
Learning by Example

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American Statesmanship: Principles and Practices of Leadership, edited by Joseph R. Fornieri, Kenneth L. Deutsch, and Sean D. Sutton. *Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021. 776 pp. \$75.00*

There may never have been a time before now when the United States was so in need of, but so lacking in, statesmanship. One might even suggest that the very term has a hint of an antique aura about it; if so, this is certainly telling. In an age dominated by cramped behavioralism and postmodern cynicism on the one hand, and brutal partisanship and domineering ideology on the other, there seems to be little room for statesmanship, or of its study. Once upon a time, the study of statesmanship, and in fact the production of statesmen, could be seen as a key focus of arts and letters. Today, statesmanship is largely neglected, either as a subject of study or as a serious

aspiration. This makes this volume much-welcome and, indeed, of vital import.

American Statesmanship is made up of twenty-six contributed chapters, each addressing a particular figure from American history, with an introduction by the late Kenneth L. Deutsch. In the brief introduction, Deutsch asks the question “What is Statesmanship?” and answers:

Statesmanship is a conjunction of superior natural ability—high theoretical and practical intelligence along with acquired political experience that enables a public person to pursue the common good. It combines the arts of political strategy, political oratory, and political judgment with the art of utilizing the different skills and talents of diverse individuals in the service of the general well-being of society. To put it briefly, it involves the political skills and charac-

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teristics to know when and how to persuade subordinates and the public, and when and how to exercise necessary methods of coercion. This proper mix of persuasion and coercion in serving the common interest is the major part of what statesmanship is about (3).

In his discussion, Deutsch makes reference to Cicero. Invoking the classical world is appropriate, because there seems to be something especially classical about statesmanship. Unlike the classical world, the late-Christian and even more, the post-Christian world tends to delineate sharply between intent and results, and to place its emphasis on the former. "His heart was in the right place," "he had noble goals," and the ubiquitous "he meant well" are the sorts of common excuses made for leaders who are ineffective, or, worse, who produce disastrous results. Frustration with such leadership can then yield a cynical turn to the strong-man leader or brutal revolutionary who promises to redress grievances, maintain order, and "make the trains run on time," but who also fails to provide the sort of leadership required for a healthy and humane polity.

Statesmanship requires not just a "good person" but someone whose vision for society is truly sound, and who possesses the ability to motivate people and muster resources to move toward that vision. And the way in which this movement is accomplished must likewise be morally sound and appropriate to the circumstances at hand. That is, statesmanship requires a rightly-oriented actor with the sort of inte-

grated personality that makes for right action. Indeed, it may be in part because a focus on the orientation and integration of the whole person—once the central project of education broadly understood—is neglected today that statesmanship is lacking. Deutsch explains:

We have a great difficulty understanding, respecting, and promoting statesmanship because we are now somewhat prisoners of the Woodrow Wilson view of leadership in a democracy. Wilson believed that the popular statesman must incarnate the spirit of the people by selecting from currents of popular opinion those that he or she regards as progressive (based on administrative expertise) and then transforming those opinions from latency to actuality. . . . Gone are the moral principles of the common good, the qualities of wisdom, foresight, personal sacrifice, humility, magnanimity, or risking public displeasure when necessary (7).

This observation highlights both the nature of statesmanship and the difficulty of identifying it in a manner that would be universally agreed upon. Few would disagree that the "moral principles" identified by Deutsch are important to statesmanship—although one might argue that not all may be found in every case. And this certainly seems much richer than Wilson's more social-scientific conception as portrayed here. But could one not maintain that a good way to pursue the common good is to select among currents of popular opinion—based on one's own judgment of their fitness—and transform those currents from latency to actuality? One could not expect

a successful democratic statesman to pursue decidedly unpopular policies. And based on the qualities the author lays out, should Wilson's crusade for the League of Nations be considered an act of statesmanship? Or was it a misguided obsession steeped in Wilson's rationalistic, progressive, administrative faith? Too often, statesmanship seems to be in the eye of the beholder.

