

Personality and Political Leadership

ROBERT C. TUCKER

Students of society have long been interested in the phenomenon of leadership and puzzled by the problem of why some people emerge as leaders rather than others. This article will approach the problem mainly in terms of political leadership in the contemporary nation-state, ours in particular.

At one time it was generally thought that those who become leaders do so by virtue of their possession in superior degree of certain personal traits—such as stamina, decisiveness, composure—which make it their fate to reach positions of leadership in their organizations or societies. This has been loosely labeled the “great man” theory of leadership.

Social science research in the twentieth century seemed for a while to invalidate it. This research gave rise to what has been called “situationism,” or the view that the nature of the group’s situation at a given time predetermines what traits are likely to bring a certain individual to the fore as the leader and what traits will impede such an outcome in others. According to situationism, qualities making for leadership success in one set of circumstances, might militate against it in another. For example, it could be argued that Winston Churchill’s party was defeated in the British national elections held soon after the end of World War II in Europe because the change from a war situation to one of peacetime made the characteristics of Clement Atlee, the Labour party’s leader, more appealing to the electorate than those that had earlier propelled Churchill to power as an ideal war leader for embattled Britain.

The pendulum’s swing from the great man theory to situationism was fol-

ROBERT C. TUCKER is professor of politics at Princeton University. He is the author of *Stalin As Revolutionary*, *The Soviet Political Mind*, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, and *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, and the editor of numerous other volumes.

lowed by a movement of scholarly opinion to a middle position: the recognition that there *are* personal characteristics which make for successful leadership but that variable group situations accentuate the effectiveness of one or another trait, and their bearers, at a particular time. As a foremost researcher in this field has expressed it, "Strong evidence indicates that different leadership skills and traits are required in different situations. The behaviors and traits enabling a mobster to gain and maintain control over a criminal gang are not the same as those enabling a religious leader to gain and maintain a large following. Yet certain general qualities—such as courage, fortitude and conviction—appear to characterize both."¹

DEFINING THE SITUATION

Perhaps the best argument against simple situationism is the fact, generally overlooked by those who have stressed the determining role of group situations, that only in times of extremity, such as war, is the nature of the group's situation self-evident to virtually all its members. At most times the nature of the situation confronting a group is problematic and calls for definition. Consequently, it has a subjective dimension. A central function of leadership is the defining of situations for the group and the devising of policy responses designed to resolve the problem in accordance with the group's interests as perceived by the leaders and others.

Since definitions of the situation and proposed policy responses are rarely unanimous, they often become issues in political debate. For example, the situation created by Hitler's demand in 1938 that the Sudetenland be ceded to Germany was defined in essentially local terms by the British political leader of that time, Neville Chamberlain, and acquiescence to the demand seemed the logical policy response to ensure "peace in our time." Those like Churchill, who perceived and defined the situation differently—as a move which, if not firmly resisted, would be followed by more such demands from the insatiably aggressive German dictator—saw Chamberlain's acquiescent response as the dangerous act of appeasement that it proved to be. In this instance, one's definition of the situation turned largely on a psychological appraisal of the leader who had created it.

If group situations are not self-evident objective realities but subject to definition, we may infer that trained and sophisticated insight, the capacity to judge situations accurately that comes from experience and intellect, are characteristic of an effective leader and are a particularly vital requisite for leadership in the extremely complex world of today. This thesis implicitly calls in question our tendency to attach principal importance to traits of character rather than qualities of mind when considering what we require in a leader. Needless to say, the

¹ Ralph M. Stogdill, *Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research* (New York, 1974), p. 72.

recent history of the American presidency is not likely to diminish our awareness of the significance of moral character in the nation's highest political leader and others; and it is far from my intention to downgrade integrity, rectitude, and other components of character as qualities to be desired in those entrusted with leadership roles. Still, trained insight needs more emphasis than we have traditionally given it. Although we have not habitually thought of strong intellect as a "must" for political leadership, we should do so.

