage the values of the organization (Barnard, 1968). Presidents, corporate executives, and leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofit organizations all have a responsibility to reflect, promote, and live the values of the organization, to abide by the laws and rules of the state, and to fulfill their ethical obligation to society. All civic leaders and public officials will thus face moral and ethical dilemmas that must be resolved. We quite properly condemn those officials in the public as well as private sectors who are exposed as corrupt and venal. There have been many political figures who have betrayed public trust and the rule of law by their illicit and illegal behavior. There have been more, however, who simply let us down. How much ethical comportment is necessary to the job of directing a nation or a voluntary association? Is it enough that people in charge act within the confines of the law? Or does the task of representing a nation or carrying out public responsibility require still more?

Although we may shake a disappointed finger at leaders who engage in activities that undercut the political responsibility entrusted to them, few are able to clearly define what sort of moral comportment an officeholder owes us. Public ethics is not a mere black-and-white,

right-and-wrong dichotomy. Further, we have paradoxical expectations. Good public officials are moral and yet effective, kind yet strong and diplomatic. Can they be all of these?

This chapter is an attempt to take a closer look at what the ethics of public leadership really means. First, we shall broadly address what the study of ethics is and how it applies to political leadership. Next, we examine the character/leadership connection, ask if we should apply different moral standards to leaders than to citizens, and we conclude by looking at what moral leadership entails.

What Do We Mean By Ethics?

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the word *ethics* refers to “a principle of right or wrong conduct,” “a system of morals and values,” and “the rules or standards governing the conduct of the members of a profession.” In this sense, to be *ethical* is to act in “accordance with the accepted principles of right and wrong that govern the conduct of a profession.” *Morality* is “the quality of being in accord with standards of right and wrong conduct” or “a system of ideas of right and wrong conduct.”

In this sense, ethics is the act of applying moral principles in the performance of our work and lives, which is

easier said than done. Along with the challenge of doing the right thing comes the difficulty of moral reasoning, knowing the right course of action. Moral reasoning is complicated because principles may conflict. David Resnik (1998, p. 20), referring to ethics in the sciences, has suggested eight moral principles:

1. *Nonmaleficence*: do not harm yourself or others
2. *Beneficence*: help yourself and others
3. *Autonomy*: allow rational individuals to make free and informed choices
4. *Justice*: treat people fairly: treat equals equally, and unequals unequally
5. *Utility*: maximize the ratio of benefits to harm for all people
6. *Fidelity*: keep promises and agreements
7. *Honesty*: do no lie, defraud, deceive, or mislead
8. *Privacy*: respect personal privacy and confidentiality

A code of values, an ethical construct that begins with these shared beliefs, can serve as a foundation for an ethical life; yet, ethical dilemmas arise when moral principles come into conflict. Ethics then becomes the hard work of sorting out from among competing ethical constructs how these principles apply in this particular instance and how to resolve the conflict among these principles that may occur. It is often about difficult choices in a complex and contradictory world. What happens when justice is in conflict with mercy or when freedom conflicts with order?

The day-to-day task of civic leadership requires that leaders choose from competing options. These choices, such as a mayor and city council spending more money on police and less on the poor, have moral as well as political consequences. Leaders do not get a free pass; they are at the center of ethical dilemmas, of choosing among competing moral principles.

Moral reasoning is difficult, and yet to have no such understanding is to be not only uncivil but also inhuman. Where do we get our moral and ethical beliefs? Some argue that we are *born* with a moral sense; others believe that we *learn* it from family, school, church, and the workplace.

Those who believe in an innate moral framework are usually called *absolutists*. They believe that there are objective and universal standards by which actions may be judged. Absolutists may believe that one gains a moral sense from family, school, and so on, in which case, they recognize the impact of social conformity. Nonetheless, they concede that society is not a determinate of right moral conduct and sometimes acknowledge instances when a society's ethical principles were harmful or misguided or both. It is through reason that we can see true moral principles that exist in a transcendental state.

Others who view that moral conduct is learned, however, are *moral relativists*. These individuals believe that there is no moral ground absent reference to specific social and historical circumstances. To the moral relativists, context matters greatly.

