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The Connections Between Democratic Theory and Leadership Theory: The
Case of Public Reason
By Kenneth P. Ruscio

Part One: Why Democratic Theory Is Essential For Leadership Theory

Debates about the current condition of democracy skim over the question of leadership. We hear a great deal about the lack of civility in public discourse, the decline of trust in institutions and public officials, the pursuit of self-interest by citizens and their representatives, the apparent incapacity of the political system to address long-range problems, and the futility of any form of political engagement. Civil society appears to be anything but civil, and public deliberation as a means of resolving differences seems a hopeless ideal, nice in theory but wholly unachievable in practice. Democracy, in the words of one insightful critic, is on trial, challenged by "deepening cynicism; the growth of corrosive forms of isolation, boredom, and despair; the weakening, in other words, of the world known as democratic civil society, a world of groups and associations and ties that bind."¹

The matter of leadership is implicit in these discussions, or when it is made explicit it comes in one of two forms: either platitudinous observations about the need for integrity, boldness and vision; or crass, simplistic misappropriations of complex and sophisticated political theories. When Jonathan Rauch's otherwise shrewd critique of politics as systematically driven by organized groups ends with a plea for "that most personal and fickle of counterforces: political leadership," we sense that his analytical powers and rhetorical skills have exhausted themselves.² The very premise of his argument is that everyone, citizens and leaders alike, is inescapably complicit in the

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problem of "demosclerosis." When Dick Morris, President Bill Clinton's erstwhile advisor, tries to justify his view of politics as merely a modern version of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, he reveals not only his perverse notion of ethics but also his tendency to mangle political philosophy in service of his cause.³

Although it may seem self-evident that theories of leadership are embedded within theories of democracy, modern discussions of leadership proceed otherwise, as if untethered to political philosophy. One consequence is that while we aggressively debate timeless questions of democratic theory, such as the terms of engagement in the public sphere and the condition of civil society, we root around aimlessly when discussing leadership, unaware that disputes in democratic theory inevitably lead to disputes about the nature of leadership. The effect is not unlike one of the characters described in a Richard Russo novel as "not profoundly stupid" but missing "his fair share of nuances."⁴ That fits the state of our theories on political leadership – not completely off the mark but lacking appreciation for subtlety and complexity.

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For example, when someone claims that democracy requires civility, what additional claims about democratic leadership are also being made? Stephen Carter's provocative book, *Civility*, provides some clues. We must first accept that there will be continuous disagreement in a democracy, constant dialogue instead of final consensus, a form of politics marked by commitment to principles, to be sure, but also a willingness to learn from others. "Civil listening" is one of Carter's ideals. "The function of debate in a truly civil society is not only to prevail; the function is to allow the best idea to win out. Therefore," he concludes, "no matter how certain I may be that I am right, unless I give you a genuine and open opportunity to persuade me of my errors, I cannot seriously expect you to give me a genuine and open opportunity to persuade you of yours."⁵ Leaders presumably should model this public etiquette while creating conditions that enable and encourage citizens to act in the same manner.

Perhaps. But to one of Carter's critics, the answer is not so clear. Civility is only one of many virtues, and when virtues come into conflict we have to assign priority to one over another. In the private realm of family and friends, civility may frequently if not always take precedence. In the public world of argument and debate, however, fighting injustice and standing for principle may at times trump civility. Sometimes we show respect for others by attacking the insufficiency of their ideas.⁶ While Carter's critic would not dismiss the benefit of civility, he does help us understand that our vision of democratic politics – what we imagine its purposes to be – inevitably leads to discussion of how we wish leaders to behave. The leadership behavior we endorse depends, that is, on the kind of democracy we want.

Another example raises a related but somewhat different question. A few years ago, when the budget deficit framed virtually all political debate and elected officials seemed incapable of making hard choices, a soon-to-be-retired senator rose to address his colleagues. John Danforth, a Republican from Missouri, was dismayed

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over his colleague's refusal to rein in entitlement spending. Fearing the fiscal burden that would eventually be placed on future generations and judging that to be a classic case of injustice, the senator blamed the inaction on the electoral imperative – the overriding impulse to placate short-term demands from constituents at the cost of long-term benefits. Speaking extemporaneously and indignantly with a passion that revealed his frustration, he continued:

Deep down in our hearts we know that we have bankrupted America and that we have given our children a legacy of bankruptcy. We have been so intent on getting ourselves elected that year after year we have told the people that they get their choice between more benefits and lower taxes....The problem is that we have hurt America – quite intentionally we have hurt America, for the purposes of getting ourselves elected. We have told Americans that they should feel sorry for themselves. We have told them we can give them something for nothing. We have told them we can reduce taxes and we can increase benefits, and the numbers do not add up, and people want to believe that this is not a problem.⁷

Danforth's particular plaint about the budget is beside the point. What does matter is his accusation that public officials fail to sacrifice their own interest (in this case electoral success) in the name of what they determine to be in public interest. In addition, he suggests that officials have a responsibility to educate the public about their choices – to lead rather than mislead. His sentiments have an undeniable appeal, and I shall take them up later. Still, direct responsiveness to constituents should not be too quickly dismissed. After all, the justification for elections as a means of accountability is that officials will and should be influenced by the incentive to please those they represent. Even more to the point, can we realistically expect representatives to ignore their own basic self-interest in the name of some amorphously defined public good any more than we can expect citizens to override theirs? In the view of many democratic theorists, interests rather than ideas or principles drive politics.⁸ Some go even farther by asserting that interests actually check the unbridled and impulsive passions. They should be not only tolerated but embraced. Constructing theories of leadership without a realistic appraisal of human nature is to create an untenable portrayal of the responsibilities of leaders. Of course the features of human nature, let alone their implications for politics, are very much open to debate, but that is precisely the point. Implicit in Danforth's version of leadership is one view, a view with appeal but a contested one that must be defended.