There appears to be no getting around the fact that much about statesmanship is necessarily amorphous and subject to disagreement. To return to Deutsch: what precisely are the "common good" and the "general well-being of society"? What precisely is "the proper mix of persuasion and coercion"? Deutsch's descriptions are sound, but, on a practical level, what constitutes statesmanship is necessarily highly contingent. Can one admire a public figure for statesmanship if one disagrees with the individual's specific goals and policies? Certainly, from Deutsch's discussion, one cannot in the fullest sense, but can one in qualified sense? This book does not attempt to flesh out a highly cohesive argument for one particular definition of statesmanship, for one particular list of the qualities a statesman must possess, or for precisely how statesmanship looks in practice. The various essays largely stand independently. This creates some challenges, but it gives the reader access to a variety of viewpoints. Some readers might have a bigger issue with the fact that, with some exceptions, the essays gener-

ally do not provide much in-depth conceptual discussion of statesmanship or its precise relationship to various aspects of the individual who is examined. It is often left to the reader to draw lessons from the profiles presented. However, one could argue that, given the slippery nature of statesmanship, this might be the best way to approach this subject. By its very nature, statesmanship is best learned by example. In the past, it was taken for granted that an effective way to understand a quality like statesmanship was to study the real-world lives and actions of "great men." This volume stands very much in that tradition—one that goes back at least to Plutarch's *Lives*.

Among the diverse essays offered, Michael P. Federici's treatment of Alexander Hamilton is the strongest in its explicit, conceptual treatment of how his subject illuminates the qualities of statesmanship in American democracy. Federici elaborates:

Central components of democratic statesmanship can be identified in Hamilton's leadership that were either exhibited by Hamilton or apparent from the shortcomings of his conduct and political thought. These include: prudential judgment, collaboration, vision, sobriety of mind, and energy. This is a reminder that character matters in the conduct of statesmanship. Prudential judgment, for example, is not a matter of simply collecting information and adjusting policy according to established principles. Democratic statesmen must be predisposed to republican virtue in order to resist the temptation to sacrifice the public good in favor of self-interest including self-promotion, vanity, and political gain. Hamilton's

instances of poor statesmanship were as much a problem of character, a failure of republican virtue, as they were anything else (168).

Federici's discussion of statesmanship is a bit different from Deutsch's, though the general thrust is the same. The different approaches of the various contributors provide opportunities for readers to explore and reflect on the many dimensions of the subject. One may in fact speculate that a writer's characterization of statesmanship is in part dependent upon the individual being examined. For example, Federici's inclusion of "collaboration" departs from the tendency to think of the statesman as a lone figure, but follows naturally from his treatment of Hamilton's relationship with George Washington. While he notes that Plutarch provided Hamilton with models for statesmanship, and that Hamilton was in fact a "worthy model for democratic leadership," Federici sees Hamilton most exhibiting statesmanship when collaborating with Washington. And in examining Hamilton's failures of statesmanship, Federici finds Washington's absence a common thread: "The point is not that Hamilton was infallible in the Washington years but that Washington usually pulled him back on course when he tended to move off the path of prudence" (186). This idea that the demonstration of statesmanlike qualities may hinge upon one's relationship with another is important, and its observation arises out of Hamilton's specific case.

None of the other profiles sug-

gests a form of statesmanship dependent on the kind of relationship Hamilton and Washington had. But this example highlights the fact that statesmanship is necessarily collaborative. At a minimum, a statesman, as a leader, must have followers, and must lead them. Beyond that, there are inevitably collaborators, often mentors, and others with whom the statesman works and that may help enable statesmanship to emerge. There are also opponents. In his profile of John Marshall, Phillip G. Henderson notes how important was his fraught relationship with Jefferson (also profiled here, by Stephanie P. Newbold), as well as the policies and perspectives represented by Jefferson. Whether or not Marshall would be a "statesman" without Jefferson is one of those historical hypotheticals that cannot be addressed satisfactorily. But, certainly, we cannot understand Marshall's statesmanship, as it actually existed, without Jefferson. More broadly, it is of course circumstances that help make the statesman. Crises, or other pressing needs for leadership, bring statesmanship out. In his profile of Frederick Douglass, Peter C. Myers observes:

Although he was denied any chance at high public office, Frederick Douglass believed it to be his remarkable good fortune to live in a time that afforded him the opportunity for a profound and heroic effort in statesmanship. "Generations unborn will envy us the felicity of having been born at a time when such noble work could be accomplished." (375)

In his discussion of Hamilton, Federici draws on insights from John

Lukacs' *Churchill: Visionary, Statesman, Historian*, and notes:

As Lukacs makes clear, the vision of a first rate-statesman, including both foresight and insight, is bound up with and dependent on other attributes including historical sense, pragmatism, and prudence. The latter temper and shape the former; they help to define both possibilities and limits to action. These attributes are partly intellectual and partly a matter of will. It is one thing to read the times and to understand what prudence and circumstances require; it is another matter to have the wherewithal to bring prudent vision to fruition given the many obstacles and opponents that stand in the way (170).

Not all the chapters are as philosophically rich as that on Hamilton. But, it is notable that it is the specifics of Hamilton's case that facilitate some of the richness to Federici's treatment. The twenty-six distinct case studies in statesmanship, with different authors and approaches, thus provide diverse insights that are unlikely to be found in a monograph.

To illustrate further, while Bruce P. Frohnen offers a broad profile of John Adams, he also devotes attention to the question of—as he put it in his chapter title—“statesmanship and the limits of popularity” (85). The chapter is framed chiefly as a defense of Adams against his critics, whose attacks, Frohnen maintains, spring largely from Adams's often unpleasant personality, and from his signing (though not initiation) of the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Acts, Frohnen asserts, have been somewhat misunderstood, and taken out

of their historical context, exaggerating Adams's supposed offense. But, more notably, Frohnen asks, “Do we care if our public leaders are cranky? George Washington yelled a fair amount, Dwight Eisenhower yelled a lot. Abraham Lincoln suffered classic symptoms of depression.” (93) Our concern, according to Frohnen, should be with “Adams's more robust and publicly important character. That is, we should be concerned with whether he was an effective supporter of public virtue for the public good” (94). Frohnen finds that “consideration of Adams's character and conduct, as well as his practical impact on public life in America, merit him the appellation of ‘great statesman’” (86).

In profiling John C. Cahoun, H. Lee Cheek, Jr. and Corey Roberts find that his “understanding of restraint within political order, albeit imperfect, remains one of the most important characteristics of his political thought and his achievement as a statesman” (248). Joseph R. Forni-eri's portrait of Lincoln characterizes him as a “philosopher statesman” and finds that his statesmanship is best understood in his manifestation of three key virtues: wisdom, prudence, and magnanimity, or greatness of soul. And Christopher Burkett's treatment of Wilson fleshes out what Deutsch alluded to in his introduction: “Wilson's modern leader is something different from a classical statesman” (450). Burkett explains:

Sensitivity to historical development and a vision of the general future of society as essential leadership qualities

were important additions by Wilson to the classical understanding of statesmanship. The Wilsonian leader must choose actions that are simultaneously in line with the course of historical progress and possible within the limits, as determined by prudence, of what human affairs and present circumstances will allow (450).

If Wilson added to the qualities of statesmanship, was something lost? Deutsch suggested a moral element, and Burkett seems to agree, pointing to, essentially, Wilson's hubris. He quotes Erwin Hargrove's finding that "his study of history convinced him that great statesmen had the souls of poets and were thus able to articulate moral truths to multitudes. . . . His weakness was that he tended to confuse his stubborn ideas with absolute moral law" (467).