Despite the significance of moral reasoning, ethics cannot be divorced from living and acting within a society. Ethics is always in reference to human behavior. Some ethical constructs focus on intention, others on consequences. Those featuring intention are often referred to as *intentionalists*. Intentionalist frameworks claim that it is not the end but the means that must align with the moral good. They argue that intending to do the right thing is the prime criterion for judging actions. *Consequentialists* take a more utilitarian approach, arguing that actions should be judged based on outcome. It is not the means but the end that is important. Ends and means create a hierarchy of:

1. Good Means and Good Ends (Mahatma Gandhi and the protest of colonialism)
2. Bad Means and Good Ends (Franklin D. Roosevelt and lend-lease)
3. Good Means and Bad Ends (President James Buchanan prior to the U.S. Civil War)
4. Bad Means and Bad Ends (Adolf Hitler and genocide)

Gandhi believed that only through good means (nonviolence, for example), could good ends result. Divorcing means from ends was, to Gandhi, false and artificial. Violence against the violence of colonialism would not bring peace. Only the peaceful means of resistance to forms of lawful violence, such as colonialism, could do that.

To Roosevelt, violating the letter of the law in his lend-lease program with Great Britain just prior to U.S. entry into World War II was a small (and morally acceptable) price to pay for the greater good that resulted (keeping Great Britain afloat in its war against Nazi Germany). His questionable means led to a good end.

President Buchanan, facing the breakup of the nation prior to the Civil War, believed the South could not legally secede, but believed he had no constitutional authority to prevent the split. Thus, Buchanan's devotion to the Constitution was admirable, yet such a strict adherence to the law led to a bad end—war. Hitler's treatment of the Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, and other groups is a clear example of bad means leading to bad ends (see Figure 79.1).

Intentionalists and consequentialists would agree that while (1) Good Means and Good Ends should be sought, (4) Bad Means and Bad Ends should be avoided. They, however, might disagree regarding (2) and (3) according their standpoint on the significance of means and ends.

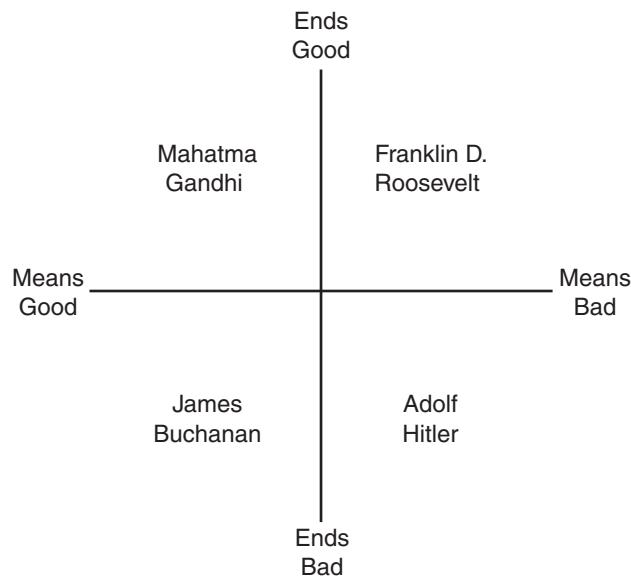


Figure 79.1 Ends/Means and Leadership

Ethics and Civic Values

Public leadership is about how we negotiate the complexities of human interaction in a complex society. Socrates asked, “How should one live?” This question is at the core of ethics. Robert Solomon and Clancy Martin (2003) offer a useful definition of ethics:

Ethics is, first of all, the quest for, and the understanding of, the good life, living well, a life worth living. It is largely a matter of perspective: putting every activity and goal in its place, knowing what is worth doing and what is not worth doing, knowing what is worth wanting and having and knowing what is not worth wanting and having. (p. 9)

Yet at the same time, no one acts in a vacuum. What is best for society must sometimes go beyond the individual good. Yet no one wants to be isolated from his or her own personal attainment of goals and desires either.

Leadership, of course, plays a critical role in this picture. Leadership can have a profound impact on the behavior of other group members. A study by Warren H. Schmidt found that the most important factor influencing the behavior of workers was the “behavior of supervisors” (1983, p. 35). And yet such findings do not authorize a heavy-handed leadership style. The two extreme styles of leadership indicate that one may take a *minimalist* approach to public ethics (all that is required is that I *not* break the law) or a *maximalist* view (I must attempt to do good). Yet, as with most things, ethical leadership is best attained with some balance.