A final example. In what is surely one of the most revealing portraits of modern-day, street-level, genuine retail politics. Buzz Bissinger writes of the tenure of Ed Rendell, mayor of Philadelphia in the mid-1990s. Rendell faced enormous constraints, including a rapidly deteriorating fiscal climate, exacerbated by self-reinforcing trends. The more people left the city because of crime, loss of jobs, and inferior education, the smaller the tax base, and the greater the inability to rectify the very problems that caused people to leave, thereby touching off still more departures. As industries historically important to the city's economy closed or moved, Rendell tried to fill the void by attracting shoppers and tourists, only to be charged with ignoring the city's traditional neighborhoods. The job became all consuming. His daily schedule was a

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series of events ranging from phone calls and meetings with the president and cabinet secretaries to appearances at funerals for slain policemen to dancing with mascots for companies who donated small change to minor civic events. His office became the repository for demands completely irreconcilable. Bissinger's portrait is unabashedly sympathetic. Rendell "knew better than anyone else how politics worked, the persona and the aura of the job subsuming everything else. People saw him as the mayor, always the mayor, never as a man who might have brushes with insecurity and sadness and even frailty....He wondered whether the standards for politicians were just impossible to ever fully meet."⁹ Bissinger continues:

He was the embodiment of a public man, utterly defined by his place in the public eye and the way in which the public reacted to him, and the private acts which define a life – family, friendships, religious faith – seemed of little sustaining moment to him. Whatever it was, wherever it was, he hated being outside the circle. But in the elusive definition of what it means to be a public servant, no one else came closer to the ideals that the concept represents. He gave of himself tirelessly, and his motive wasn't pure self-aggrandizement or strokes of the ego, nor was it mere obligation. He was hardly a student of urban history and urban planning. He had no grand theory that could be explained on paper. But he understood exactly what a city was about – sounds and sights and smells, all the different senses, held together by the spontaneity of choreography, each day, each hour, each minute different from the previous one.¹⁰

In the canonical literature on leadership, there is a distinction drawn between transactional and transformational leadership. The former refers to leadership based on transactions between leaders and followers, agreements or bargains which promise mutually beneficial results. If you vote for me, a politician will offer, I promise you this. I get a position; you have your interests fulfilled. By contrast, transformational leadership offers a new way of looking at the world. Leaders provide not bargains but ideas, hopes, and aspirations.¹¹ The distinction (which I have unfairly simplified) is a useful one. It has contributed to our understanding. Yet one wonders whether it applies in any way to Rendell's case. As he came to embody the city, to the point of losing any sense of a private life outside of his official role, as he worked tirelessly to overcome the constraints and usher in a new vision for the city, was he transformational? Or was his leadership better understood as an endless attempt to balance the demands of a heterogeneous group of constituents? Rendell was both transactional and transformational and therefore was neither. The demands of leadership in a democracy call for bargains and transactions – hard, cold tit-for-tat tradeoffs – but within a context of goals, purposes and objectives.

The purpose of this study is to mine contemporary democratic theory for insights into understanding the obligations and responsibilities of leaders. My premise is that assertions about leadership – such as normative claims about legitimacy and accountability or commitments to constituents and appropriate criteria for decision making – are inseparable from claims about preferred forms of democracy. It is impossible, in other words, to "do" leadership theory without also doing democratic

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theory. And yet the literature on political leadership in democracies only rarely draws from political philosophy in any systematic or explicit manner. That could very well be because democratic theorists only occasionally focus directly on leaders, per se, although much of what they say has enormous implications for how we enable officials to lead while constraining their discretion and scope of authority. Whatever the explanation, students of leadership typically overlook political philosophy.

There are two boundaries to the project. The first should already be obvious, but given the current state of the literature it bears emphasis. I am addressing political leadership. There are undoubtedly similarities among leaders in different sectors of society – in business, science, religion, education. But the broad-brush approach – the "seven habits of highly effective leaders" model – obscures the unique demands placed on public officials. In the political sphere, particular rather than general obligations apply, especially in democracies governed by a constitution, which accords a certain status to the individual and makes collective action problematic. That is why democratic theory, which presents justifications and principles underlying normative beliefs, becomes so essential. What may not yet be obvious, but I hope will soon become so, is that carving out a political realm distinct from other realms has significant implications for the model of leadership I will endorse.

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And that leads to the second boundary of this project. To underscore my claim that assertions about political leadership cannot be made apart from claims for a preferred form of democracy, I must disclose my normative framework. This discussion of leadership will draw from liberal theory – liberal in the broad, historical sense of individualism, freedom, equality, tolerance, and limited governmental power; liberal in the sense of allowing individuals to seek their own version of the good life bound by the constraints of justice.

The study might therefore be read on two levels. One is to ask what contemporary liberal democratic theory tells us about leadership. In a polity animated by liberal precepts, what are the duties and obligations of leaders? Liberal theorists may evaluate this project by measuring whether it accurately presents a view of leadership in accord with well-established liberal tenets. Those critical of liberal theory may move to the second level – that is, to see this project as simply an example of how one strand of political thought might be mined for insights into leadership. If communitarians respond with their own version, or if postmoderns or other critics of liberalism retaliate by showing how their versions of leadership would look very different, or if devotees of the ancients remind us of the early writings on statesmanship and rulership, this project will have achieved one of its main goals.

These boundaries circumscribe the project but not nearly enough. Far too much territory remains under the heading of liberal political leadership. There are many

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versions of liberalism, and the realm of the political has itself been the scene of many recent boundary disputes. I have therefore adopted the more manageable strategy of identifying three central themes. Certainly there might be others. Certainly they might be cut differently. But the case I wish to make is that any excursion into liberal thought with the intent of identifying premises for leadership would inevitably encounter at least these concepts in one form or another. Moreover, as I hope to show, they have relevance for present-day debates over the state of politics in society.

Briefly stated:

Public Reason: In a polity derived from the just powers of the governed, where the governed differ in their values and beliefs, there will inevitably be conflict. The management of conflict to arrive at collective action is a fundamental task of leaders. But the way in which conflict is managed is at least one distinguishing feature of liberal polities. We must be willing to live with others who differ from us; the end of politics is not the imposition of the good life on all but the creation of conditions that allow each to achieve his version of the good life without being unjust to others. Action to solve common problems stops well short of the imposition of a single version of the received wisdom. Conflict is permanent, and therefore so is politics. Even so, we must cooperate and coexist with others who differ from us in substantial ways. Rawls puts the problem squarely: "How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?"¹² One answer is that they must justify their reasons for a particular course of action, if that action calls upon the coercive power of the state, in terms that are understandable to others. They must reason publicly. They must understand if not always endorse the positions of those they live with. Leaders must not only do the same (indeed, their obligation is greater), but they must also create the conditions that allow for public deliberation.

Trust as a Political Virtue. A central issue for the contemporary, liberal, administrative state is balancing two imperatives. The political imperative requires public officials to be accountable, and perhaps the primary method of ensuring accountability is to limit authority. Those who govern cannot simply declare a course of action. They are checked and balanced; their powers are often divided. Richard Neustadt reports on a now-famous observation from Harry Truman, who looked on bemused as the office of the presidency was passed on to Eisenhower the former general. "Poor Ike. He'll sit here and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' and nothing will happen. It won't be a bit like the Army. He'll find it very frustrating."¹³ Constitutional government has higher priorities than efficiency, and one of the primary reasons is an inherent suspicion or even mistrust of those who find themselves in positions of power.

