

# WILEY



---

Commentary: Ethics and Character in the U.S. Presidency

Author(s): WILLIAM GALSTON

Source: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, March 2010, Vol. 40, No. 1, Ethics and the Presidency (March 2010), pp. 90-101

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23044897>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wiley and Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Presidential Studies Quarterly*

# Commentary: Ethics and Character in the U.S. Presidency

WILLIAM GALSTON

*University of Maryland, College Park*

*The essays in this special issue present and develop several important themes in the examination of ethical presidential leadership. These include the distinction(s) between public and private virtues; the ways in which America's history and democratic ethos shape the "constitutional character" required of its chief executive; the complications in the assessment of presidential leadership posed by the multidimensional character of the presidential office and by the variety of challenges that the president confronts; and the different and often divergent sources of democratic legitimacy, including responsiveness to the electorate, guidance by one's own judgment of its interests, and fidelity to one's core convictions.*

I begin these reflections on the preceding essays on a note of ethical realism, or at least caution. All human beings are morally flawed, and the practice of politics puts unusual pressure on ordinary moral restraints. For these reasons, ethical considerations have a limited impact on the conduct of public leaders—how limited is in dispute. At the poles of this debate are the extremes of moralism and institutionalism. In a tradition that extends back to Plutarch, moralists argue that character is destiny in public life and that leaders who lack the requisite virtues cannot and will not promote the common good of the community. Institutionalists counter that because virtue is in such short supply, especially in politics, we must rely instead on the wise channeling of baser instincts. It is not the benevolence of the baker that brings us our bread, Adam Smith (1776) insisted, and likewise it is not the virtue of leaders that brings us liberty and security. Institutionalists tend to be hopeful about outcomes but skeptical about motives.

A fair reading of *The Federalist*, and of American history, is that both matter, with a balance that shifts in response to issues and circumstances. No one doubts that the character of public officials—and especially of presidents—can make a big difference. Richard M. Nixon is the *locus classicus* of this thesis, but his downfall is only the most vivid version of a general truth. So reflection on the ethics and character of presidents—in short, their virtue—is by no means pointless.

---

*William Galston is a senior fellow and the Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution and a former policy advisor to President Bill Clinton.*

## Public and Private Virtue

Presidential virtue is an instance of public virtue, which raises the question of whether public and private virtue are the same or different. Much evidence suggests that they are not the same—at least not entirely. In private life, candor and honesty are regarded as virtues, but many presidents have deliberately obscured the truth when they thought the national interest required it. For example, John F. Kennedy denied that he had exchanged the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba for the removal of American missiles from Turkey, but he had, and not admitting that fact made it easier to step away from the brink of nuclear war. Robert Dallek is right, however, to distinguish between lying for reasons of state and for reasons of self-interest. Presidents and presidential candidates who conceal physical ailments that bear materially on their capacity to discharge the duties of their office or to complete their terms act unacceptably, as the examples of Woodrow Wilson in 1919-20 and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944 demonstrate.

Another example: law abidingness is a virtue for private citizens, and a fortiori for the president, who is required by the Constitution he swears an oath to uphold to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed” (Article II, Section 3). But one of America’s greatest presidents knowingly violated the highest law of the land by suspending the writ of habeas corpus in the earliest days of the Civil War, arguing that if he did not, he would be prevented from executing many other laws. In both these cases, to be sure, one can imagine analogous exemptions and exceptions for private citizens, circumstances in which lying and breaking the law may be justified. But at the very least, the kinds of reasons that justify the breach of these norms in public life differ from those that are acceptable in private life.

For other virtues, the gap between public and private seems even wider. In our private relations, we typically prize a capacity for caring and connection, but public life often demands the opposite. In his classic essay “Politics as a Vocation,” Max Weber identifies a “sense of proportion” as one of the critical cognitive virtues of the leader. And he continues, “This is the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness. Hence his *distance* from things and men.” Weber concludes, “‘Lack of distance’ *per se* is one of the deadly sins of every politician” (1946, 115). In private life, for example, loyalty to friends is a virtue; in public life, it is often a vice. Out of loyalty to a man who had been loyal to him, President George W. Bush waited much too long to replace Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense; out of friendship to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., President Barack Obama entered, and exacerbated, a controversy he would have done better to avoid. Maintaining old friendships while in office has cost presidents dearly, from Ulysses S. Grant and Warren Harding to Harry S. Truman. Similarly, in private life, a passionate response from the “gut” to an issue or person is often a sign of welcome spontaneity and liveliness, but presidents can seldom afford to indulge in unpremeditated or unfiltered acts.

