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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2009

Leaders and Followers

Charles R. Kesler

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President Gann, Dean Hess, Esteemed Trustees and Faculty Members and Staff, Fellow Students – It’s an honor and a great pleasure to speak to you this morning. The idea of Convocation is to call us together, to mark the end of summer recess and the beginning of the school year. My mother, who taught elementary school for more than four decades, used to say that her three favorite things about being a teacher were June, July, and August. But that was also her way of saying that teachers and students aren’t so different, after all. For there are few occasions so invigorating to old teachers as the beginning of the school year, when we’re reminded not only of our own beginnings as unimaginably young freshmen, but of our continual re-beginnings in those studies which always outrun us, yet whose pursuit seldom fails to delight us. That’s why I hailed my fellow students. Doctors are different from patients, lawyers have little in common with their clients, but teachers, by which I mean good ones, always remain students, though admittedly with some bottle age. Not for nothing did Chaucer say of his Scholar, “Gladly did he *learn*, and gladly teach.”

From the beginning, Claremont McKenna College directed young and old scholars alike to the meeting ground of public affairs and liberal arts. In its short history, the College has employed different terms to describe this special focus. In the early days it extolled “political economy” as a wide-ranging study that would prepare students for a world shaken and shaped by crisis – the Great Depression, World War II, the nascent Cold War. Nowadays we are prone to speak of our special niche, at least in shorthand terms, as involving the study of leadership or at least the cultivation of would-be leaders in economics, politics, and other arts and sciences. We describe our students – we describe YOU – as “leaders in the making,” which by most indices of our graduates’ achievements would seem to be a safe prediction.

Yet leadership is in some respects an elusive, even morally ambiguous quality. There are good leaders and bad leaders, to be sure, but I want to make a slightly different point. You cannot have leaders without followers, and especially in a democratic country this inescapable inequality galls. The desire to be a leader, even for the noblest purposes, is a desire to have followers. The wish to have a leader (often heard in modern politics) is a wish to be yourself a follower. Of course, if everyone could be a leader simultaneously, and no one ever a follower, that would solve the problem, but such magic is impossible even in America, where, as Allan Bloom once remarked, Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* would likely have been titled, *The Categorical Imperative – and Ten Ways to Make It Work for You!* Another way out of the dilemma, taking turns at being leader, doesn’t sound much like leadership. Maybe at Pitzer....

Leaders and followers are not new phenomena, to be sure. The ancient Greeks spoke of the leader (*hegemon*) and the Romans had a word for it, too (*dux*). But these terms were often connected to military command; and politically, they pointed to accounts of civic life that were highly illiberal, at least insofar as they conceived of politics itself as a form of ruling. This understanding persists, at least in a sedimentary way, in our terms monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, the rule of one, few, and many. But leadership of this sort, pointing to the asserted right to rule over others often without their consent, is not what CMCers or our fellow citizens have in mind when they admire leadership. But it does help explain the little-known fact that the founders of the American republic were not keen on leadership. We think of them, generally speaking, as great leaders, but they didn’t usually call themselves that, and not merely out of modesty. There was something about leadership they distrusted.

To take an example: In *The Federalist*, the famous defense of the Constitution beloved of every student in Gov 20, the terms “leader” and “leaders” are used 14 times, all but two pejoratively. A dozen times the

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book criticizes “factious leaders,” “favorite leaders,” “artful leaders,” and so forth for their demagogic excesses. In short, the word is almost a synonym for dangerous knaves who rouse the people’s passions in order to lead them to vicious and illegal acts, which the people themselves would later regret. The exceptions in *The Federalist* prove the rule: the authors refer twice to the Patriot leaders of the Revolution. That is, leaders can be respectable when operating in the kind of crisis in which tyranny can be avoided only by throwing off the existing law, using military force to defeat the oppressor’s might, and substituting new laws and constitutions. In such an emergency, the people may and must be directly led in a quasi-military way, but with the goal of sheathing the sword and restoring civilian, legal rule as fast as prudently possible.

To the potentially boundless sway of leaders, and the intoxicated and degraded obedience of followers, the founders preferred the equality of fellow citizens under the sober rule of law, crowned by the kind of statesmanship that is the servant of good laws and constitutional order. They admired George Washington precisely because he never turned into a leader. He became a founder and an office-holder who gladly surrendered his offices and who sedulously labored to enhance the people’s capacity to govern themselves – the father, not the *Fuehrer*, of his country. They sought a government that would represent the people, not lead them, because they feared leadership’s unrepugnant tendencies.

Today, by contrast, we tend to regard leadership ability as a prime qualification for high and even low office. What happened? With the rise by the late 19th century of large democracies with tens of millions of citizens, and the need for mass political parties to organize these millions, the stage was set for the rehabilitation of leadership. The people needed parties, more to engineer than refine their will, and the parties needed leaders. This perilous logic led to two disastrous experiments in leadership theory: the Leninist version, in which the Central Committee of the Communist Party became the unelected vanguard of the proletariat, and the Committee’s head the effective dictator; and the Fascist version, in which *il Duce* or *der Fuehrer* (they liked to be called Leader!) summed up and commanded the nation, the *Volk*, as its incarnation. The United States was saved from these horrors by its republican institutions and mores, but also by the democratic version of leadership articulated by its leading theorist and practitioner, Woodrow Wilson.

As a Progressive, Wilson embraced history as the story of man’s gradual ascent towards greater rationality and freedom. To him, leadership was mostly the story of incremental adjustments between the present and the future; the leader helped negotiate the transitions. Occasionally, however, the leader had to appear not in the harness of compromise but as the leader of a cause (like, say, Barack Obama today). The leader saw further into the future than the people could, and had to persuade them not only that change was possible but that he knew which changes were ripe. Wilson insisted, however, that such a leader be only slightly ahead of his time. His function was not to impose an untimely theory on an unready people, as Robespierre had tried to do, but to help the people see the future before their very eyes, as it were. The Wilsonian leader had therefore to attend very carefully to the people’s incipient desires or will, to sympathize with them in order to sum up the demands the people themselves were yet unconscious of. He had to offer them a vision of the near future, to inspire them to take the next step in the nation’s progress.

As I say, Wilson’s account of leadership helped to shape our own views. Nowadays, we shy away from politicians like poor George H. W. Bush, who confessed he had a problem with “the vision thing.” But it’s unclear whether our enthusiasm for visionary leaders has led to better public policy and sounder

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statesmanship. Competing visions of the future are so many idols of the imagination, in effect, competing promises of a better future, and a political system based more and more on such projections will find its appetites increasingly out of line with reality, not to mention dignity. Need I mention that the U.S. has had 43 deficits in the past 48 years?

By keeping the leader close to his followers, Wilson hoped to tame the demagogic potential in leadership, but at the expense of some of the grandeur that made it attractive in the first place. If the leader must commune with the people in order to determine where to lead them, who is leading whom, exactly? Modern leadership – especially as the art of polling has become ubiquitous – often consists in telling voters, and perhaps even students, what they want to hear, reducing this supposedly charismatic gift to a scramble merely to stay in front, to be in the lead. How then to tell “leaders in the making” from “leaders on the make”? Happily, in the best cases, the desire to be “a leader” is merely the unlovely contemporary idiom for a healthy love of honor and natural attraction to excellence. CMC can help you put these strivings into a larger, longer, and higher perspective. For there is, or at least should be, no greater balm for such noble desires than the serious study of the liberal arts and of the excellent men and women, across the ages, who nailed their lives to the cross of thought or of action.