But as the scope of government expanded, so did the administrative tasks which require discretion and flexibility, thus creating a managerial imperative much different from the political one. The key to resolving the tension between these two imperatives is trust.¹⁴ To declare that mistrust is a central premise of liberal polities

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is not to declare that trust has no place. One of the purposes of this study is to recover the significance of trust in leaders as an element of liberal theory. To do so, however, requires a distinction between the kind of trust we develop in our personal lives among friends and families and the trust we have in our public lives as citizens. Political trust, I will argue, is not the same as personal trust. A political virtue is in some important respects different from personal virtue.¹⁵ To develop a theory of liberal political leadership, we need to clarify why trust is important, what form it takes, and how it is nurtured within an institutional structure based on an assumption that power can be misused.

The Possibility of a Common Good. Often in political theory, very basic assumptions carry enormous implications for how we envision government. Consider the simple question whether individuals act in their self-interest. Of course they do some of the time or maybe even most of the time, but always? And are they ever able to sacrifice self-interest in the name of some greater duty or obligation? Is there something in principle called the public interest? Does it consist merely of the arithmetic summation of all individual interests, or is the whole greater than the sum of its parts? I will argue strongly that there is indeed a common good that transcends individual interests – and that a model of leadership based on that assumption differs markedly from one constrained by a rigid assumption of self-interested behavior. A search for a common good obligates leaders to act in a manner different from if their main obligation were only to respond to and balance separate and competing interests. That argument requires some adventurous forays into discussions of human nature, a topic that has engendered some of the most contested claims in political theory. This inquiry surely won't settle the matter, but I hope it demonstrates the importance of revealing the assumption under which we begin to construct our preferred models of leadership. Many arguments about the responsibilities of public officials can be traced back to disagreements on some of these basic assumptions.

Readers familiar with contemporary debates among democratic theorists will recognize a number of highly charged assertions in the preceding paragraphs. It will be clear to them already that I am presenting a version of liberal political leadership, not *the* version. The spirit of the inquiry is to present a target, something more substantial than a straw man I hope, but certainly something I concede is provisional and contestable.

I will attempt to locate my claims in the writings of readily recognized theorists – Machiavelli, Adam Smith, Kant, and Montesquieu from earlier days; Publius and Tocqueville closer to our day; and from our day Rawls especially. Of course, those theorists and others mentioned throughout these pages do not form a coherent package. They differ sharply on key points and the emphasis they place on the precepts they do hold in common. But they do share a strong intellectual tradition in political thought – a belief in the efficacy of government as well as a fear that it can constrain individual autonomy. In contemporary times, the challenge to liberal thought comes from a variety of sources, particularly those such as communitarians, feminists and postmodernists who believe that liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism, rights, and procedural justice, negates the conditions which are

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required for it to flourish.¹⁶ In liberal regimes, the argument goes, individual choice is glorified to the detriment of the formation of community; procedures are given a higher priority than any substantive good; and the reluctance to assert any firm values results in weakening of the civil virtues necessary for a healthy vibrant society.

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This inquiry defends the liberal tradition but admittedly falls into the camp of what might be called "chastened liberalism." Peter Berkowitz is one of its current champions; his work is characterized by the concession that the critics have hit their mark and raised difficult issues, even though he believes that in the end they have failed to penetrate the core beliefs of liberal

thought. The appropriate strategy for liberals is to recognize that indeed liberalism embodies inherent tensions and to rework their analysis to take into account the sociological conditions of contemporary society. To take an example particularly relevant to this discussion of leadership, liberals are (almost instinctively) reluctant to speak of virtues for fear that the perceived need to cultivate democratic virtues implicates the power of government to do so. At the same time, however, as Berkowitz convincingly shows, liberal societies depend on the existence of several critical virtues, such as civility, toleration, and respect for difference. Liberal theorists resolved the dilemma by placing faith in the ability of extra-governmental institutions – church, family, associations, and in some cases the market – to cultivate those virtues. But as Berkowitz points out, times change. "Liberalism today no longer has easy access to the beliefs, practices, and institutions from which the makers of modern liberalism could once confidently draw to sustain virtue."¹⁷ In light of the current erosion of what might be called civil society, perhaps liberals need to be more assertive in their discussion of matters such as virtue, community, and the beneficial involvement of government.

The practical and pressing challenge faced by liberal democracies today is to discover not how to become a different or better kind of regime, but how to make themselves better at defending liberal principles and achieving purposes for which liberal states are formed. This cause can be advanced by liberals who learn to take more responsibility for cultivating the qualities of mind and character whose necessity for the preservation of liberal states can be shown by theory, but whose existence, theory also suggests, cannot be presupposed by practice.¹⁸

This project is intended to be part of that effort. I hope to shore up the proposition that virtue of a particular kind is necessary for leadership in liberal democracies.

A final word about context. This is not a study of current events, but where today's headlines illustrate the broader points and anchor them in real-life situations, I will incorporate them. Still, the day-to-day discussions of democratic leadership are superficial in the extreme and deeply disappointing. One of my motivations for embarking on this study is to move away from discussions of leadership behavior driven by partisan strategy rather than a desire to better understand the demands and obligations placed on public officials. Often we can gain insight into

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contemporary debates not by immersion but by stepping back and realizing how little we have to say is new and how many questions of democratic leadership have been anticipated and addressed by others in eerily prescient ways.

Part Two: The Road To Public Reason

"How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?"¹⁹ John Rawls's fundamental question is an apt formulation of the problem of contemporary democratic theory – and, therefore, (consistent with my thesis) an apt formulation of the leadership problem in modern democracies. One of the answers he provides is "public reason," a concept which requires us to explore such hefty issues as toleration, civility, and the conditions necessary for public deliberation. Can we achieve common ground or at least reasonable and just collective action through political engagement? To explore that question, we need to first set the foundation, a task which brings us back to the times of Machiavelli, then into the period of the American founding, and only then into our own. Machiavelli set the stage. Isaiah Berlin credits him with establishing this proposition: "Men need rulers because they need someone to order human groups governed by diverse interests and bring them security, stability, and above all protection against enemies, to establish social institutions which alone enable men to satisfy needs and aspirations."²⁰ We may not like some of Machiavelli's answers. Public reason may be a more palatable one. But whatever the response, modern politics accepts disorder and conflict as inevitable and leaders as an inevitable part of the response.