Another example: in private life, the qualities of kindness and gentleness are widely prized. But in public life, some harder, rougher qualities may be needed to restrain

antisocial vices and to induce compliance. In the Talmud, we read, “Were it not for fear of the authorities, men would swallow one another alive” (*Mishnah Avot* III, 2). This implies that the capacity to inspire fear is a political virtue, because some men will interpret kindness as weakness. Presidents must be able to make their subordinates believe that self-seeking behavior, such as habitual anonymous leaking to the press, may lead to demotion or firing. If not, his administration will give the appearance of division and disorganization, weakening his legislative and electoral prospects. And if presidents cannot credibly threaten to withhold support for locally significant projects and appointments, some members of Congress whose support he needs will happily go their own way.

Sexual conduct raises distinctive questions about the relation between private virtue and public virtue. In private life, fidelity to one’s spouse is a virtue that is linked to many key goods of family and community life. But in public life, the link between fidelity and the duties of office appears more tenuous. Some of the best presidents were unfaithful to their wives; some of the worst seem to have been models of propriety. Similarly, taking bribes and showing favoritism to friends and supporters is on its face a disqualification for judicial office; adultery is not.

Political aspirants often use sexual misconduct as evidence of unfitness for public office—“If he betrayed his wife, he’ll betray you”—but this strategy does not always work, in part because voters are not sure the link is that strong. Republicans were stunned when Bill Clinton maintained his popularity in the aftermath of the Monica Lewinsky affair and Democrats actually gained seats in the 1998 midterm elections. As Shalom Carmy observes, similar considerations are at work in the Jewish tradition, which tends to regard David as an admirable leader despite the sins that stained his private life. For example, none of the six elements of the royal job description in Albo’s influential discussion requires that the king comply with divine law in his personal life as a condition of ruling. On the other hand, Carmy notes, a closer inspection of the biblical story suggests complex, subtle links between David’s private failings and his political efficacy. While the virtues are not seamlessly connected, they are not hermetically sealed off from one another either.

While we may argue the question historically and philosophically, in a modern democracy, traits of character and patterns of conduct are relevant to public office if citizens come to believe they are. George W. Bush’s promise to restore honor and dignity to the Oval Office probably bolstered his support in 2000, despite the favorable conditions of peace and prosperity in which Clinton’s designated heir waged his presidential campaign. And public attitudes may change over time. A generation ago, homosexuality was widely regarded as evidence of a psychological flaw that constituted a disqualification for public office; today, many officials are openly gay.

There is one virtue that public and private life clearly share—prudence, which is the ability to size up particular situations accurately and to find the best possible way of matching ends and means. But the prudence that public life demands is different, more complex, because it requires officials to assess the impact of their acts on large numbers of individuals, most of whom are complete strangers, and to foresee how those affected will respond. J. Patrick Dobel offers an illuminating analysis of public prudence. It requires, he suggests, a range of cognitive, dispositional, and emotional traits: self-

knowledge and self-discipline, openness and the capacity to adapt to new information, and an intense deliberative focus on goals and relentless efforts to anticipate the consequences of different options for promoting them. Dobel points out—correctly, in my view—that presidents and other leaders can be held accountable for the quality of the institutions and structures they create to facilitate prudent decisions. Presidents must choose advisors with the intellectual ability to think independently, and they must foster an atmosphere within which dissenters from the majority view are given a fair opportunity to make their case without fear of disapproval or retribution. In private life, it is often enough to take counsel with oneself or one's spouse; the complexity of public life requires a more inclusive and systematic approach.

### Constitutional Character

As Dennis F. Thompson observes, the differences between public and private virtue call into question the thesis that human virtues form a harmonious whole. They suggest, rather, a world characterized by what philosopher Thomas Nagel (1979) terms the “fragmentation of value”; as Isaiah Berlin (1969) argued, a world in which genuine goods, principles, and virtues conflict, not accidentally but fundamentally. It is possible to imagine a world in which the goods of private character and of public character fully coincide. But it would not be the world in which we live.