This point must be qualified, however, with the observation that "character" and "intellect" do not exist in separate compartments of the mind. The "intellect" or "trained insight" requisite for political leadership needs to be accompanied and guided by feeling, which is not to say that it invariably is. It may, for example, be an intellectually perceived fact that large numbers of job-seeking persons in a political community are unable to find work, or that because of inflation some elderly persons must subsist partly on cheap pet food to make ends meet. But without compassion, human sympathy, or emotional identification with these people, a leader's cognitive grasp of the facts will not necessarily cause him or her to *define the situation politically* as one that should be remedied. We may therefore introduce the distinction between humanist and nonhumanist political leadership. Intellect is requisite in either case, but compassionate feeling for people, or the lack of it, will determine the extent to which the leader's knowledge and powers of intellect become, or fail to become, a force for humanist leadership.

Carrying the argument one step further, we must recognize that the feeling by which a political leader's intellect is guided (if it is so guided) need not necessarily be benevolent. Twentieth-century history has familiarized us frequently with the phenomenon of the inhumane, even diabolic political leader, of whom the two archetypal examples have been Hitler and Stalin. In leaders of this kind, extremely acute intellectual powers come under the sway of ungovernably intense malevolent feeling against entire large groups of the country's population and people beyond its borders. The sources of the malevolent feeling lie in a very complex nexus of culture, ideology, and personal biography. The consequences, as history shows, can be genocidal. So we must add to the distinction between humanist and nonhumanist political leadership the further distinction between both kinds, on the one hand, and antihumanist leadership, on the other hand.

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

This brings us to the large theme of creativity in leadership. A crucial qualification for creative leadership is the capacity to perceive in group situations what makes them somewhat different from previously experienced ones which they may greatly resemble. Without such an ability, a leader is likely to rely on the repetition of policy responses that have proved successful in the past but may

not be so in the present because they fail to take account of the elements of novelty in the situation currently confronting the political community.

Creativity of political and other forms of leadership is a precious asset and a relatively rare one. The reason, basically, is that we all form mental stereotypes as a result of past experience, especially the experience of memorable situations that occur in formative times in our own lives and that of our generation. These stereotypes very often determine our perceptions of new situations as they arise, inhibiting creative leadership. An example from recent political history is the failure of American political leadership in Indochina. It was partly due to the tendency of some high officials to perceive the Vietnamese situation according to the stereotype that they had formed as a result of Hitler's aggressions in the pre-World War II period and Stalin's in the years immediately following that war. Memories of Munich and of the Berlin blockade kept some influential political minds from perceiving the fundamentally local character of the Vietnamese civil war, and the futility of supporting a regime in the south which lacked the national sources of support to make it viable in the long run.

To cite a different example, one of the highly creative political minds of this century was that of Lenin, a leader of a revolutionary political party. What made him so, more than anything else, was his extraordinary capacity to grasp with great rapidity the unprecedented elements of new situations as they developed and to devise policy responses geared to the party's revolutionary aims. The classic case was his initially heterodox definition of Russia's situation after the February Revolution of 1917 as ripe for a second revolution, which turned out to be accurate. Partly as a result of this act of revolutionary political leadership, some of his party colleagues later set aside their Marxist convictions about historical causation to the extent of crediting to Lenin's personal leadership the October Revolution of 1917 which brought the Bolsheviks to power.