Machiavelli and da Vinci, or Why The Mona Lisa Helps us Understand Politics

Look past the Mona Lisa's smile (or smirk, depending on which interpretation you accept) to the background. It is an unusual, almost surreal landscape. Rivers flow in twisted and violent patterns, cutting great gorges and winding around mountains and hills. Why da Vinci chose such a background is likely as much an enigma as Mona Lisa's expression. But thanks to the careful research of Roger Masters, we have some clues.²¹ In the early 1500s, when da Vinci painted his famous portrait, rivers apparently were very much on his mind. He and Niccolo Machiavelli were engaged in an elaborate scheme to divert the waters of the Arno River. The two great Renaissance thinkers had found mutual cause in the defense of Florence, their *mia patria*. Surrounded by rival city-states and armies in the employ of the less than munificent Pope Alexander VI, Florentines were examining every possible means of protection. Raising their own army of citizen soldiers was one option. So was hiring mercenaries from France. So was the building of an elaborate defense. But those required money, and that meant taxes, and the fiscal condition of Florence as well as the political climate rendered those choices unappealing.

And so the two creative minds hatched their plot. To the west of Florence was Pisa, a city with a streak of independence and a longstanding mistrust, even hatred, of its eastern neighbors. But Pisa stood between Florence and the open sea, and flowing through Florence and into Pisa and eventually into the Ligurian Sea was the Arno River. Why not divert the Arno River in such a way that it bypassed Pisa and created a direct route to the sea for Florence? For da Vinci, the challenge of such a

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fantastical science and technology project was irresistible, and from his previous work in Milan he fully appreciated the practical uses for society of engineering. For Machiavelli, diplomat and public official (*The Prince* and other famous writings would come later), the strategic importance was uppermost in his mind. Advantage Florence by disadvantaging Pisa. He was also in touch at the time with Agostino Vespucci, related to none other than the explorer Amerigo Vespucci, whose news from the discovery of the Americas had convinced Florentines of the emerging markets abroad and the benefit of their route to the sea. For classic geopolitical and economic reasons, Florence attempted an ambitious and far-flung engineering project centuries ahead of its time.

Predictably it failed. Just as da Vinci anticipated but could not develop the ability of man to create machines that would allow flight, so he anticipated the potential to change the landscape but could not himself achieve it on such a scale. The engineer on site for the project incurred the wrath of da Vinci, and the artist, constantly in search of cash it seems, moved on to other projects. Machiavelli was "reassigned" but remained active in political affairs. He raised a citizens' militia and advised on foreign affairs. Soderini, the ruler of Florence at the time, only added to his tarnished reputation as weak and indecisive. Although he survived assassination plots and less violent attempts to remove him, his power continued its downward trajectory. In a few short years he would lose it all and provide Machiavelli with a model of what a prince should not be.

As Masters so cleverly details, the unsuccessful collaboration between Machiavelli and da Vinci was more than a minor historical footnote. It illuminates much about the thinking of the times – and so much about the intellectual legacy handed down from Machiavelli, and therefore so much of the thinking of our own times. Machiavelli laid the foundation for our current perspective on leadership. Understanding his legacy depends first on understanding the context in which he was writing. The creativity sparked by the Renaissance notwithstanding, it was an anxious and unsettling time. In Italy, city-states were indeed rivals. The church and the ruling Popes were corrupt by any definition of the term. Every region was either on the attack or being attacked. Throughout Europe the situation was no better. Philippe de Commines, a French diplomat of the times, wrote to Charles VIII of France, explaining his assessment of the current state of affairs: "God has not made any created being in this world, neither man nor beast, nor anything else, but he has set up something in opposition to it ... France has England as a check, England has Scotland, and Spain, Portugal." He went on to describe the similar state of hostility among the German and Italian states. Strife was judged to be a permanent condition "all the world over."²²

Machiavelli – strategist, patriot of Florence, public official, skeptic of doctrinaire religion, and now discreet critic of the feeble Soderini – began to see leadership in a light different from that of the philosophers of ancient Greek and Roman times. They wrote without reference to the struggles of politics and therefore of matters far removed from what Machiavelli observed. Their musings provided no guidance for him or the rulers he served. Years after the failed Arno River project, he crafted *The Prince*. "I may be held presumptuous ... But since my intent is to write something

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useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation."²³

The Prince remains "useful" to this day but for reasons far more complex than its reputation suggests. We will return to it later for different purposes and more critically. For now, though, it is essential to highlight this one main contribution: Machiavelli firmly believed that societies control their destiny. To be sure, luck or fortune plays some part, but we are not without resources. In fact, we have little option but to act, and a critical factor, an indispensable factor in taking charge of our future is strong leadership. No doubt recalling at least a little his and da Vinci's fated collaboration, he wrote metaphorically:

...that fortune is arbiter of half our actions, but also that she leaves the other half or close to it, for us to govern. And I liken her to one of those violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift earth from this part, drop in another; each person flees before them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in every regard. And although they are like this, it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for them with dikes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging. It happens similarly with fortune, which shows her power where virtue has not been put in order to resist her and therefore turns her impetus where she knows that dams and dikes have not been made to contain her. And if you consider Italy, which is the seat of these variations and that which has given them motion, you will see a country without dams and without any dike.²⁴

Machiavelli set the terms for our contemporary discussions of leadership. Disorder and conflict are inherent in the modern world. But we are not powerless, fated, passive victims of the raging rivers. The task of politics and therefore the task of political leaders is to manage that conflict. To be sure, we have to examine critically some of Machiavelli's suggestions for achieving those objectives, but the basic dilemma is clear. Providing stability requires the use of power – occasionally, maybe even often. The use of power requires skills and tasks not always in harmony with some other priorities, such as freedom, compassion and altruism, to mention just a few. That is why Machiavelli was subversive then and still unsettling today. If everyone were virtuous, the leader could also be virtuous. But in a "world [that] consists only of the vulgar"²⁵ and where people are "ungrateful, voluble, anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain"²⁶ a leader would actually be *more* merciful if he learned "not to be good" – for goodness, in that classic sense of the term, would paradoxically "injure the whole community" by allowing disorder and conflict. According to Isaiah Berlin, Machiavelli was "convinced that what are commonly thought of as the central Christian virtues, whatever their intrinsic value, are insuperable obstacles to the building of the kind of society that he wishes to see; a society which, moreover, he assumes that it is natural for all men to want – the kind of community that, in his view, satisfies men's permanent desires and interests."²⁷

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How do we achieve one set of goals without jeopardizing another set? How do we provide order within constraints of ethics and justice? I will argue that "public reason" is one modern answer, but first we need to examine another episode on the way to our present day.

