

## *The Virginia NEWS LETTER*

# *Politics and Moral Leadership*

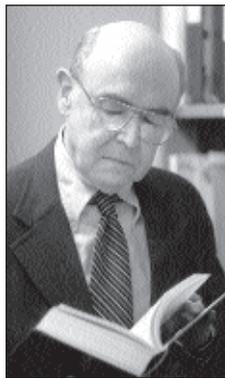
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By Laurin L. Henry

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**I**n this presidential election year we'll hear a lot about character and moral leadership: how badly the country needs those qualities, which parties and candidates offer them, and which ones don't. I wouldn't deprecate the need or disparage the offerings. Our better instincts tell us the importance of moral values in politics, and recent experience has deepened our sense of need.

We should understand, though, that moral leadership in politics is far more problematic than it may appear. The basic ideas are hard to define and the key words mean different things to different people. Historical experience shows that great moral achievements in politics are rare and usually recognized only in hindsight; that attempts to assert moral leadership often are frustrated; and that morally significant accomplishments sometimes come from unlikely people in surprising ways. In a complex pluralistic



*Laurin L. Henry*

society like ours, moral purpose collides with the realities of democratic politics to produce outcomes abounding in ironies and paradoxes.

Much of my life has been spent in academia, with frequent involvement in Virginia and national government, but I profess no special learning in ethics or moral philosophy. My perspective is that of a student of history and politics, with particular interest in American presidential leadership, and my intent is to emphasize how elusive effective moral leadership really is.

My hope is that tempered, more realistic, expectations will provide inoculation against disillusionment and despair about the state of our politics.

All this rests on a belief that moral leadership is strong medicine in the body politic—useful, at times vital, but also risky and dangerous if misconceived or abused.



WELDON COOPER  
CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE  
University of Virginia

*The public yearns  
for another  
George Washington*

If this is so, political movements or candidacies emphasizing character or moral assertions, noble in intent though they may be, do not simplify or ease the burden of voter choice. In fact, they require a more discriminating citizenship than politics resting on the baser grounds of personal attachments and material interests.

### What is Moral Leadership?

**W**hat do we mean by moral leadership? Where does it come from, and how do we recognize it? Quickly we encounter slippery terms and conflicting ideas.

Most people probably see moral leadership as based on, or an outgrowth of, individual character. Dodging the difficult question of what “character” really is and how it is formed, we can say that the public favors political leaders and candidates thought to have “high” or “good” character—that is, men and women whose beliefs and behaviors reflect widely recognized moral, ethical, or religious values. The presumption is that virtuous leaders can be trusted to do the right things, and because of that trust, citizens and other politicians alike will respond to their leadership, making the political process run smoother toward morally superior outcomes.

We honor the memory of George Washington, whose reputation for virtue gave his words and example enormous weight in such crucial matters as establishing the national government under the Constitution; for many people of his day, if General Washington said those things were necessary, it must be so. And ever since, the public has yearned for leaders of equivalent stature, and candidates have suggested themselves (in all due modesty, of course!) as embodiments of Washingtonian virtue. Leadership based on personal character and trust can be especially important in a crisis, when decisions must be made before there is time for the public to learn the facts and rights and wrongs of the situation.

Another way of looking at moral leadership is to ignore (or at least pay less attention to) the character of the leader and focus on his or her positions in the political arena. Does she stand for the right things? Do his decisions and policies aim toward goals of high moral content, such as equal justice and alleviation of human suffering? All leaders, of course, profess such values. The more creative ones excel in choosing and explaining to the public how their policies on immediate issues like defense, education, taxation, and crime contribute to loftier ends.

A third and more difficult definition or test of moral leadership is to pass over individual character and short-term policies and look at results. Did well-intentioned policies succeed? Did this president’s work, taken in the large, result in significant movement toward peace, freedom, and equality? Did this leader break new ground by redefining goals and educating the people to support new aspirations of high moral content? Many politicians like to think of themselves in this way, but we usually need the perspective of history to reach firm conclusions about the true moral significance of a Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, or Roosevelt. In hindsight, too, we can see a rich array of ironies and paradoxes arising from misunderstood policies, unpredictable events, and unexpected or unappreciated accomplishments of unlikely people.

Here we may as well confront what to many observers seemed the enormous contradiction between President Clinton’s universally condemned behavior in the case of the White House intern, and the steadfast belief of a majority of the people that, overall, he was doing a good enough job in the presidency and should not be removed by impeachment. The President’s persistent support undoubtedly rested on a mixture of things, including public satisfaction in an era of economic growth and relative peace, and reservations about the motives and moral standing of some of his attackers. But I think that at bottom most of his supporters believed that the policies Clinton stood for did have something to do with peace, prosperity, and equality—certainly not morally unworthy goals.

I would not go so far as to conclude, as some have, that the Clinton episode demonstrates complete separation in the public mind between personal and public character. I do believe that the two are related, and that in some cases, perception of personal virtue in a leader (or lack thereof) affects the possibility of public achievements. But the two certainly are not fully identical. People seem less inclined now than in former times to make sweeping judgments about the character of others, including public figures. When questions arise they are more likely to inquire how particular aspects of a leader’s character may affect issues of immediate concern to them, and to tolerate serious lapses of personal conduct if important public values are being advanced. Is this a sign of national moral deterioration, or of more sophisticated political understanding?