In leadership, as in other fields, high creativity is not something that one can acquire by hard work and preparation alone. At bottom it is a gift bestowed on some individuals by nature and life circumstances in combination. So, although most political communities have never been more in need of creative leadership than now, the phenomenon remains a rather rare one, fortuitous in appearance, and usually a stroke of luck for the community that obtains it. Experience, while necessary in order to enable creativity to show itself, is no guarantee that it will do so. An inner security, the freedom from self-absorption which enables a leader to keep his mind sensitively attuned to what is happening outside himself and to empathize with the feelings of those who make up the political community, is a necessary prerequisite for highly creative leadership although not a sufficient one. Ironically, inner security and freedom from egocentricity have seemed to some prominent political scientists to be least likely qualities of those who actively seek roles of power in modern life, whether in politics, business, or the professions. "Power is expected to overcome low estimates of the self," runs Harold Lasswell's well-known hypothesis

about "political man" as power seeker.² That there are cases in point is not in doubt. But we may question whether such personal insecurity is generally characteristic of aspirants to leadership and whether the very notion of "political man" as a definable personality type is not oblivious of the infinite variety of character encountered among those who seek and attain leadership.

Increasingly in our century, political leaders have turned to the experts, academics included, as a source of the trained insight that they recognize as a requisite for effective and especially for creative leadership. Because of the world's growing complexity and the development of whole areas of pertinent scientific and other expertise, this trend has a certain inevitability. Not even an intellectual prodigy in power could possibly command in person all the specialized understanding required for leadership in the many fields of internal and external policy. But the rise of the expert as a key participant in the process of political leadership is a trend that for all its naturalness carries certain problems and potential dangers.

Experience warns against overreliance on the expert as a source of authoritative wisdom and creativity in the defining of situations for the political community. In particular, experts who enter government out of academic life may prove a force for muddled leadership. Their prior immersion in history and theory may imprison academic minds in stereotypes that inhibit insight into the novelty of situations as they arise. Hence long-time practitioners with a scholarly bent may be more valuable, or less risky, as advisors to political leaders than lifelong scholars with a zest for applying their expertise in governmental practice. The worst danger is for a leader to fall under the spell of a single specialist-advisor whose combination of competence up to a point and self-confidence may create an illusion of infallibility. But if a leader avoids this situation and makes it a practice to use multiple sources of expertise, which inevitably means conflicting judgments and advice, the leader's own trained insight becomes crucial in the choice of which advice to follow and which advisors to employ. There is, then, no substitute for the possession by the leaders themselves of relevant knowledge, excellent reasoning powers, and good intuitive judgment of people and situations.

CHARISMA AND LEADER CULTS

We have argued that situations per se do not adequately explain why persons with certain characteristics become leaders, since these very situations are in a sense constituted by the human beings who define them and then act in ways they believe will be appropriate to them. But having said this, we can safely recognize that group situations are also, in some sense, objective realities and that they do favor the rise of certain potential leader-personalities and militate against the rise of others. The variability of group situations casts *some* light

² Harold D. Lasswell, *Power and Personality* (New York, 1948), p. 39.

upon the personal characteristics which make for effective leadership in one situation as distinguished from those which do so in another.

This point is most easily illustrated by considering the kind of leadership that—following Max Weber, who introduced the term—we call “charismatic.” Since this word has been vulgarized in the popular press, which often uses it simply as a synonym of radiant charm in a leader, some scholars would like to see it banned from the vocabulary of political science. Others, including the present writer, believe that such a ban would do no good since we would then have to invent some other term to designate the extremely important phenomenon that Weber sought to conceptualize when he wrote about charismatic authority. Moreover, we have only to attend closely to Weber’s usage of “charisma” to be clear and discriminating in our own.³

In Weber’s usage, the possessor of charismatic authority, who may be a religious, political, military, or other kind of leader, is in essence a savior-leader—or one perceived as such. The followers’ responsiveness to a savior-leader, or would-be savior-leader, implies that they are in need of being “saved,” or in Weber’s own terminology that they are people in “distress,” which may be material or spiritual or both. A person who comes forward in a distressful situation and presents himself or herself in a convincing way to the sufferers as one who can lead them out of their distress by virtue of special personal characteristics or formula for salvation may arouse their intense loyalty and enthusiastic willingness to take the path the leader is pointing out.