Hamilton's Dilemma

It would be convenient for our analysis if Alexander Hamilton's essays in the celebrated *Federalist Papers* had footnoted Machiavelli, or if historians had been able to unearth copies of *The Prince* or *The Discourses* among his papers. But the history of the influence of certain ideas is usually never that obvious. Scholars have in fact traced strands from Machiavelli to Montesquieu and then to the Enlightenment thinkers, such as Locke and Smith, and then directly into the writings of the founders. But those strands take some convoluted twists and turns. In any event the argument I wish to make is not that there is a straight, linear connection between the Italian thinker and one of the authors of the Constitution. For our immediate purpose, we need only observe some common sentiments, a kind of parallel analysis that yielded some different conclusions about government while sharing some critically important premises. Recall Machiavelli's claim that we affect our destiny and consider Hamilton's declaration in the very first paragraph of the very first *Federalist Paper*. Though he had not schemed with a colonial da Vinci in a grandiose engineering project, he did believe

...that it seems to be reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.²⁸

On the one hand, *The Federalist Papers* were merely a series of op-ed pieces addressed to the voters of New York to generate support for the Constitution. On the other hand, they command our attention today for their careful analysis of the challenge faced by democratic governments everywhere. The stakes were high. At this time and place, Machiavelli's proposition would be put to its clearest test. The eighty-five essays – fifty by Hamilton; twenty-six by James Madison; and five by John Jay and three jointly by Madison and Hamilton – describe the proposed constitution, but they also constitute a nuanced philosophical argument for various processes of government – a declaration that citizens and their leaders, despite their inherent conflictual natures, can achieve just collective action.

They also are a polemic, an argument against the existing Articles of Confederation. It was, in fact, the Articles that formed the backdrop for Hamilton's primary argument, and in a manner similar to the way in which the fragmented city-states of Italy formed the backdrop for Machiavelli. The Articles provided no unity among the states of the newly formed country. The government consequently was "destitute of energy."²⁹ Mere tinkering to change the "material defects in our national system"

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was inadequate. The problems "do not proceed from minute or partial imperfections, but from fundamental errors in the structure of the building." Defenders of The Articles and critics of the Constitution "seem to cherish with blind devotion the political monster of an imperium in imperio....Each State yielding to the persuasive voice of immediate interest or convenience has successively withdrawn its support, till the frail and tottering edifice seems to fall upon our heads and to crush us beneath its ruins."³⁰ For proof of the inability of the government to ensure tranquility, the conveners of the Constitution pointed to Shays's rebellion in Vermont – the conflagration caused by debtors who rejected the powers of the national government.

Instability was in the air. The individual states were spinning away from the center driven by "love of power" disguised rhetorically as a love of liberty. Hamilton was not an engineer nor did he have a da Vinci at his side, but it seems that he intuitively grasped the laws of physics. "From this spirit it happens that in every political association which is formed upon the principle of uniting in a common interest a number of lesser sovereignties, there will be found a kind of eccentric tendency in the subordinate or inferior orbs by the operation of which there will be a perpetual tendency to fly off from the common center."³¹ Power of one kind had to check power of another kind. The answer was not diminished power but a countervailing one. Stability comes from balancing centrifugal and centripetal forces.

While all three contributors to *The Federalist Papers* make the case for a strengthened national government, Hamilton's voice is the most forceful and it finds its clearest expression in his arguments for establishing a presidency. "A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of government." The office needs "energy," "vigor," "expedition," and "competent powers." Hamilton's case was an implicit critique of the states' tendency to devise governmental structures in which the legislature was supreme. Legislatures are "best adapted to deliberation and wisdom," he wrote, "and best calculated to conciliate the confidence of the people and to secure their privileges and interests." But an orderly polity also requires "personal firmness" and "stability of the system of administration." He declared, "...[L]et us make a firm stand for our safety, our tranquility, our dignity, our reputation. Let us at last break the fatal charm which has too long seduced us from the paths of felicity and prosperity."³²

The "fatal charm" to which Hamilton refers suggests that in his view societies can be misled into thinking that liberty without restraint is some aspirational ideal. Too much power was a problem; but so too was unrestrained liberty. Madison put the matter in these terms: "...[L]iberty may be endangered by the abuses of liberty as well as by the abuses of power; that there are numerous instances of the former as well as of the latter; and that the former, rather than the latter, is apparently most to be apprehended by the United States."³³ The authors of *The Federalist Papers* were in no way abandoning the project of liberty. But, as Isaac Kramnick describes it, they were seeking to reassert the "politics of energy" during a time when the "politics of liberty" dominated political discourse.³⁴ The task is to devise "some institution that blends stability with liberty."³⁵ The dilemma for Hamilton – and Madison and Jay – was not that the establishment of order necessarily meant the

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loss of liberty. On the contrary, a properly constructed order was a better provider of liberty. In the now familiar words that found their way into the preamble of the Constitution, their project was to "form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."³⁶

It is at this point, however, that we need to recognize an important element in the case made in *The Federalist Papers* – important in advancing us to the concept of public reason and the view of leadership associated with it. The proponents of the Constitution, the Federalists, did indeed wish to centralize government, or at least make it more central than the structure created by the Articles of Confederation. Their critics, the Anti-Federalists, were concerned that the proposed Constitution would diminish the voice of the people. For example, rather than the vibrant, responsive state legislatures – local and directly in touch with the electors – the proposed Congress would be distant, large, and made up of an aristocratic elite. The Anti-Federalists believed that the local legislatures could reflect the will of the people more accurately because the elected would be more like the electors. As one opponent of the Constitution wrote, representatives "should be a true picture of the people; possess the knowledge of their circumstances and their wants; sympathize in all their distresses; and be disposed to seek their true interests." Representatives need not be, nor should they be, men of "brilliant talents." There should be instead a "sameness, as to residence and interests, between the representative and his constituents."³⁷ In the view of the Anti-Federalists, they should mirror the preferences of the citizens they represent:

Representatives should have the same views and interests with the people at large. They should think, feel, and act like them and in fine should be an exact miniature of their constituents. They should be (if we may use the expression) the whole body politic, with all its property, rights and privileges reduced to a smaller scale, every part being diminished just in proportion.³⁸

Hamilton, Madison, and Jay had a different metaphor in mind – not a mirror but a filter. Their argument is intricate and draws from a set of propositions underlying political discourse at that time. Individuals were considered creatures of interests and passions. Those interests arose from and were given definition by a curious combination of reason, which enabled individuals to recognize and calculate their interests, and self-love, which transformed their calculation of interest into self-interest. To advance one's interests, a citizen would join with like-minded allies and form factions. Those factions would compete and (as Madison famously wrote in Federalist Paper #10) *the* problem for government was resolving those conflicting claims, reconciling competition, and ensuring some sense of order and justice – while at the same time respecting not only the *need* for liberty but also the *inevitability* of individuals asserting their autonomy. To simply mirror those factional disputes among the citizenry was an invitation to chaos. To simply transfer the passionate self-interested debates into the structure of government was to enfeeble the institutions rather than strengthen them. Representatives should "refine and enlarge" public opinion so as to "discern the true interest of the people."³⁹ That, for

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Madison, was one of the primary differences between a republic, which he favored, and a democracy.