Statecraft Versus Soulcraft

At the time of Plato, statecraft was synonymous with soulcraft. *Soulcraft* is the ordering of one’s soul to desire the good. Plato asserted to be a good leader, one must be a good person: know justice and act justly. And for several hundred years, to tame the prince meant to educate the prince to practice ethical behavior. Thus, *statecraft*, according to Plato, necessitates a maximalist view of leadership. And yet a leader in this model appears to maintain isolation from politics. He comes across as self-involved and uninterested in civic life. Although soulcraft allows for the best society, Plato writes that it is not best sought for this end. Rather, soulcraft is deemed to be its own reward. Plato’s predilection for the good of the soul over the good of society is indicated in the finding that his republic is not a paradigm for the state but a model for the soul.

When Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1513, he seemed to close the door to soulcraft in politics and relied on skill and power. Out went the view that virtue is a necessity of statecraft. Virtue was not to be sought as its own reward but as a means to another reward, the economy of political power. To speak of virtue in these terms is to abandon the Platonic notion altogether. And yet Machiavelli saw this as necessary and desirable. For him, no one lived as Plato’s Socrates, the perfectly virtuous man, and rather than be concerned with the flawless leadership of the philosopher-king, Machiavelli wished to shape leaders of the real world. For him, virtue no longer ruled but power did. Desire and fear were the factors that drove political transformation, not highfalutin ideals.

To Machiavelli, the good leader was not necessarily the moral leader, but the one who exercised skill and good judgment in acquiring and using power. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli separated statecraft (power) from soulcraft (goodness) and advises the would-be prince to grab and wisely use power. Power divorced from ethics raised grave concerns. Power without ethics is the ability to allow one’s self-interests to prevail. And yet, as off-putting as Machiavelli’s crass and blunt advice may have been, it did indeed seem to capture the essence of rulership. Power is never achieved without giving up some of one’s interests. There arises a give and take between ruler and ruled. Machiavelli is not concerned with ethics per se, and he advises the prince that power, not principle, is the first priority.

The framers of the American government system held a fairly jaundiced view of human nature, believing humans to be selfish and self-interested. They believed that virtue should be taught, but also that virtue alone was insufficient to guarantee good behavior by leaders. They were well aware of the persistence of political corruption and the abuse of power and knew that systematic corruption, or “a long train of abuses,” could undermine stability or even lead to revolution. They were suspicious of the

central tenets of classical republicanism (virtue and community). They imposed an institutional or architectural method of keeping the new president in line. In doing so, they embraced a new liberal (individualism and self-interest) basis for the new government, yet they were still influenced somewhat by classical republicanism as a subordinate philosophy. How did they reconcile these two competing and in many ways contradictory foundations of politics? The answer can be seen in James Madison's "new science of politics." Because virtue was not enough and democracy was somewhat dangerous, yet embracing a monarchical model was unacceptable, the framers were forced to conceptualize a new science that would govern politics. This break with the past reflected a new, even radical reformulation of the foundations of republican government.

The framers believed that civic leadership required acting ethically. But as they examined history, they came to the conclusion that they could not rely on teaching virtue or on public officials always acting ethically. Thus, other means would be necessary.

The framers premised their new political system, embodied in the Constitution, on the belief that interest and virtue would guide, though not in equal measures. Interest, at least in the minds of the framers, preceded and trumped virtue. The framers did not reject virtue; rather, they thought that one could not rely on virtue alone to triumph over interest. Therefore, interest became, in their minds, the primary driving force that animated human behavior, and virtue was secondary. The new science of politics would not rest on the mere hope that virtue would triumph. The framers were less concerned with the way people ought to live and more concerned with how they did live, a very Machiavellian approach. They were concerned less with shaping a leader's character than with dealing with people as they actually are.

This "new science of politics," grounded in an empiricism based in a "realistic" and not a utopian conception of human nature, assumed that humans were motivated not primarily by ethics or virtue but by self-interest. To form a government with such baggage, the framers drew not on the language of ethics but on the language of *natural science*. A balance or equilibrium was needed to keep natural order, not appeals to justice or virtue. Thus, interest would counterbalance interest, ambition would check ambition, faction would counteract faction, and power would meet power. This was a mechanical, architectural, or structural method of controlling government.

In this new science of politics, the framers saw a rational ordering in the universe that could be transferred directly to the world of politics. As John Adams noted, government could be "erected on the simple principles of nature." Madison wrote in similar Newtonian terms of constructing a government so "that its several constituent

parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places" (Hofstadter, 1986, p. 67). Thus, a separation of powers.