Nonetheless, there are ways of focusing our attention and organizing the virtues within specific contexts. In that vein, Thompson directs us to the concept of “constitutional character.” Every regime has its own constitution, understood in the Greek sense as a distinctive ordering of institutions, ends, and principles, and Thompson plausibly suggests a connection between democratic constitutional orders and democratic virtues.

Thompson's thesis has a distinguished provenance. Near the beginning of the *Politics*, Aristotle grounds politics in the human capacity for speech (*Politics* I.2), and he goes on to argue that political leadership is qualitatively different from other kinds of rule in that it is “over free and equal persons” (*Politics* I.7). Politics involves relationships among human beings who are not in principle rightly subject to either coercion or command. The core of political rule is persuasion—the ability to induce agreement about what should be done to preserve and improve the community. On the eve of Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration, outgoing president Harry Truman is said to have remarked that Ike “will say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ and nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won't be a bit like the army” (Neustadt 1990, 10). While Truman failed to grasp how much of Eisenhower's success as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces had rested on his powers of conciliation through persuasion, he was right about the underlying principle: the essence of politics is coordination of wills through persuasion rather than through unchallenged commands and unquestioning obedience.

It follows that whether democratic leadership is distinctive—shaped by democratic constitutions—depends on whether the process of persuasion in democracies is distinctive. To clarify this issue, we must turn to the *Rhetoric*, in which Aristotle identifies three sources of persuasion—character, emotion, and argument. Upon inspection, all three

prove to be relative in different ways to the political context in which one is operating. In the first place, certain kinds of character traits will commend speakers to their audience in particular contexts but not elsewhere. As Aristotle puts it, “We ought to be acquainted with the characters of each form of government; for in reference to each, the character most likely to persuade must be that which is characteristic of it” (*Rhetoric* I.8). While certain traits—such as probity in financial matters and devotion to the common good—are universally prized in politics, others are more regime specific. The latter are traits that promote a regime’s distinctive ends. If the end of democracy is liberty, then democratic citizens will prize traits seen as defending liberty. (From a democratic perspective, it would be hard to improve on “Give me liberty or give me death.”) In an Aristotelian spirit, we can add that while some valued traits promote a regime’s ends, others reflect and honor its core beliefs. So if equal opportunity and upward mobility are prized, as they are in the United States, then some who started with nothing and took advantage of the chance to “work their way up” will be regarded as possessing admirable traits of character—grit and determination, among others. As American history repeatedly has shown, these traits commend themselves to democratic electorates and to their representatives. (No doubt Sonia Sotomayor’s inspiring rise from obscurity eased her confirmation as the first Hispanic Supreme Court justice.)

Similarly, there are passions and emotions more characteristic of democratic polities than others. For example, people who prize liberty will tend to be on their guard against those who might deprive them of it if given the chance, and those who wield power are in a position to do just that. So democracy and suspicion of authority tend to go together. Another example: if the equal freedom of democratic citizens leads them to regard themselves as possessing equal worth and merit, then they will resent individuals seen as “giving themselves airs”—that is, as claiming to be better than others. Populist resentment is an enduring staple of democratic politics. To avoid resentment, democratic leaders who are to the manor born must display an unfeigned common touch, treating their fellow citizens (and others) as their social equals. Franklin Roosevelt, who came from an aristocratic family, successfully conveyed his commitment to democratic equality, once serving hot dogs to the king and queen of England at a Hyde Park picnic, a decision the *New York Times* treated as front-page news. A third example: as Plato was perhaps the first to observe, the democratic preference for liberty tends to generate a certain mildness toward, and tolerance of, varying ways of life. The desire to live just as one desires softens antipathy to those who live differently but do not impede one’s own choices. Live and let live is a perennial democratic sentiment to which would-be leaders can appeal.

Finally, the content of premises that are generally accepted as bases of public argument will vary in accordance with political context. For example, claims erected on the foundation of individual rights are more powerful in the United States than in most other nations—even other advanced democracies. Each country possesses a distinctive public culture—beliefs that amalgamate principle, shared history, and distinctive ethnicities.