David Weaver makes the case well by suggesting that the authors of the *Federalist Papers* were, in effect, balancing a realistic appraisal of the basic factious nature of citizens and leaders with an aspiration to achieve a true public interest. As he put it, "...[A] central problem of governance and, perforce, of leadership would be to guide and control the irrational aspects of human nature while striving to promote and develop the rational."⁴⁰

The filter argument remains contested even to this day, in part because it depends on other propositions – two in particular – which are also contested. One is that leaders, once in government, can display those qualities or virtues that enable them to debate and thereby discover the public interest. The other is that the institutional design – the structures of the institution and the procedures – should create incentives for capable individuals to enter government, provide rewards for them to act in that manner and create a selection process that identifies and recruits the most talented. Both those contingencies are necessary; neither is sufficient. Leaders must not only possess certain virtues; they must be identified and placed in institutional structures that cultivate those virtues and reward those individuals who manifest them.

Whether Madison's, Hamilton's, and Jay's case is disproved by current events is an intriguing question. But there is no doubt that they were convinced of the soundness of their brief. One of the strongest arguments for the Constitution, in their view, was that the structure made it possible, indeed probable, that the citizens most capable of leadership would find public service an attractive proposition. Even more to the point, the constitutional forms would function so that the traits most desirable in leaders would be the same traits that enabled aspirants to public office to successfully navigate the selection system. There were no guarantees, of course: "enlightened statesmen would not always be at the helm," and "experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions," which is why trust alone would not prevent the abuse of power.⁴¹ Still, the Founders wanted to raise the odds as high as they could. Jay, for example, argued that the extensiveness of the republic created a larger pool of talent:

When once an efficient national government is established, the best men in the country will not only consent to serve, but also will be appointed to manage it; for, although town or country, or other contracted influence, may place men in state assemblies, or senates, or courts of justice, or executive departments, yet more general and extensive reputation for talents and other qualifications will be necessary to recommend men to offices under the national government – especially as it will have the widest field for choice, and never experience that want of proper persons which is not uncommon in some of the States. Hence, it will result that the administration, the political counsels, and the judicial decisions of the national government will be more wise, systematical, and judicious than those of individual states.⁴²

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And in another section:

...the President and senators so chosen will always be the Number of those who best understand our national interests...who are best able to promote those interests, and whose reputation for integrity inspires and merits confidence.⁴³

Hamilton supplied a similar analysis. In Number 35, after presenting his own version of the filter argument, he argues that representatives will go to great efforts to understand the need of their constituents and establish "strong cords of sympathy" with them – although they will avoid the "momentary humors or dispositions" of the populace.⁴⁴ They will, that is, come to understand their general habits and interest, not their fleeting passions. Political leaders wise enough to make those distinctions can be found among all classes and all walks of life. One of the functions of the constitutional system is to ferret them out, to provide the means and opportunities for them to be identified and enticed into public service.

The story so far brings us to this point. Conflict is inevitable in diverse societies. In order to bring stability to the conflict and to ensure that people of different beliefs and interests can live together, leaders are necessary. But those leaders must possess a set of qualities and talents that allow them to participate in and manage a process that extracts from the citizens their "true interests." Machiavelli himself reveals a tendency to this view more forcefully in another of his works, *Discourses on Livy*. "But as to prudence and stability, I say that a people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince. Not without cause may the voice of a people be likened to that of God; for one sees a universal opinion produce marvelous effects in its forecasts, so that it appears to foresee its ill and its good by a hidden virtue. As to judging things, if a people hears two orators who incline to different sides, when they are of equal value, very few times does one see it not take up the better opinion and not persuaded of the truth that it hears."⁴⁵ The role of leaders in democratic societies is to create conditions that enable the "true wisdom" of the people to emerge. That function itself requires wisdom of a different sort.

John Rawls and Public Reason

We leap ahead to the present era, past the tectonic social changes caused by industrialization and technological advances, through the periods of intense and tragic international conflict, and into a political climate where, as Jean Bethke Elshtain sees it, "democracy is on trial."⁴⁶ Rates of political participation have declined, as measured by voting, work on campaigns, or simple awareness of key political issues. Commentators typically decry the low level of trust in public officials and government institutions. The coarsening of public debate, marked not only by negative campaigns but also by legal and ethical prosecution of political opponents, seems to have crossed some problematic threshold.⁴⁷ Eric M. Uslaner's study of Congress led him to conclude, "American society and its politics have hardened ...Politics is now not just a serious business but a highly polarized one. Give and take has given way to non-negotiable demands...Confrontation, not

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dialogue, dominates..."⁴⁸ Indeed, the very purpose of politics appears to have degenerated in most people's eyes to the single-minded pursuit of particular interests. Americans hate politics, in the opinion of E.J. Dionne, because "we have lost all sense of 'the public good.' Over the last thirty years of political polarization, politics has stopped being a deliberative process through which people resolved disputes, found remedies and moved forward."⁴⁹ Cappella and Jamieson implicate the media for the "spiral of cynicism" they reinforce: the acts of politicians are explained solely as strategic moves to enhance their electability.⁵⁰ When Bill Bradley quit the Senate a few years ago, he declared, "Politics is broken ... Neither political party speaks to people where they live their lives."⁵¹

This is not what Hamilton, Madison, and Jay had in mind. Despite their realism and grounded analysis, their aspirations for political discourse were higher.

