Persuasion and discernment: The gifts of leadership

by William F. May in the March 10, 1999 issue

By Erwin C. Hargrove, The President as Leader: Appealing to the Better Angels of Our Nature. *(University Press of Kansas, 240 pp.)*

The ancient cities of Jerusalem, Sparta and Athens can stand for three different types of leaders--charismatic, military and persuasive. The founder of Jerusalem, King David, led by charisma. David was a man of transcendent gifts and charm: a poet, a musician and a great strategist. Though he was a sometime adulterer and betrayer of his men, he founded a great nation and was the prototype for a personal, kingly rule.

The founders of American democracy rejected charismatic leadership, insisting on a government of laws, not of men. However, a sad counterfeit of charismatic leadership still shows up today in the cult of the celebrity, and in a disposition to limit presidential candidates to those who pass the camera test for office. Instead of an account of the hero's deeds, we get a *People* magazine report on the celebrity's personality.

In ancient Sparta, a military society, leadership took the form of command. Sparta was a society given to taciturnity. It depended upon the bark of command and the grunt of obedience. Military leaders do not need to use many words. Leaders of the Spartan type abhor the messy give-and-take of political compromise; they prefer the clarity of military confrontation to the shifting waters of political coalitions. They prize hierarchy. We still partly depend on such leadership today. Our president is commander in chief, and corporations depend heavily on command; but that is not the whole of leadership in a democracy.

In Athens leadership depended on persuasion. Athens relied on *logos* or *rhetor* (that is, the word or the art of persuasion). Democracies are inherently wordy. A parliament is literally a house of words. The American presidency may no longer be a bully pulpit, but it has to be a bully blackboard to the nation. You cannot lead for

long, you cannot even command the armed forces for long, unless you are able to persuade the people to follow.

Erwin C. Hargrove in *The President as Leader* highlights the importance of Athenian leadership--that is, leading through teaching and persuasion. "Politicians must try their best to describe the world and their plans for dealing with it in the most accurate terms they can master." In short, they must "teach reality." While Hargrove concedes that presidents must bargain, manipulate, control and maneuver, their first task is to "teach reality to publics and their fellow politicians through rhetoric." On this issue, Hargrove follows James MacGregor Burns, who in his book *Leadership* distinguished transactional from transformational leaders. The transactional leader gives followers what they want. The transformational leader addresses their deeper needs. The transformational leader who would address needs rather than wants must perforce teach and persuade; otherwise, the leader's transformative acts will be done paternalistically or dictatorially.

Comparing Franklin Roosevelt and two of his successors, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, Hargrove gives Roosevelt the best score. Johnson skillfully bargained with and manipulated politicians on domestic issues, but he lacked the gift of teaching and persuading the nation, especially in foreign policy, as he persisted in fighting a war based on a series of illusions. Reagan was a master communicator--his effectiveness on television rivaled FDR's mastery of radio--but his charm tended to obscure the fact that he was not teaching about reality. He plumped for a supply-side strategy of tax cuts, even though the strategy failed to produce the private savings, the balanced budget or the economic benefits for ordinary workers that some of his theorists had forecast.

In "teaching reality," a president must address and draw on the deep and enduring values of the people to meet their most significant challenges. According to Hargrove, FDR "knew how to lead by listening and teaching, and then listening and learning more, as he again taught. He could sense what was in people's minds at any given historical moment and articulate plausible remedies for their concerns."

Just what are the deep cultural ideals that a president must address if he would teach reality? I have great difficulty with Hargrove's answer to this question. In his judgment, liberal individualism supplies the basic cultural ideal that an effective presidential leader must invoke. Hargrove defines "liberal individualism" spaciously enough to cover both economic libertarians and democratic egalitarians. Economic

libertarians (read Republicans) gain power when government becomes too burdensome; egalitarians (read Democrats) ascend when the free play of the market economy begins to exclude too many from the fundamental goods of American life. Both parties are individualistic, not communitarian.

In my judgment, Hargrove is diagnostically wrong in locating American culture wholly within the parameters of liberal individualism and morally and politically wrong in arguing that "teaching reality" must automatically confine itself to culturally established borders.