When the framers met in Philadelphia to invent, among other things, a presidency (Cronin, 1989), they harbored no illusions about changing human nature to produce a virtuous ruler. It had not been done in the past; they would not attempt it. How then, could one grant the government power yet control power? Assuming that "a human being was an atom of self-interest" (Hofstadter, 1989, p. 5), how could a government be formed that both takes power to order the social, economic, and security affairs of a country yet does not threaten individual liberty? How could one both energize the executive yet, in the absence of virtue, hold the executive in check? Following the logic of the new science of politics, the framers embraced an essentially *structural* model that recognized self-interest as "normal" among mortals, and so, sought to unleash humans' material proclivities and allow self-interest to prevail, indeed even demand that it do so. In this way, a rough balance of powers grounded in competing political institutions could be achieved.

The framers knew that, as Madison warned, "enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm" (2009, p. 51), and in the absence of virtuous rulers, only a properly constructed state could control the ambitions of power-hungry rulers. Though elections were to serve as one control, Madison knew that "experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions" (p. 120). For the framers, the primary precaution was that the three political offices were arranged so as to allow ambition to emerge, but set ambition against ambition. "The great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department, consists in giving to those who administer each department the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others" (p. 120).

The Role of Character in Ethical Leadership

Machiavellian politics seems to capture just what is involved in real-world political leadership. Its dynamic influence in the American political system indicates its practical strengths. But surely character and ethics over mere cunning are important in public leadership. Peggy Noonan, former speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, believes that,

in a president, character is everything. A president doesn't have to be brilliant; Harry Truman wasn't brilliant, and he helped save Western Europe from Stalin. He doesn't have to be clever, you can hire clever. . . . But you can't buy *courage* and *decency*; you can't rent a *strong moral sense*. A president must bring those things with him. (1995, p. 202)

How are we to define *character*? Should we take the approach of Plato? What about social values, honesty, respect for others, a commitment to the public good, respect for democratic standards, compassion, empathy, trustworthiness, and a sense of fair play? We assume that honesty, integrity, and truthfulness are all important qualities in a leader. With the appearance of character, whether real or only demonstrated, comes *moral capital*.

Clearly, character involves more than a moral reputation. Character is who you are, how you respond to moral questions and dilemmas, what your moral qualities are, and how well you live up to them. A good moral reputation may be merely the public front, the perception one cultivates, while behind the scenes one's behavior violates moral codes. Many of the prominent public ministers who lambasted adultery and homosexuality, who were later "outed," may have had—prior to the truth being revealed—a good moral "reputation," but were they truly moral?

In the Bible, the book of Proverbs reminds us "a good reputation is more precious than fine gold." Heraclitus reminds us that "character is destiny." Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "character is higher than intellect." Character is a precious political commodity. The word *character* is derived from the Greek, meaning the mark of a coin or seal. Euripides defined character as "a stand of good repute on a person." It affords trust. However, the problem is as Machiavelli indicates, character is often feigned. Gandhi, George Washington, and Mother Teresa were able to convert reputation into political fuel. Yet Hitler and Joseph Stalin won public sentiment as well. As John Kane has written: "a high reputation, because it inclines others toward trust and respect, allegiance, loyalty, or perhaps only forbearance, can be politically invested to achieve things otherwise difficult or even impossible" (2001, pp. 2–3).

Yet Kane notes that moral reputation is not enough; just like with all resources, so with moral capital. It is not enough to be good, morally irreproachable, filled with good intentions, or highly and widely respected. It is necessary to have the political ability to turn moral capital to effective use and to deploy it in strategic conjunction with those other resources at one's disposal that make up one's total stock of political capital. It may be well or foolishly, fortunately or unfortunately invested; it may bring large returns to oneself or one's enterprise, or it may be wasted and dissipated—and in politics there are always opponents with a vested interest in doing everything they can to ensure dissipation (Kane, 2001, pp. 7–8).

The framers held low expectations of leaders' behavior. Does that mean we are doomed to be governed by crooks, thugs, and ne'er-do-wells? Are there no people of true character who might lead us? To the framers, while such people may on occasion reach public office (e.g., Washington), sufficient safeguards would be built into

the system (e.g., the separation of powers) to mitigate against abuses. Yet, the framers still sought and hoped for people of character at the helm of government. Character was important to them. However, they were wise enough to know that character was not enough to prevent the abuse of power.