Of course, a lot happened since the Renaissance and the Founding. Modernity intervened, with all its attendant costs and benefits. Society fragmented into specialized spheres: education became distinct from parenting; church and state no longer perfectly overlapped; law and morality branched off from each other. Interactions among people became purposive or functional; we come together for commercial transactions or to fulfill other interests and needs. A host of legal mechanisms arose: contracts, organizations, and bureaucracy, leading to what is generally called "rational coordination." Modernity did have its advantages. It brought efficiency to a more complex society. It also brought toleration and enabled free and diverse peoples to live together in a manner that diffused at least somewhat the potential for conflict. But, as Selznik points out, it came with a price. "The fundamental truth," he writes, "is that modernity weakens culture and fragments experience. The gains of modernity are won, not easily and smoothly, but at a significant cost to the harmony and stability of human experience."⁵²

It is against this backdrop of profound sociological change and concern over its impact on democratic prospects that John Rawls presents the concept of public reason. He is perhaps the most influential contemporary political philosopher, not necessarily because of his persuasiveness or eloquence – indeed his views are controversial and his writing dense and abstract – but rather because of the intricacy and meticulousness of his overall theory; the way the pieces fit together so tightly to form a coherent package. *Theory of Justice* changed the agenda of liberal thought by introducing a compelling argument for egalitarianism within liberty.⁵³ *Political Liberalism*, a different kind of work, has also spawned a wealth of commentary.⁵⁴ In this second work especially, Rawls weaves together a set of ideas and concepts that serve as the ground rules for political discourse in a pluralistic society where people differ profoundly in their beliefs and principles. What are the terms of engagement? What are the benchmarks against which we can measure the current political climate? One is public reason. We need to examine it in a way that does justice to Rawls's claims while also framing it so that we can examine its implications for leadership theory. Is public reason attainable and, if so, desirable? And if it is attainable and desirable, what does it require of leaders?

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My thesis is this: public reason, though it imposes extremely high standards on democratic discourse, is desirable because it respects the profound differences among citizens (indeed, it embraces them) while recognizing as well our interdependence and need to work with those who do differ from us. As demanding as it is on citizens, however, it is even more so on leaders, to the point that we are led to a critical departure, indeed inversion of sorts, of Machiavelli's view of the world. Whereas Machiavelli's response to the "vulgarity" and avariciousness of the citizenry was to ask leaders to reflect those vices to an even greater degree, Rawls's stake in public reason leads him in an opposite direction. Leaders are obligated not to embody the differences of their constituents nor to mimic their vices but rather to transcend them. Closer to the sentiments of *The Federalist Papers*, Rawls endorses a kind of filter approach, a hope that the process can control and guide the irrational while promoting the rational. Discourse in the public arena, or even politics in general, is unavoidably messy and harsh; nevertheless, citizens should aspire to reasoned debate. While remaining free and open, deliberation must be restrained by an awareness of what is possible and permissible to achieve in the political realm and how those arguments need to be presented.

Arguing for "restraint" is not a comfortable posture for those with liberal instincts; and Rawls is extremely careful about how that restraint takes force. It comes about not through legal structures but rather through the incentives fashioned through institutional design and also through a dependence on a leader's virtue and sense of duty. It is a moral not a legal imperative.⁵⁵ The claim I wish to make, in other words, is that Rawls, contrary to the charges leveled by his critics, relies heavily on virtue to achieve his liberal ends. For public reason to work, citizens must fulfill an ethical duty; leaders even more so.

Implicitly, Rawls therefore enters into a classic divide in the leadership literature: can we construct a theory of leadership on the hopeful premise that leaders are capable of acting and indeed obligated to act out of a sense of duty and in a manner that potentially works against immediate interest? A negative response is an implicit rejection of public reason as a guidepost. A positive response, though not automatically an embrace of public reason, at least admits its possibility.

[PULL QUOTE: Can we construct a theory of leadership on the hopeful premise that leaders are capable of acting and indeed obligated to act out of a sense of duty and in a manner that potentially works against immediate interest?]

Public reason, according to Rawls, is the way we should disagree on fundamental political questions, given that disagreement is inevitable and permanent in societies of free and equal citizens. "In a democratic society," he writes, "public reason is the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive powers over one another in enacting laws and amending their constitution."⁵⁶ If the citizenry calls upon the state to coerce other citizens through laws, and thereby limits the freedom of citizens in the name of a collective good or order, the decision must be arrived at legitimately. One criterion for legitimacy is whether the reasons for the action were publicly explained and understood by those affected, even if

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some remain opposed. The stakes are high. Public reason becomes one of the fundamental obligations of citizens, a defining characteristic of citizenship:

[Citizens] should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality. Trying to meet this condition is one of the tasks that this ideal of democratic politics asks of us. Understanding how to conduct oneself as a democratic citizen includes understanding an ideal of public reason.⁵⁷

And,

What public reason asks is that citizens be able to explain their vote to one another in terms of a reasonable balance of public political values.⁵⁸

This is a deceptively difficult standard to achieve. It presents a paradox. On the one hand public reason limits discourse; on the other hand it elevates it. By understanding the paradox, and the charges leveled against each aspect of it, we can begin to fashion an understanding of the obligations of leaders, if public reason is to accomplish what Rawls intends.

The Paradox of Public Reason: Aspiration and Limitation.

In Rawls's world, deliberation is not a free-for-all in which all kinds of justifications for positions are legitimate. Merely expressing an opinion is undemanding; justifying an action in terms others can understand and in terms consistent with what we mean by freedom and equality is a higher standard. Certain claims, such as appeals to religious traditions or "comprehensive beliefs," fall within the parameters of public reason only when some very particular conditions apply. For example, opinions expressed only in terms comprehensible to the citizens expressing them is mere discourse, not reason or at least not public reason. Politics is not, in other words, the venue for discovering truth – a worthy and desirable undertaking to be sure but one that becomes potentially dangerous when aligned with the coercive potential of state action. The justifications that legitimately support political action do not perfectly coincide with arguments acceptable in nonpolitical institutions, such as the church, family, and associations. Membership in those social units is voluntary, or if it is not fully voluntary there is at least an exit option more possible than leaving the political unit. In any event, they lack the coercive capabilities of the state.

To put it another way, not all matters need to be brought into the political arena. Not all disputes are political. There are limits to what can be and should be achieved in politics, and the arguments for political action cannot legitimately draw upon personal, which is to say nonpolitical reasons understood only by the individual articulating the claim.