It is in this context that Thompson advances his account of democratic constitutional character, a set of virtues that includes “sensitivity to the basic rights of citizenship,



a respect for due process in the broadest sense, the sense of responsibility, tolerance of opposition, willingness to justify decisions, and above all the commitment to candor.” Each of these raises questions of interpretation and applicable. Franklin Roosevelt’s internment of Japanese Americans has not fared well in the judgment of history. Abraham Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus at the beginning of the Civil War has fared better, even though it was arguably a more fundamental attack on our system of rights. While political tolerance, as Thompson puts it, “calls on leaders actively to seek opportunities for cooperation with their opponents” and may mean “practicing more bipartisanship than they might otherwise prefer,” it is a matter of judgment how far toward compromise leaders are required to go in circumstances characterized by sharp disagreements on fundamentals. (As I was completing this essay, Barack Obama was wrestling with precisely this question as the bipartisan health care discussions dragged on in the Senate Finance Committee.) And as Thompson acknowledges, there are circumstances that warrant less than total candor, especially when the president is acting as commander in chief.

To propound a theory of constitutional character is not to say that all virtues of leadership are regime specific. In the classic template, there is a crosscutting dimension: whether leaders—democratic, aristocratic, monarchic, or mixed—govern with an eye to the common good or to their own advantage. To be admired, leaders must care about the people they lead, and they must somehow demonstrate their concern. It is in this context that Joanne B. Ciulla’s emphasis on “being there”—showing up promptly at the scene of crises and disasters—makes sense. As Ciulla points out, even undemocratic leaders are feeling public pressure to do this: consider the behavior of the Chinese top leadership following last year’s earthquake, or the criticism that Russian president Vladimir Putin received for his apparent indifference to the fate of the sunken nuclear submarine. More broadly, leaders who do not try to provide basic services, education, and an honest judicial system are regarded as inattentive to the common good, regardless of the basis of their power. When people regard their democratically elected leaders as preoccupied with self-interested political infighting and the perquisites of power, the door is open for undemocratic movements that demonstrate more concern for the people’s needs at the grassroots level.

## Democratic Offices and Their Virtues

The constitutional framework is necessary but not sufficient for an adequate understanding of democratic leadership. As Thompson acknowledges, within democracies, there are different virtues corresponding to different kinds of offices. Consider the relationship between two masterful politicians—Tip O’Neill and Ronald Reagan. O’Neill, the Speaker of the House, was a superb legislator who knew how to soothe wounded egos and forge coalitions among often-squabbling representatives but who was ineffective at communicating larger arguments and purposes in public forums. Reagan was a superb communicator who knew how to articulate shared principles and goals in support of his agenda but who had limited patience for the detailed work needed to

translate concepts into enacted laws. O'Neill never wanted to be president and never could have become president; and similarly for Reagan as a legislative leader.

So to grasp adequately the virtues of presidential leadership, we must understand what kind of office it is, at least in broad outline. For our purposes, the key point is that it is multidimensional, bringing together functions that are separated in other democratic systems.

In the first place, the U.S. president acts as *head of state*. He must stand for the nation as a whole and articulate what we have in common, much as kings do in constitutional monarchies and presidents (as opposed to prime ministers) in many parliamentary systems. Three of the best at this were Lincoln, FDR, and Reagan. Presidents who lack a feel for what President George H. W. Bush memorably called the "vision thing" have a hard time creating strong bonds with the people and challenging the country to advance toward its highest aspirations. On the other hand, a politics of aspiration has its dangers as well as advantages. A president who raises people's hopes but cannot realize them diminishes trust and confidence in government as an effective instrument of public purpose.

Second, like prime ministers in parliamentary systems, the president acts as *head of government*. In that context, he is responsible for defining an agenda, for executing laws (including ones with which he disagrees, as long as they have been validly enacted), and, most broadly, for the effective and constitutional discharge of public duties. This is where competence counts. If the public agrees that the president and his administration are responsible for a problem—say, dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—then the failure to do the job competently affects not only the individuals and communities that government has failed but also the people's trust in government as an effective and honorable instrument of public purpose.

Third, like prime ministers in some systems and party secretaries in others, the president acts as *head of party*. In this capacity, he represents what differentiates one large group of citizens from another and works to promote the political fortunes of the party's elected representatives.