Developing Standards

Presidents are the focus of a great deal of public attention. As such, they can serve as excellent laboratories from which to examine moral dilemmas in action. By today's standards, many of our great and good presidents would be deemed unsuited for the office. George Washington, in chopping down the cherry tree, would have been attacked as antienvironmental; Franklin D. Roosevelt would have faced charges of marital infidelity; Henry Truman would have been linked to the corrupt Boss Prendergast political machine; Dwight D. Eisenhower would have faced embarrassing questions about his relationship with Kay Summersby. (British journalist Martin Walker imagined a televised press conference where Eisenhower was asked: Have you ever attempted adultery with an alien in wartime?"); and John Kennedy . . . well, you know the story. The only modern president who might have passed today's "character test" is Nixon. In his private life, Nixon was virtually spotless. In his public life, however, the president left much to be desired. In a test of character "which Nixon passes and FDR fails, something is evidently amiss with our prejudices about the kind of character we desire in political leaders" (Walker, 1996, p. 54).

Public office neither elevates nor demeans the office holder. It does, however, put a leader under a spotlight where all strengths and weaknesses are magnified. In this way, character—good or bad—is likely to impact governing. One of the paradoxes about presidential character is that many of those judged to possess high levels of personal character (Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter) often are judged to have had low effectiveness as presidents. In contrast, some of the flawed presidents (Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Nixon) are viewed as having been influential or effective (Greenstein, 2004).

In examining the connection between character and leadership, we are confronted with one of the most perplexing paradoxes in an office full of paradoxes: We demand our leaders be of the highest personal character and exhibit a commitment to high moral standards, yet, there are times when we insist that they be cunning, guileful, ruthless, and manipulative. To be effective, presidents must exhibit a wide range of skills and characteristics, some of the saint and some of the sinner. At times, we ask presidents to do things, especially in dealing with foreign adversaries, that are problematic from a moral standpoint. Could a highly moral leader order a bombing raid on Iraq?

Would Mother Teresa have made a good political leader? The moral example she would have set could serve as a model of individual goodness, but would she have been tough enough to stand up to foreign dictators and international terrorists?

And while we expect truth telling and a commitment to keeping promises in our leaders, what happens when a leader is confronted with changing circumstances or new information that undermines his original intention? George H. W. Bush pledged “Read my lips, no new taxes,” but as economic conditions changed, he felt compelled to break this promise and raise taxes. Bush was heavily criticized for this, but as John Maynard Keynes asked, “When the facts change I change my mind. What do you do, Sir?” (1999, p. 47). What, indeed? Does one prize a promise after it has proven to be a mistake or as facts change? While Immanuel Kant may enjoin us always to tell the truth and keep one’s word, politics is not static. As things change, we may need to be “flexible.” James M. Burns reminds us of this when he notes that at times a leader must be a fox, at other times, a lion (Burns, 1956).

Max Weber reinforces this view when he writes that politics is about compromise, trade-offs, and competing values. Thus, public action cannot be based solely on political convictions. They must temper convictions with what is possible (Weber, 1946). Politics can be a messy world.

Recent press attention has obsessed on extramarital relations presidents and candidates may have had, suggesting that such affairs disqualify a candidate from office. Had that long been the standard of judgment, several of our most popular presidents—Thomas Jefferson, Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and others—would have been disqualified from office. While a president represents the nation and serves as a symbol of who we are as a people, and while logic suggests that character is important, in terms of performance, there is little correlation between “high” personal moral character and success in office. Some of our presidents with checkered backgrounds performed well, and others of the highest character were political disappointments.

We demand our political leaders have a two-faced personality. We want the sinister as well as the sincere, the cunning as well as the compassionate; a president capable of crushing a foreign adversary, yet kind and compassionate at home. Nixon, writing about leaders he worked with, said that at times a leader has to employ a variety of otherwise unattractive qualities to be effective or at least to appear so. Nixon carried these practices too far when in office, but his retirement writings are still instructive:

In evaluating a leader, the key question about his behavior is not whether they are attractive or unattractive, but whether they are useful. Guile, vanity, dissembling—in other circumstances these might be unattractive habits, but to the leader they can be

essential. He needs guile in order to hold together the shifting coalitions of often bitterly opposed interest groups that governing requires. He needs a certain measure of vanity in order to create the right kind of public impression. He sometimes has to dissemble in order to prevail on crucial issues. (1983, p. 341)

Nixon is not alone in this. Of a leader, Charles de Gaulle wrote, “He [*sic*] must know when to dissemble, when to be frank. He must pose as a servant of the public in order to become a master” (1960, p. 177). De Gaulle also noted that leaders need strong doses of egotism, pride, and hardness. De Gaulle may well be a modern example of Machiavelli’s distinction between statecraft and soulcraft.