First, his diagnosis forces him to dismiss the communitarian elements in the American heritage, both religious and political. All three major religious traditions--Protestant, Catholic and Jewish--relied on their communal origins as they made their way into this country. Jews disembarked in the U.S. under the triple banner of God, Torah and Israel. Catholics defined the church as the body of Christ, its members compacted inseparably as members of that body. Although Protestants later bought into the rhetoric of individualism, they did not begin on that note. The early Protestant settlers entered into their shipboard covenants, understood themselves as bound together in "the ligaments of love," and defined their several callings as the way in which God ordained them to serve the common good.

Some commentators have countered that the emphasis on individual liberty and equality in the revolutionary period broke with this communitarian heritage. Revolutionary thinkers established the two poles of liberal individualism: they invoked liberty more often than any other ideal; and they justified independence with Jefferson's proposition that all men are created equal.

But the principles of liberty and equality do not exhaustively define American culture. Immediately after attaining liberty, the revolutionaries invoked "public virtue" more often than any other term, a virtue which they defined as the readiness to sacrifice self-interest to the common good. Why public virtue? The revolutionaries recognized that liberty itself would not long survive unless people sustained a readiness to serve the common good.

The framers of the Constitution carried forward this sense of community into the first words we uttered as a nation: "We the people." The preamble to the Constitution does not proclaim, "We, the factions of the United States" or "We, the interest groups of the United States" or "We, the individuals of the United States," but "We,

the people." Individualism may be the primary language spoken in the U.S., but it is not the only language. A communitarian language may, in Robert Bellah's words, rank second to individualism in American life, but it is not a foreign language. In "teaching reality," leaders can appeal to it.

Furthermore, even if individualism did describe the American character, we need not restrict teaching *reality* to what Americans have hitherto found acceptable. Aristotle (with whom Hargrove opens and closes his book) recognized that though we may not be able to do surgery upon our characters, we must learn how to strive against our weaknesses. If dominantly individualistic, Americans may need to learn how to counter elements of their individualism. For individualism, while powerful, does not help us respond adequately to the circumstance of persons in a complexely interconnected and interdependent world. Individualism has helped create a world that individualism alone cannot survive.

Having urged a more adventuresome view of leading through teaching, I want nevertheless to stress two obstacles to the undertaking which Hargrove overlooks. One is circumstantial, the other, intrinsic.

Earlier, I suggested that the U.S., like Athens, depends upon leadership by persuasion. But for such leadership to work, leaders need access to the place where they have a chance to persuade. In ancient Athens that site was the marketplace, to which leaders had access without fee. In the modern U.S. the place to which leaders need access is the television station, and the ticket of admission is astronomical. Money calls the shots for both political parties--over $1 billion in the 1996 election.

Because of the high price of political access today, we also use words differently. We no longer put them together in extended argument in order to catch all the factors that count in a complex political judgment. We dice them into sound bites, intended not to persuade but to manipulate. Money threatens to corrupt not simply leaders but political discourse. Improving such discourse is only partly a question of changing behavior. We also need systemic reforms to shorten political campaigns and to allow leaders more free access to television for the business of governance. As things stand, we have reversed the relationship of campaigning to governing: leaders today do not campaign occasionally in order to govern; they campaign constantly and govern only occasionally.

Hargrove also overlooks an intrinsic, sometimes tragic limitation of political discourse. He asserts that presidents can successfully simplify issues without distorting the political message or the cultural ideals that justify it. In rare transcendent moments that may be the case. Lincoln surely offered incandescent simplicity in his Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address. But language describing programs and policies inevitably sloganizes; it prescinds from the full complexity of experience. And although political abstractions also clarify portions of the total consciousness of a people and help organize the government for action, they also distort, neglect and marginalize other ranges of experience and conviction. Politics traffics in the possible and the doable and not the altogether. Its slogans inevitably grow distant and spectral. That limitation has hampered political discourse since long before the advent of TV.

The inevitable distortions and sloganizing of politics led the philosopher R. G. Collingwood to argue that a society needs its artists as well as its politicians. The artist engages in a retrieval and freshening of language and therefore in an enrichment and clarification of consciousness. This in turn leads to a recovery of community in its entirety, which politics always runs the risk of sacrificing for the sake of immediate action.

Religion can also serve the political health of a people, not only through the particular advice and counsel it occasionally offers, but indirectly through its more spacious horizons. As Samuel Johnson put it: "How small, of all that human hearts must endure, / That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!" In addition to making their own modest contributions to the work of immediate action, churches and synagogues have a further responsibility to recognize and serve the vast territory of the spirit that lies beyond the reach of politics.