It does not require complex analysis to see how these presidential roles, and their corresponding virtues, can come into conflict. The head of state unites, while the head of party divides. The head of government takes responsibility for the myriad details of execution, while the head of state focuses on the big picture. The head of party seeks political advantage, while the head of government is required to execute the laws, regardless of which party benefits. And so on.

It is rare to find individuals who can perform these three roles capably; it is even rarer when they can keep them in perspective, striking new balances among them as circumstances require. At his peak, FDR did all three superbly, which is among the principal reasons why he is regarded as the greatest president of the twentieth century. More often, presidents excel at some of these roles but fall short in others. Lyndon B. Johnson was a remarkable head of government, for example, but largely ineffective as head of state. In acting as head of government, however honorably, some presidents leave their parties divided and dispirited, as Jimmy Carter did. During his first term, George W. Bush was often a persuasive head of state and an effective head of party. But he was



at best a mediocre head of government, a fact that became increasingly important during this second term.

The norms of presidential leadership reflect not only the major functions of the presidency, but also the circumstances within which they are discharged. Like it or not, there is a distinction between peacetime and wartime. Because public information can be useful to the country's enemies, the cause of transparency suffers, and the use of secrecy increases, during periods of armed conflict. Presidents have been known to deal directly with newspaper editors and owners, urging them to suppress stories that could damage national security. Much depends on the president's willingness to distinguish between stories that are genuinely risky and those that are merely embarrassing to the administration.

For reasons akin to those that warrant secrecy, candor tends to suffer during armed conflicts, and presidents feel justified in resorting to obfuscation and outright untruth. Winston Churchill once remarked that "[i]n wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies" (Keyes 2006, 26-27). Even strict moralists agree in principle, though (as with secrecy) the propriety of lying depends on the president's motives. Lying about a military reverse may be justified if it enhances the prospect of subsequent victory, but not if its principal aim is to protect the president's standing.

A final difference between peace and war concerns the Constitution. During wartime, claims based on urgent necessity take on greater force and may in some situations warrant the breach of principles as fundamental to our system as the separation of powers. Most constitutional scholars believe that the placement of language permitting the suspension of habeas corpus in Article I means that Congress and only Congress is authorized to take such a drastic step, yet President Lincoln did so by himself, submitting his act to Congress for review long afterward, after the immediate crisis had abated.

Locke's *Second Treatise*, which had a profound effect on the founders' constitutional understanding, took as its motto the Latin phrase *salus populi suprema lex*, "the safety of the people is the highest law." Faced with a national emergency, presidents would almost certainly adopt this motto as the maxim of their response; they would act on their own authority to protect the country and seek justification later. If the emergency were genuine, they would be right to do so. And if they did not, they might well be accused of excessive legalism—of fidelity to the text of the Constitution at the expense of the oath they swore to uphold it. In extreme situations, violating the Constitution might be the only way to preserve it. Occupants of the Oval Office would be challenged to display the understanding needed to discern such situations and the fortitude needed to take such a momentous step.

## Democratic Leadership and Legitimacy

The basis of the claim to exercise authority varies with the regime. In democracies, in which legitimacy flows from popular consent, disputed election results can call into

question the legitimacy of those who eventually prevail, as George W. Bush discovered in the aftermath of the Florida controversy in 2000.

But elections are an ambiguous basis of authority. While they reflect the public's will, they are also designed to select individuals with the requisite talent and character to discharge the duties of public office. As Aristotle observed, a lottery is the most purely democratic method of selecting public officials; elections have an aristocratic tendency (*Politics* IV:9). Defending the proposed constitution's means of selecting the president, Alexander Hamilton declared in *Federalist No. 68* that it would afford a "moral certainty" that the office would seldom fall to any man "who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications." Indeed, he continued, "there will be a constant probability of seeing the station filled by characters preeminent for ability and virtue." In a letter to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . May we not even say that that form of government is best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?" This, he argued, was the genius of our constitutional order, "to leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the *aristoi* from the *pseudo-aristoi*, the separation of the wheat from the chaff." As a general matter (though not in every case), we can rely on the people to make discriminating judgments, to "elect the really good and wise."