The criticisms of such a position are not surprising, for Rawls does present a rather simplified psychology of how individuals form their beliefs and translate them into political opinions. Undoubtedly, political positions represent a complex convergence of influences upon an individual. To separate a particular thread from a densely

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woven fabric is difficult. Even if it could be done, the entire tapestry would unravel. Or to use Michael Sandel's imagery, it is impossible to "bracket" certain fundamental beliefs or principle, to set them aside and not have recourse to them when we make our public arguments.⁵⁹

The critics have had their influence, forcing Rawls and other liberals to carefully explain their structures on public discourse. In a carefully developed section of *Political Liberalism*, Rawls goes to great lengths to describe an "inclusive" and an "exclusive" view. The exclusive view is the one critics would surely reject. It relies upon a bright line distinction between comprehensive beliefs and those citizens might legitimately call upon in the public arena. The former are strictly excluded. The inclusive view is more accommodating. It would allow citizens "to present what they regard as the basis of political values rooted in their comprehensive doctrines, provided they do this in ways that strengthen the idea of public reason itself."⁶⁰ This flirts with tautology, for apparently the only way we know if a statement is publicly reasonable is by determining whether it leads to public reason. But Rawls provides an illustration. He points to Martin Luther King, Jr., as a prime example of someone crafting a clearly moral, yet political, argument based in good part on a religious tradition. Now, King did construct the moral case so that it matched well the fundamental political values of the society. His skill was an ability to move from a moral and religious tradition to the principles and values inherent in a society that endorsed a Declaration of Independence. As Rawls explains, "Religious doctrines clearly underlie King's view and are important in his appeals. Yet they are expressed in general terms; and they fully support constitutional values and accord with public reason."⁶¹

Rawls's adoption of the inclusive view is a concession. Even with that concession, his limitations on what can enter public debate still seem too severe to some critics and too artificial given the reality of how people form their political positions and explain them to others. He does indeed wish to impose a filter to screen out certain arguments in the public sphere. His stance, however, is consistent with the tradition of "liberalism as fear" – the strand of liberal thought, well-articulated by the late Judith Shklar. She worried about "ideologies of solidarity" (similar to Rawls's worry about comprehensive beliefs) and their potential for oppression when merged with politics. Like Rawls, she emphatically defends a boundary between the personal and the political. She would concede that the boundary is provisional and constantly contested. She would agree that citizens might dispute the location of the boundary, and that some will favor a larger political sphere as beneficial to society, whereas others will prefer it to be smaller. And she would acknowledge that conflict is permanent in diverse societies.⁶² But to place all conflict – religious, familial, associational – in the public sphere is to impossibly burden political institutions and to risk outcomes of the most frightening sort. A "liberalism of fear" would not submit (indeed debase) all value disagreements, whatever their origins, to the vicissitudes of political contests.

That is not to dismiss the significance of deeply held beliefs, religious or otherwise. "To seek emotional and personal development in the bosom of a community or in romantic self-expression is a choice open to citizens in liberal societies," Shklar

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writes. But those are "apolitical impulses...which distract us from the main task of politics when presented as political doctrines."⁶³ "Public reason" – the criterion which, steers public discourse away from appeals to personal belief does not delegitimize those beliefs. But it does recognize the danger of basing political actions on rationales not understood by those who must live under laws derived from such rationales. In this respect, Rawls's public reason is unquestionably a defensive posture, a limitation on political society, and one akin to Shklar's analysis of fear as a primary reason for a liberal brand of politics.

On the other hand – and this is why it is a paradox – public reason is also an aspiration, for it seeks to elevate public discourse. At the same time that it is motivated by a "fear" of what may happen in the political realm, it sets a standard for the quality of public debate. A justification must be understandable to others who disagree, not because it may result in agreement and not only for strategic reasons of persuading others to align with one's position, but out of respect for the beliefs of others. Mutual respect is a step beyond toleration.⁶⁴ It requires a recognition of the moral standing of others and a willingness to engage and deliberate with those who hold very different moral frameworks. It does not require accepting the others' beliefs. But it does require (to use Gutmann and Thompson's felicitous term) an "economy of moral disagreement," an attempt to limit the disagreement to the fewest sources of disputes.⁶⁵ The consequence is that understanding and persuasion supplant bargaining as the goal of political discourse. Deliberation aspires to more than simply the pursuit of private interest. It rises above a mere contest for position and power.⁶⁶ Yet it stops well short of the pursuit of the full truth.

Public reason obligates citizens to adopt a disposition and a set of democratic virtues. It is normative, principled, and moral. In Rawls's words:

The virtues of political cooperation that make a constitutional regime possible are, then, very great virtues. I mean, for example, the virtues of tolerance and being ready to meet others halfway, and the virtue of reasonableness and the sense of fairness. When these virtues are widespread in a society and sustain its political conception of justice, they constitute a very great public good, part of society's political capital.⁶⁷

A Preliminary Conclusion

The portrait of liberal leadership sketched so far is surely incomplete, but several essential characteristics have emerged. Machiavelli's reputation for ruthlessness is not wholly undeserved, although his obsession with restoring order in the midst of conflict is understandable given the times in which he lived. But in the midst of his treatise are insights which are very much applicable to these times. Societies are diverse; politics arises from disagreement and conflict; the object of government is to resolve that conflict, and leaders are at the center of that enterprise. When Machiavelli writes that leaders would actually be more merciful if they "learned not to be good," he does indeed give us reason for concern. And of course that conclusion is based on a less than lofty version of human nature. If leaders followed the rules of goodness, if they did only what they ought to do, the general "vulgarity" of mankind would determine the fate of society in ways not very pleasant. The larger message,

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though, is that society need not surrender to that fate. Leaders are responsible for "building those dams and dikes" to divert the waters to more advantageous directions, and that obligation requires a set of skills and virtues different from what we conventionally think of as virtues.

Hamilton and his fellow essayists, Madison and Jay, move farther along the path, presenting a more hopeful portrait of the possibilities of collective action. They certainly saw the same danger in disorder as Machiavelli did, but whereas the Florentine defined the public good almost solely as the absence of the "public bad," the authors of *The Federalist Papers* had positive aspects in mind as well. That "true interest" of the people could only be discerned, however, through reason and deliberation – political activities which again fall to leaders to manage and which again require a certain set of skills and virtues.

Rawls goes even farther. Though he devotes almost none of his treatise to an explicit consideration of leadership, the implication is clear. If reasoned deliberation is essential for liberal society and if understanding those with whom we disagree is an element of the fair and just society, the obligation of leaders becomes considerable. Rather than succumbing to the "vulgar" nature of citizens, leaders must bring out their capacity for tolerance and rational discourse. It is a demanding role. It, too, requires a particular set of virtues and skills. That set has yet to be firmly identified, but it includes the ability to engender trust among citizens; and trust rests on the perception that leaders are pursuing a public good rather than their own self-interest. Exploring those propositions is the object of the rest of this inquiry.

Notes

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15. Kenneth P. Ruscio, "Jay's Pirouette, Or Why Personal Trust is Not The Same as Political Trust," *Administration & Society*, 31, 5 (November 1999): pp. 639-657. [\[return to text\]](#)
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18. Ibid., p. 184. [\[return to text\]](#)
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33. Ibid., p 373. [\[return to text\]](#)
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35. *The Federalist Papers*, p. 371. [\[return to text\]](#)
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