It follows that a given leader may be charismatic at one time (e.g., Churchill for Britons in their darkest hour of World War II), but not at a later period when distress has been alleviated. While there seems to be no one set of personal characteristics that charismatic leaders share as a class, one quality that may be common to them all is a contagious faith and confidence in the community’s capacity to overcome, under their leadership, its distress—the kind of confidence conveyed in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s statement to Americans that they had nothing to fear but fear itself. Of course, the leader’s directions for overcoming distress cover a very wide spectrum: from effective remedies to worthless nostrums and sinister schemes for one group’s salvation through another’s destruction. Clearly, charismatic leadership carries potential hazards as well as benefits.

At times of great calamity, such as may be caused by war or a natural disaster, an entire political community may be distressed to the point of receptivity to charismatic leadership if it arises. But it may also happen that one part of the community, say a racial minority (or majority), is distress ridden, and another part is not. If the latter is politically dominant, authority may be exercised by noncharismatic leaders who face the problem of whether to give priority to the dominant group’s preference for continued stability of life conditions or to the

³ For a discussion of Weber’s view, and the scholarship pertaining to charismatic leadership, see Robert C. Tucker, “The Theory of Charismatic Leadership,” *Daedalus*, 97, no. 3 (Summer 1968), 731–756.

disadvantaged group's urgent need for change that would alleviate its situation. Should the latter course be taken, by a leader whose sympathies go out to the disadvantaged, that leader must show the qualities of an outstanding educator in relation to the group that has elevated him or her to the leader role. The leader must foster understanding of the other group's plight and appeal to the generous instincts of those in comfortable circumstances, their capacity for acting according to the dictates of decency and of long-range self-interest. Should the other road be taken—that of maintaining stability in the dominant group's short-term self-interest—a likely outcome is the emergence from within the distressed group, sooner or later, of charismatic leadership of revolutionary hue with a program of group separatism or national conquest. If the government responds with repressive and terroristic policies, these are not likely to succeed more than temporarily.

Some scholars have suggested that charismatic movements, which made their appearance in religious form early in history, are increasingly anachronistic in our technological civilization and hence fated to disappear. Some, of course, do decline and die out because of their very success in changing the conditions that helped bring them into being. However, like the recently fashionable but now widely questioned theory that our age is seeing the "end of ideology," the notion that charismatic leadership is on the way out has little evidential support and seems dubious. So long as distress has not turned into total despair, its victims will be eagerly receptive to would-be savior-leaders with personalities and programs that promise relief, whether by revolutionary violence or other means. The following questions must then be asked: Are the mass conditions of distress that form the medium in which charismatic movements arise and flourish more likely to spread or contract as time passes? Are political oppression and sociopolitical inequality going to become easier or harder to overcome on a world scale? Does not the very technology that solves certain problems foster the emergence of terribly serious new ones which may cause great distress, such as unchecked population growth, pollution, and the depletion of resources?

One of the manifestations of charisma is the expression of fervent devotion in a cult of the leader's personality. This may happen while the leader is still living or after his death. A possible consequence in present-day conditions is the phenomenon of spurious charisma as an artifact of the modern mass media, particularly in countries with an authoritarian regime and a government-controlled press. The media can create the false appearance of charisma in the absence of the genuine wide-scale adulation which would make it a reality. They can fabricate a pseudo-personality cult. An historic case in point is the pseudo-cult of Stalin which evolved in Soviet Russia during the 1930s. The combination of glory-hungry leaders and state control of the media is a potent source of pseudo-cults of personality.

But countries with representative government and press freedom are also vulnerable to the phenomenon of spurious charisma or at least to the artificial

inflation of a leader's stature in the public mind, with ensuing harmful consequences. Since a national leader's actions impinge directly and deeply upon the concerns of the people to whose interest in events the mass media minister, the leader is constantly in the limelight of media attention. Considering, further, the pragmatic dictates of party and personal success in a democracy, as reflected for example in the interest of reelection, and the fact that the leader may be served by a high-powered public relations operation whose prime purpose is to project a favorable image, it is easy to see why key leaders in democratic countries often come to appear larger than life. Especially when we add to all this the well-attested tendency of the entourage of aides to reinforce the leader's picture of himself and the world by censoring out discordant facts.