A deep difficulty lurks in the shadow of elections, so understood. It is natural for people of unusual ability to believe that their merits entitle them to positions of leadership, and to a measure of deference. They may ask themselves why those of lesser merit should be able to confer or withhold what belongs to by right to those with greater political capacities, and they may come to resent what they experience as the stultifying, even demeaning, processes of popular consent.

These reflections point toward a core virtue of democratic leadership—democratic humility: the belief that the legitimacy of your power ultimately depends on the will of the people and not just on your own merit. It is easier to state this proposition than to practice it, however. Many officials privately believe—even if they will not publicly state—that sound public policy requires a substantial degree of insulation from public scrutiny and judgment. The greatest challenge to the Constitution would arise, probably during a crisis, if the people elevated to the presidency an individual so certain of his excellence and indispensability that he refused to accept democratic norms as legitimate constraints on his authority.

## The Ultimate Test of Democratic Leadership

I have saved for last the most needful and paradoxical attribute of democratic leadership—namely, the willingness to eschew or surrender power in the name of a cause that one is unwilling to compromise. Democratic politics at its best is the use of public authorized power to advance the common good. Would-be leaders, then, can fail in two ways: they may be unable to obtain public support for their agenda, or they may win support by advocating only what the people want to hear. While modern survey research

has raised the assessment of public beliefs to a high art, the temptation to pander to them is a perennial weakness of democratic politics.

But the justified antipathy to pandering does not warrant lurching to the other extreme by demanding an unrealistic purity. Often, presidents cannot attain or maintain power if they say what they believe in the bluntest possible terms. For example, while FDR's desire to support Britain's struggle against Nazi Germany was completely justified, he might well have lost his 1940 reelection campaign if he had been completely candid about it. So he equivocated. When Wendell Willkie, the Republican presidential nominee, claimed that a vote for Roosevelt meant war in 1941, Roosevelt countered with a flat promise to the contrary—"Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars"—deliberately omitting the qualifying phrase in the Democratic platform, "except in case of attack." When one of his speechwriters asked about the omission, FDR replied, "Of course we'll fight if we're attacked. If someone attacks us, then it isn't a foreign war, is it?" This mental reservation allowed Roosevelt to pretend that he wasn't trying to mislead the people, which of course he was. (For parallel accounts of this episode, see Rauch 1950, 267; Reynolds 2001, 101.)

On a deeper level, though, one can offer a defense—moral as well as democratic—of Roosevelt's strategy. He knew that Americans would fight if attacked, even if they would turn against someone who said so in advance of the attack, and he believed that he was the best man to lead America in the great war that would ensue. So he stayed as close to the truth as the requirements of democratic politics would permit. Still, campaign utterances have consequences. What many took to be a promise to keep the United States out of war made it more difficult for FDR to mobilize public support for the lend-lease program, without which Britain might have collapsed before Pearl Harbor made American participation inevitable.

While Franklin Roosevelt was a man of sincere convictions, it is not clear what political risks he was willing to run in their defense. John McCain, by contrast, was willing to jeopardize his career to adhere to his principles. Frustrated by his primary defeat to George W. Bush in 2000, his desire to run and win in 2008 was palpable. At the same time, he believed that the national interest required a new approach to immigration policy, which he advocated with great force. This stance greatly dismayed most Republicans, members of Congress, as well as the rank and file. McCain, who had begun his quest for his party's nomination as the acknowledged front-runner, found that his support had all but evaporated by the summer of 2007. His lonely but successful effort to bring his candidacy back from the dead is one of the most remarkable chapters in the annals of modern American politics.

This suggests that Plato's judgment of democratic publics was too harsh. Yes, the people do not welcome being told what they do not want to hear. At the same time, they cannot help admiring individuals who come before them with strong convictions about their community's best interests. Candor fosters trust, and a reputation for trustworthiness is one of the most valuable assets a democratic politician can acquire. To be successful, democratic leaders must continually judge how far they can go before the opposition candor arouses overwhelms the admiration it evokes.