Questions about leadership character are as old as the nation itself. In 1800, ministers denounced Jefferson from their pulpits as “godless,” and Andrew Jackson was attacked as a barbarian adulterer. During the election of 1884, Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland was charged with fathering a child out of wedlock. Cleveland accepted responsibility and agreed to pay for the child’s upbringing. This became a major issue for his opponent James G. Blaine. The problem was that while Cleveland’s private life did raise questions, he was highly responsible in his political and professional life. Blaine, however, had an “upright” private life yet was far less well regarded for his political integrity. In the end, the voters selected Cleveland.

Many leaders have lied to us. But there is a difference between the behavior of Franklin D. Roosevelt prior to U.S. entry into World War II and Richard Nixon’s lies about Watergate. The essential difference is that Roosevelt misled with the public good in mind, and Nixon misled for purely personal gain. In the long run, historians judge Roosevelt’s methods as questionable but his goals as honorable. Nixon’s actions are seen as self-serving and dishonorable. If a leader lies to protect national security, we may see the lie as justified. However, if that same leader lies to protect or cover up his own mistakes, we understandably judge him harshly. The old adage “an honest politician lies only when he has to” rings true practically if not ethically. It seems clear that Machiavelli would applaud Roosevelt’s calculated use of deception, whereas he would condemn Nixon’s behavior as misguided, merely self-serving, and not an effective exercise of statecraft.

Ironically, there are times—especially in crisis or social upheaval—when we may turn to unethical or toxic leaders (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The search for a savior may have short-term appeal, but will usually prove destructive in the long run. We sometimes seek out options amid crisis that would be unthinkable in normal times. This escape from freedom may feel good, yet it is an abdication of responsibility.

There are a few things we “know” about the relationship between character and leadership: first, private

character is not necessarily a good guide or predictor of public character or performance. Second, public character—that is, how well one has behaved in previous offices and public tasks—is a far better, although still imperfect, guide to future behavior. Third, our preoccupation with scandal doubtlessly chases away some capable candidates who refuse to put themselves and their families through the ugliness of public scandal hunts. Fourth, do not look for perfection. We are all human; we all make mistakes.

We should judge leaders more by what they do than who they are. Although both are important, we must remember leaders are expected to govern, not preach the gospel. And although the ceremonial, symbolic, and even shamanistic or priestly functions of leadership are important, we are weaker people if we let our leaders, celebrities, or sports stars set the moral tone for the nation.

We must also remember that on occasion, we punish leaders for doing what they believe is right. Few presidents believe they can exhibit a “profiles in courage” type of leadership because it is electorally dangerous. President Ford’s principled stand on the Nixon pardon and Carter’s insistence that we do the honorable thing concerning the Panama Canal are examples of how politically dangerous speaking truth to power can be. Ford and Carter attempted what they believed was “right” in spite of public opposition. Both acted on high principle and were willing to suffer the inevitable public backlash that followed. Character problems can spell doom for candidates and elected officials. Any character weakness can be exploited by adversaries and lead to the end of a career. But what of the reverse side of the coin? Do character strengths (Kane, 2001) benefit leaders? Is “goodness” easily exploited? On the other side, a leader who is too “good” or too honorable may be problematic. Both Presidents Ford and Carter were decent people. Might they have been more effective had they been more Machiavellian? Perhaps, however, the Zen adage “water that is too pure has no fish” may also hold true.

Judging leadership character is difficult given the varied motives of those who pursue public careers. Some enter politics for the wrong reasons—to fill a void or need that arises from low self-esteem. Others go into politics for more noble reasons—to accomplish good things for the public. It is often difficult to distinguish one from the other.

When considering the character of leadership, we may well ask the following questions of a particular leader:

- Is an ethically questionable act an isolated incident or is this part of a pattern of behavior?
- Should we separate private behavior from public behavior?
- Is there a link between private behavior and public performance?
- Must a leader be a good person to be a good leader?
- Is “what one does” more important than “who one is”?