What seems to follow is a further reflection on a theme already introduced above: egocentricity in leadership. One potent antidote to spurious charisma in a democracy is the entrusting of leadership to individuals without illusions of godlike greatness and resulting inner insecurity, the craving for reassuring admiration, and resentful oversensitivity to criticism; individuals who have learned to accept themselves as the imperfect, limited, fallible human beings that they are; individuals who are *not* cases of "political man" as in Lasswell's characterization. If this is so, we citizens of a democracy may well ask a question at this point: How can we learn to discriminate between candidates for leadership whose intense drive for public office springs from egotistic need and those genuinely motivated by the desire to serve, and by care for those whom they would govern? And if these discriminations are beyond our powers, how can we modify our mechanisms of leader selection so as to enlist persons of strong ability whose realism about themselves is evidenced by their lack of consuming ambition for high office?

LEADERSHIP AND THE CRISIS OF SURVIVAL

Let us conclude by considering, partly in the light of what has been said here, what may be some of the personal attributes most needed for effective leadership at the present time, particularly political leadership at the national level in America.

The cardinal requisites are the mental and moral powers to take full measure of the human prospect, to define the situation not in static or short-range terms but in developmental perspective, and then to gain the support of our people for the decades-long effort that will be needed to help surmount the oncoming crisis of human survival. Clearly, the qualities called for are those that would make for humanist and creative leadership of the highest order. It would be creative, for example, in its capacity to transcend many assumptions formed in the past which have or will become less and less valid. Among the latter are the division of policy into "domestic" and "foreign," the idea that national security in the nuclear age is attainable through whatever is the next extension of deterrent power, the assumption that such security is attainable through

alliance systems, the habit of thinking of political leadership's success or failure in terms of quadrennial periods, and the notion that science itself will somehow see us through by solving our mounting problems.

The definition of the situation just suggested—crisis of survival—flows from the thought of some of the keenest minds of our time in various countries.⁴ It is first a crisis of chaos, the fact that man cannot endure indefinitely without evolving the institutional structure of a planetary society. The threatened further proliferation of nuclear weapons technology in a world still organized as a set of theoretically sovereign nation-states and beset by international terrorism is only one, although the most dramatic, manifestation of the danger that continued lack of world order presents to the human future.

The crisis is also one of growth and ecology on a small and finitely endowed planet which cannot sustain indefinite growth of population, production, and pollution, but must be brought into an equilibrium state as a precondition of indefinite human survival. Yet growth goes on. For example, a doubling of the already partially insupportable world population of about 4 billion has been projected for the coming thirty-five years or so. Continued global disunity inhibits the checking of growth, and further growth guarantees aggravation of disunity. A vicious circle of growth and disorder endangers the human future.

There is no clear general appreciation of the situation as a crisis of survival. Sensitive members of the public are troubled by a sense of foreboding. They are aware of a series of very grave problems: at home there is unemployment and inflation; poverty, crime, and delinquency; the utter failure of the penal system; the depletion of energy and other resources; environmental pollution; blighted cities plagued by financial insecurity; discrimination against minorities; grossly inadequate provisions for health care, mass transit, education, and the care of the aged; and the cultural vacuum being experienced by many, especially among the young; abroad there is the persistence of wars and the danger of a nuclear war; the violent breakdown of political communities in different parts of the world; the suppression of ethnic minorities or majorities in some countries; the decline of democracy in some places; chronic hunger or famine; failures of economic development; plus many problems similar to our own domestic troubles.