Despite the endless strife of interest groups in our Madisonian system, presidents cannot dispense with—in fact, they must be appeal to appeal to—some notion of the common good as distinct from private advantage. This means, at a minimum, that presidential agendas should not be shaped by the preferences of large campaign contributors and that presidents should not be excessively partisan. (Thus the perennial tension between the president as head of party, on the one hand, and head of government and state, on the other.) It also means that presidents must counterbalance the perennial temptation of democratic polities to pursue short-term advantage at the expense of the long-term good. Governing with an eye to personal popularity ratings does just the reverse by reinforcing the power of the immediate. Presidents cannot successfully champion the common good unless they are willing to place something ahead of victory in the next election.

While the people are always sovereign in a democracy, they are not always right. The ultimate test of what I have called democratic humility is the ability to accept the people's verdict as legitimate without necessarily regarding it as wise. This tension is hard for unpopular or defeated presidents to bear, but they may take comfort from the fact that public judgment is mutable. When time vindicates the prudence of controversial decisions, once-scorned leaders rise in the esteem of their countrymen. Rejected by three-quarters of the people, the architect of Cold War containment and the Marshall Plan retired rather than standing for reelection. Now Harry Truman is regarded as man of courage and vision, and as a near-great president. The man who guided the nation through the end of the Cold War, the peaceful reunion of Europe, and victory in the first Gulf War was rewarded with 38% of the vote in his 1992 reelection campaign. Now George H. W. Bush is regarded as a man of patient prudence whose restraint spared the country costly mistakes and reinforced Europe as a haven of democratic liberty. The character that makes for good presidents does not ensure popularity, but it is the surest path to an honored place in their country's history.

### Presidential Character and Democratic Political Life

Our democracy needs leaders—especially presidents—with specific cognitive, dispositional, and emotional virtues. But like the rest of us, leaders are not born virtuous; they become virtuous through training and experience. This raises the question: what are the features of our political life that tend to promote the kind of presidential character we need?

My conjecture—hard to prove, no doubt—is that the basic structure of our constitutional order helps shape the habits and sensibilities of those who seek power within it. When coupled with the separation of powers, the principle that no one is above the law reinforces a sense of limits that checks the *libido dominandi*. Electoral accountability gives leaders incentives to consider the people's interests, not just their own, and to familiarize themselves with the full range of public needs. Media scrutiny habituates leaders to offer public justifications of their acts, and the power of public opinion constantly reminds leaders that the power they enjoy may be withdrawn. Skeptical Madisonians may argue

that these structural forces create not virtue, but only a better alignment between the self-interest of leaders and the nation's interests. Aristotelians will reply that virtue always begins with externally driven habituation that only over time is transformed into inner conviction and character.

Abraham Lincoln—perhaps our greatest president, certainly our most reflective—did not think that this kind of habituation, however effective, would be enough. He believed that in the long run, only a carefully cultivated reverence for the constitution, and for the principle of human equality at its base, could save us from talented individuals inclined toward antidemocratic sentiments (Lincoln 1838). Most Americans do revere the Constitution, not because they are formally educated to do so (our civic education is woefully inadequate), but because it is a tree that yields splendid fruit. Throughout our history, the Aaron Burrs and Richard Nixons have not succeeded in toppling our constitutional order. Is this evidence of a virtuous circle, with the constitution and respect for the constitution reinforcing one another? Or just luck, which is bound to run out? We will not know until, in some far-off era, our own Gibbon feels compelled to chronicle the decline and fall of the American republic.

## References

- Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Four Essays on Liberty*, by Isaiah Berlin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 118-72.
- Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. "The Royal Visit: June 7-12th, 1939." <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/royalv.html> [accessed November 17, 2009].
- Keyes, Ralph. 2006. *The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Lincoln, Abraham. 1838. "Lyceum Address." January 27. <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm> [accessed November 17, 2009].
- Nagel, Thomas. 1979. "The Fragmentation of Value." In *Mortal Questions*, by Thomas Nagel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 128-41.
- Neustadt, Richard E. 1990. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Free Press.
- Rauch, Basil. 1950. *Roosevelt: From Munich to Pearl Harbor; A Study in the Creation of Foreign Policy*. New York: Creative Age Press.
- Reynolds, David. 2001. *From Munich to Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt's America and the Origins of the Second World War*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Smith, Adam. 1776. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Dublin: Whitstone.
- Weber, Max. 1946. "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 77-128.