- Does our excessive concern for scandal and poking our noses into the private lives of public officials chase away effective people from public service?
- Should we be most on the lookout for hypocrites who preach one standard yet practice another?
- Is the standard of perfection attainable or even practical?
- In their public lives, do the leaders appeal to what is best or worst in us; the better angels of our nature, as Abraham Lincoln put it, or our baser drives?

One potential clue into leadership character is to determine how a person deals with adversity or defeat. Tragedy unveils true personal character. Roosevelt’s polio would have overwhelmed most people, but he overcame adversity, and in doing so was even more convincing when he told the nation it had nothing to fear but fear itself. In Roosevelt’s case, adversity made him stronger, built his inner strength. His character was forged in the fire of personal crisis that he overcame. Nelson Mandela’s personal story, his moral strength, his odyssey from long-time prisoner to South Africa’s president conferred on him a special status that gave him political capital, while also teaching him a lesson in how personal goodness can overcome political divisions. Mandela’s “moral halo” gave him political clout and served as a resource in governing.

The Ethical Universe of Leaders

Some believe that leaders occupy a different moral universe by virtue of the office they occupy and the responsibilities they bear. As an individual, a person’s highest moral imperative may be to save his or her soul. In the Platonic paradigm, to rule is to serve as a moral exemplar, yet this is not foremost for the good of others but for the good of self. Still, once one chooses to rule, one has adopted a high moral imperative to serve and to save the state. The goal is to preserve, protect, and promote the interests of the state and to do otherwise would be immoral. Thus, to be “moral” in an individualistic sense is one thing, while being “moral” in a princely sense means a very different thing. A leader is not immune from the requirements of morality; it is just that the parameters of morality may be different (Price, 2008).

A leader must protect the community in a sometimes-hostile world. The ethics of leadership are and must be both situational and positional. They are contingent on the circumstances confronting a leader of the community in an uncertain and sometimes violent world. As Machiavelli reminds the prince, he “must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him . . . and not deviate from right conduct if possible, but be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 76). And while all religions have general rules or “oughts,” such as thou shall not kill or it

is wrong to lie, these rules are not absolutes and may apply in a different way to leaders.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli reminds a would-be prince that to accomplish great things, he may have to “enter into evil,” as Nixon and De Gaulle also came to believe, and that “the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 76). But Machiavelli’s insight is not a green light for the prince to behave badly. The evil of which he speaks must be entered into only as the situation demands it. He did not advise the prince to be evil, only that there would be times in which to either protect his power or protect the state, he must be ready to use evil for strategic ends. As Machiavelli notes in *The Prince*, “The ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary” (p. 76). Of course, we are selfish judges of our own cases, so on this Machiavelli opens himself up to criticism, but his general principle may have some merit. When dealing with evil or dangerous foes, only a fool would take the moral high ground when it would undermine state interests. Machiavelli says there are times when you must fight fire with fire.

To Machiavelli, the life of the individual may be about attaining the “good” life, but politics is about power. Its rules must be different from the moral universe of everyday life. Politics has but one moral goal: achieving and wisely using power. An action is good to the extent it advances toward that goal. In this sense, Machiavelli is not “immoral”; he simply refuses to judge politics by conventional morality. He is interested in statecraft, not soulcraft.

Here Machiavelli parts from the tradition of Plato, who in the *Republic* argues that the goal of politics is virtue. Machiavelli dismisses this argument as being focused on the wrong end. Politics is not about the pursuit of virtue, politics is about power. Any reasonable policy that advances that goal is acceptable, even required of an effective leader. In *The Prince*, he wrote:

It being my intention to write of things which shall be useful to him who apprehends it, it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of a matter than the imagination of it; for many have pictured republics . . . which in fact have never been known or seen, because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation; for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue perhaps. (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 76)

Machiavelli wants the prince to succeed, and if he enters the arena wearing rose colored glasses, he will soon meet a tragic end. But as he warns the ruler, “A prince should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary” (2003, p. 76).

Is this to say that ethics should be subjective? No; because if so, there would be no concept of overreaching

ethical bounds. If ethics are not fully subjective, however, the dilemma of ethical leadership becomes more complex. When, for example, is a leader allowed to go beyond the law and conventional morals? It depends. There are four questions that one might want to answer:

1. Is this truly a case of necessity?
2. Have you exhausted all the normal channels and options?
3. Do your acts promote and expand the rights, security, and interests of the people at large? Or are they directed at a personal, political, or partisan gain for you?
4. And, finally, did you succeed in achieving the good end?