Although there is widespread awareness of these problems, people in general do not grasp them in their interrelationships and cumulative character; they do not see them as symptoms of an emerging planetary crisis. The so-called population explosion is a misleadingly named phenomenon, for example, because it is not some future event that will occur with a big bang—as many may sup-

⁴ Among representative examples are Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1964); Richard A. Falk, *This Endangered Planet* (New York, 1971), Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York, 1971), and the two Club of Rome reports on the limits to growth.

pose—but one that is going on noiselessly now and making mass death by starvation the inexorable destiny of growing multitudes of our fellow human beings. Because of its very complexity, the crisis has an insidious aspect. The palpability of many of the symptoms does not produce public awareness of the nature of the disease. Books by scientists and intellectuals cannot bring about the needed awareness without the powerful assistance that only inspired political leadership can provide in communicating to people the proportions of the overall problem and the threat it ultimately poses to human existence.

Hence the qualities required now in our leaders are not only those that make for innovative leadership, creative in its capacity to comprehend a situation and to evolve an adequate analysis of it with the aid of the mobilized forces of science and social thought at home and abroad. The leadership required must be, to a degree never before seen, a leadership in edification. This will call for persuasiveness based on the ability to explain on the widest possible scale both the basics of the situation and the dire predictable consequences of continued drift in the face of it. It will call for confidence, the capacity to communicate, along with an awareness of great and growing danger, the hope that we, in league with other awakened peoples and their leaderships, can surmount the crisis and become in the process the masters of our destiny that men and women have long yearned to be but never yet become. It will call for the courage to give the unvarnished facts, which will also often be unpalatable, and summon us to change ingrained ways of thinking and acting, such as our energy profligacy, the tenacious growth mindedness of our corporations and many other institutions, and our habit of living as though the present and growing generations were the last that merit our deep concern. Such leadership cannot succeed solely on the basis of appeals to calculated self-interest. It will also require idealism in the leaders and the millions whom they seek to guide in a protracted politics of nonviolent radical change. If all this is far beyond the bounds of rational hope, so be it. But let no one delude oneself that humans in that case are long for this world—that is, as historical time is reckoned, in centuries.

An alternative mode of American response to the situation—nationally and regionally self-centered, hardheaded if not ruthless, “practical” and “realistic” in the traditional sense—is imaginable. The aim would be to shore up our exceptionally favored position, together with that of some other similarly endowed and like-minded nations, in the midst of spreading chaos, misery, anarchy, violence, and mass death in the rest of the world. It would be geared to the preservation of endurable conditions for as long as possible for people inhabiting lands, who might be able to protect and feed themselves under conditions of advancing planetary disaster. The state would increasingly become a garrison state.

The alternative way of responding would be an unfortunate one for three main reasons. First, the role of the United States in the world scheme of things is so important that our contribution to leadership of a movement on a universal scale to check and reverse man’s self-destructive course is indispensable if

any such movement is to have a serious chance of developing and succeeding. Without our active involvement, the cause is certainly a lost one. Hence the alternative mode of response would be a defeatist one. Second, it would at best gain us a reprieve, a finite extension of our national life span beyond that of less well-equipped and well-situated societies. The ultimate outcome, however, would be no different. Finally, it would mean the forsaking of the revolutionary-universalist values in the American historical heritage.

The dilemma of leadership that this decision poses is not an American one alone: in one way or another it confronts the governments of all nation-states now. Politics in the modern nation-state has always been based on the assumption that "effective leadership" is that which serves the interests of the national political community. Aspirants for power must declare and demonstrate a supreme commitment to these interests in order to convince their constituencies that they are fit for leadership roles. A nationalist orientation remains, therefore, a qualification for success in attaining high office in a world where the very idea of effective leadership on a national scale and for national goals has become or is fast becoming obsolete. How, in the continuing absence of the global political community that remains to be created, can we foresee and foster the advent to power of leaders who will dedicate themselves to supranational goals that include the building of a universal community? How, if such leaders appear, can they gain the requisite popular support for sustained endeavors directed to these goals?

The questions have no easy answer. The dilemma reflected in them is itself an element in the oncoming crisis of human survival.*

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