In serving this wider domain, churches and synagogues should not diminish or despise the limited arena of politics or dismiss the huge distinctions that must be made between honest and demagogic discourse, between the president as teacher and the president as artful illusionist. But they should remember that the health and vigor of the political arena itself requires contributions from other sources upon which inclusive community depends.

What kind of moral character must a leader in a democracy possess? Hargrove's discussion of character is brief and unexceptionable. Trust depends upon the leader's exhibition of integrity, judgment and competence. The emotionally secure,

self-confident leader listens better to others and elicits better their confidence in him. Character is itself a tool of leadership in that it enhances the leader's capacity to persuade others; and persuasion "is a far more effective approach to leadership than control," trickery or manipulation. Hargrove also refers to the capacity for "discernment." If leading entails "teaching reality," then discernment surely heads the list of virtues the leader needs. Discernment entails more than tactical alertness (to which Machiavelli reduced the classical virtue of prudence). We need to associate discernment with practical wisdom about ends and not just the adroit choice of means to predetermined ends.

It is on this point that we can distinguish leading from managing. The manager, whether working for the government or a corporation, operates with preset goals. The task of managing is somewhat custodial, janitorial. The leader faces the more difficult task of choosing goals. Leadership usually entails breaking new ground. The word leading, in root, means going. Going where? Politics poses the vexing questions of destination. It requires the wise choice of goals (which the culture has not entirely selected) and the means to them (about which serious differences of judgment may exist).

Political leaders rely heavily on advisers to help them set priorities. But no matter how much wisdom and information leaders take in, they cannot dispel all doubts or eliminate all risks. At best, they choose wisely what risks to take. So in addition to the virtue of discernment, the leader needs courage. A rough patch of trouble usually follows hard choices--and most decisions that cross a president's desk are hard choices.

Thomas Aquinas defined courage as firmness of soul in the face of adversity. Such courage has two aspects: active and passive. Courage requires the active capacity to attack problems, rather than dodging or ducking them. But courage also calls for an equally important, somewhat more passive, endurance or resilience in defeat--an ability to pick oneself up off the floor and carry on. (Our modern political campaigns test the virtue of endurance to the point of cruelty.)

Leadership also requires the virtue of temperance. Plato once noted that to govern others, one must first be able to govern oneself. The current political ordeal of the nation in response to Bill Clinton's behavior painfully reminds us of the wisdom of Plato's assertion. Runaway desire can set institutions lurching, both defensively and reactively, out of control. But the greater long-term danger to the republic's integrity

comes not from sexual misconduct but from the intrusion and corruption of cash.

Finally, leadership in a democracy requires the virtue of public-spiritedness, what the founders of the country called public virtue, a readiness to sacrifice self-interest to the common good. Some have called this the virtue of contributive justice, and it is surely the indispensable fount of contributive justice. We cannot distribute well or wisely for the good of all if we do not exact well and proportionately from the bounty of each.

We need the virtue of public-spiritedness, and we need to honor that virtue when we find it. It is a huge irony that at a time when the entire world depends on good political decisions coming out of the U.S., Americans have contempt for politics as a vocation. We act as though our government is headed by King George III, a foreign power, not an instrument of national purpose. To that degree, we deny to ourselves the possibility of some structural solutions to deep-seated problems: poverty, a badly educated populace, some 80 million citizens with little or no health care insurance, and the disturbing growth of an underclass. One cannot simply shine a thousand points of light on deep structural problems and expect them to disappear. We need also the government as the instrument of good order and justice.

We need the virtue of public-spiritedness also in the leaders of corporations and other huge organizations. In large part, such organizations pursue their own interests, but they will not long survive if leaders in the "private" sector do not keep an eye on the common good.

The two powerful institutions in the medieval world were the church and the state. The two great institutions in the modern world are business and government. We woefully underestimate the power of business leaders if we think they are engaged in private enterprise, for their decisions have huge public impacts not only on their stockholders but on the jobs we need, the neighborhoods in which we live, the water we drink, the air we breathe and the schools in which we learn. In effect, business leaders and professional leaders are unelected public officials.

So what does leadership in a democracy require? The Greek art of persuasion certainly. It also requires the ancient virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance and public-spiritedness. And it is not enough to demand these of our political leaders alone. The leaders of other powerful institutions in society must evince these virtues as well.