Yet in answering each of these questions according to the demands of place and predicament, one nonetheless assumes at least some principles of ethical behavior. One must if one is to answer at all.

The Role of *Phronesis* in Ethical Leadership

It is truly praiseworthy to be a good person. And we admire leadership that demonstrates the qualities we think admirable. But the chief goal of rulers is not to be good but to serve the needs and interests of their people, and that means that there may be times when one cannot observe the demands of goodness that bind private individuals in society. However, this is not license to act without reference to basic ethical standards.

Aristotle, in Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, attempts to guide effective leadership in his discussion of prudence or *phronesis*. Like Plato, Aristotle values a leader’s rational and moral development. Yet his is a descriptive as opposed to a prescriptive theory. *Phronesis* is the realist’s device. The verb *phronein* suggests “intelligent awareness”; and the noun *phronesis* means practical prudence, or sound deliberation resulting in correct actions directed at a good end. *Phronesis* is an intellectual virtue, concerning what can be achieved in action. It is reason and good judgment, as applied to a complex world, recognizing limits and possibilities, and deciding on a constructive course of action that may most likely lead to a morally and politically good result.

Aristotle recognizes that for one to live the good life, the ethical life, one must *live*. His political leader is acutely aware of his social climate, so through this awareness he may enter into it. Not surprisingly, Aristotle conceives of the human being in a different way. By existing somehow between gods and beasts, humans, in Aristotle’s model, are the only social creature. We need political life to balance and sustain our passionate and enlightened natures. At the same time, the intrinsic need for community signals the demand of leadership. Who is capable of overcoming his or

her own nature to lead? With Machiavellian realism Aristotle claims no one.

Prudent deliberation is neither scientific knowledge nor good guessing but a correctness that originates from inquiry. Proper ends, moral ends, are known only by development of character. Is the ethical leadership then doomed to failure? In short, no. Perfection in matters of leadership is not required or possible. Aristotle recognizes the moral project. Cleverness, he writes, is much like prudence; it is about getting what one wants. Cleverness, however, is the ability to attain ends regardless of their moral value. At times, leaders may be mistaken in their moral aims and yet they need not be ineffective. Aristotle particularly notes the significance of modeling one's actions after role models who may be looked up to and emulated. Fortunately, the American government has not been without great exemplars. Presidents who might fit this model are Washington and Lincoln. In general, these leaders followed Aristotle's model: to do the right things, for the right reasons, toward the right ends.

In his 2003 book, *Transforming Leadership*, James M. Burns wrote,

The clues of the mystery of leadership lie in a potent equation: embattled values grounded in real wants, invigorated by conflict, empower leaders and activate followers to fashion deep and comprehensive change in the lives of people. The acid test of this empowerment is whether the change is lasting or whether it is temporary and even reversible. Deep and durable change, guided and measured by values, is the ultimate purpose of transforming leadership, and constitutes both its practical impact and its moral justification. (p. 213)

Applying ethical standards to leadership is a complex, even paradoxical venture. A leader is expected to be ethical, but also use power in a dangerous world to serve the interests of the state and the people. At times these two ends are in conflict.

President Buchanan, facing the breakup of the Union, froze—he did not believe he had the constitutional authority to act. This was a principled position, one putting him on a high ethical pedestal. He was abiding by the higher law, the Constitution. But by sitting back and doing nothing, he was also putting that very Constitution in jeopardy. Then consider Lincoln, who broke the law, abused power, and yet saved the very Constitution he sometimes violated. And yet, in moving beyond the law to protect the law (a leadership paradox if ever there was one), Lincoln seemed instinctually aware of what Gandhi would later identify as the seven social sins. According to Gandhi, the seven social sins are: politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice (Covey, 1992).

Ethical leadership is about maintaining balance. One must not be too strong or forceful; and yet one must not be easily manipulated and weak. One must respect the law and at times break it to maintain its principle. One must be moral; and yet one must be human. Still, the human quality of any leader need not be the force that capsizes some other higher nature; the best and worst of experiences can build character. Strong leaders are dynamic. Their ambitions exceed them and yet they maintain courage in the face of limitation.

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