David Tucker's treatment of Benjamin Franklin offers insights into statesmanship in the democratic context. Tucker observes that "if we emphasize the freedom of command in our understanding of statesmanship, we will find it hard to distinguish the statesman from the tyrant" (38). Understanding that the exercise of statesmanship requires winning support, Tucker notes that

"Franklin's *Autobiography* . . . describes Franklin learning how people of superior virtue, with no claim on others except that virtue, could serve the common good. Persons of superior virtue must win the support or consent of others in large measure by hiding their superiority" (43). They must do so because an assertion of superiority will be perceived as self-serving. Likewise, Tucker finds that

Franklin believed that "if one wants to attend to the public good, and not just to one's own greatness, one must attend to things that seem low" (43-44). Common people want everyday concerns addressed. And he notes that Franklin "mentions with regard to his public projects that in order for them to succeed, he had to prepare public opinion or the public mind" (44).

Several profiles notably break from the typical pattern of associating statesmanship with high political office, or at least with political insider status. Besides Peter C. Myers's treatment of Frederick Douglass, these include Emily Krichbaum on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Natalie Taylor on Susan B. Anthony, and Giorgi Areshidze on Martin Luther King, Jr. The profiles offer ample opportunity for the reader to find statesmanship on the part of these figures, but the chapters would be enriched by taking fuller advantage of the opportunity to broaden and deepen conceptions of statesmanship by offering more explicit, conceptual treatment of the tensions that may arise in the application of the idea to outsider political activists. Another atypical treatment of statesmanship is Sean D. Sutton's discussion of *The Federalist*. "Publius the Lawgiver," as Sutton frames his subject, is of course three people, and, more problematically, the actual subject of his chapter consists of essays. Consequently, the chapter largely amounts to a summary of some of the key political thought expressed in *The Federalist*. Still, Sutton observes that "in mak-

ing his case, Publius takes his lead from public opinion and attempts to shift it to a more thoughtful position," certainly a characteristic of a statesman (80). And persuasive public essays are in fact political acts themselves. Thus, while some may question the subject, the chapter ends up spurring further reflection on what statesmanship really means.

The other profiles in this volume include: Gary L. Gregg II on George Washington, Troy L. Kickler on Jackson, Jonathan O'Neill on Daniel Webster, Hans Schmeisser on Henry Clay, Jean M. Yarbrough on Theodore Roosevelt, Will Morrison on FDR, Elizabeth Edwards Spalding on Truman, Phillip G. Henderson on Eisenhower, Patrick G. Garrity on Kennedy, William J. Atto on Lyndon Johnson, David B. Frisk on Nixon, Mark Blitz on Reagan, and Jeffrey Crouch and Mark Rozell on "Presidential Statesmanship in the New Media Era."

Covering Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, the last chapter is the only one that is ill-conceived. The task of addressing such a complex topic as statesmanship in the context of four different U.S. presidents in a dozen or so pages is a daunting one. What ends up being offered is, for the most part, limited to brief summaries of each president's media strategy, with little opportunity to glean much useful insight into their statesmanship or its absence, much less into what "statesmanship" really means today. When Crouch and Rozell finally move beyond media strategy, in the case of Trump, what

is provided amounts to little more than a brief anti-Trump screed, largely indistinguishable from what is repeated by many of the shriller and more partisan popular-media commentators. The editors would have been better advised to commission these authors for a more complete and nuanced study of just one of these presidents, or simply to have ended the book with Reagan, where there is more historical distance and thus greater perspective.

Fans of political biography and of American political history will delight in *American Statesmanship: Principles and Practices of Leadership*. While the chapters vary in their depth of engagement with questions of statesmanship, they all offer much to engage the reader, providing insights into lives and motivations and examples—both positive and negative—from which to learn. Scholars and students, as well as thoughtful members of the general public who would like to understand where the U.S. has been, and what it may take to ensure a brighter future, can all benefit from this book.

The range of subjects is appropriate and well-chosen, the historical treatments are solid and thought-provoking, and the chapters are all free of jargon and require no prior specialized knowledge of political science or history, or of the individuals being profiled. Many are also beautifully written. We can only hope that this book will contribute to a resurgence both in the study of statesmanship and in its real-world application in American politics.