Let us look more carefully at the possibility of choosing a president who can lead from strength of personal character. One problem is that a good man, or woman, nowadays is hard to

find—at least hard to find within reasonable range of electability. What kind of a person really wants to be president? Candidates profess noble purposes and may indeed believe their own rhetoric, but scholars suggest that many of the people who persist in the demanding—and often demeaning—struggle for high office are driven by abnormal needs for ego satisfaction derived from attention, applause, and power. The power drives of such persons sometimes are harnessed to beneficial results, but also can produce dangerous behavior in a crisis. The lives of Richard M. Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson provide rich illustrations of the strengths and weaknesses of such characters.

### Politicians aren't Ethical Virgins

Whatever his inner drives and original moral condition, a politician is not likely to arrive at presidential candidacy in a state of ethical virginity. Political careers demand alliances, choices, compromises, and deceptions, some of which are almost certain to be morally questionable. Harry S. Truman is an interesting case. Now widely admired for plain speaking, honesty, and courage in facing up to the Soviet challenge after World War II, he started his career as the chosen candidate of a corrupt Kansas City machine that he never really repudiated. After what we have learned about some of his successors, we have more appreciation of Truman's marital fidelity and financial probity, but, for many detractors in his time, Truman's character seemed to be defined by coarse language and occasional bourbon and poker with old buddies more at home in the Legion Hall than the White House. Whether in the long run of history Truman's moral significance will be judged positively as a world leader in defense of freedom, or negatively as the first user of an atomic bomb, we can not now say, but either way, his loyalty to a few unworthy friends will not count for much.

Although Truman was relatively immune, I think it is true that political life at high levels involves high risk of infections of personal character. Constant excitement, travel, free spending, mixing with celebrities, applause, and sycophancy—all tend to induce illusions of entitlement and omnipotence. Power as an aphrodisiac is not a recent discovery.

How can voters assess the character of presidential candidates? Modern journalism and campaign methods have mixed results. They give us more raw information than ever before about

the backgrounds and personalities of candidates, including things about their lives that used to be left behind the veil of privacy, but what can the citizen make of it all? Candidates appear to us in contrived situations, their speeches and policy ideas screened through polls and focus groups, their resumés and images scrubbed by consultants and polished by spin doctors. Opponents attack and project their own images by the same techniques. Journalistic coverage is long on investigation and sensation, short on thoughtful analysis. Candidate debates may offer some insight into character—at least they suggest how the individual reacts to attack or challenge—but they often provide little direct confrontation of ideas and give us memorized mini-speeches hung onto the first available questions.

From such information, judgments of character are hard to make, especially their relevance for future behavior in political situations. In 1992, information about Bill Clinton's philandering was not altogether lacking. Should we have understood that such behavior had been more prevalent than was revealed—and would reappear in the future? We can speculate that wider knowledge of Clinton's prior behavior would have prevented his election, but for most of us it is far too soon to say whether, considering the total results of his presidency, that would have been a good thing.

How can character assessments be projected into the unknowable political future? What would the voters of 1932 have made of a fuller revelation of the extent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's physical disability? Would they have appreciated what we now see as the toughening effects of his struggle to regain some degree of mobility and return to political life, or would they have shied from someone so badly impaired? At the time, even supposedly wise journalist Walter Lippmann dismissed FDR as a pleasant but not very serious person. And what if the voters had known of his old affair, re-kindled from time to time for over 25 years, with his wife's former secretary? More information nowadays is available to the careful observer, but which assertions are true, and, more importantly, what do they matter? It takes hard thought to avoid knowing more but understanding less. And, for peace of mind, it helps to have a bit of fatalism about the unknowable consequences of our choices.

It is clear that personal morality does not guarantee success in the presidency. The most obvious recent case is Jimmy Carter, a deeply religious man of high character, strongly determined to do good. His ability to quote the Old Testament may have helped in jawboning Begin

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and Sadat into agreement at Camp David, but his religious convictions and perceived virtue did not give him much leverage with Congress. Declaring the moral significance of energy conservation did not cause many citizens to turn down their thermostats or leave their cars at home and take the bus. What most other politicians saw as Carter's consciousness of moral superiority seemed to insulate him from advice he could have used and negotiations that might have advanced his purposes. Ironically, his term ended in frustration over the plight of our embassy hostages in Iran—humiliated by Moslem holy men with their own understanding of the will of God.

While moral sensibility is not easily converted to political power, we often get effective leadership from presidents of flawed personal character. FDR's achievements in Depression and war are hardly in doubt, and although he was idolized by many, he was also regarded by persons who knew him, including some of his own supporters, as devious or worse in both personal and political relationships. John F. Kennedy's violations of the Seventh Commandment, as well as the Tenth (do you need to look that up?), were concealed while he was in the White House, but his known transgressions pale in significance beside his moral achievement in the Cuban Missile crisis, when, almost alone, he squarely faced the consequences of a possible nuclear exchange and fended off righteous and bellicose advisers so as to give Khrushchev a face-saving way out—a course of enormous risk both military and political, if it had failed.

One might also ponder Richard Nixon, whose character these days has few defenders. Acknowledging Watergate and all that, one could argue that Nixon's initiative in opening talks with communist China was an act of moral leadership. Dealing with a nation that had long been demonized in U.S. politics was politically dangerous, coming after 20 years of Republican agitation (to which Nixon himself had been a large contributor) about Democratic culpability for "losing" China. Nixon's move not only ended the shameful agitation but shifted the world balance of power and put international relations in the Far East on a basis that greatly lessened the risk of a major war—surely an outcome of moral significance. One of the ironies of politics is that major shifts of policy often can be achieved only by leaders previously thought to be opposed to them.

Moral ironies in leadership were multiple and compounded in the career of Lyndon Johnson. LBJ's personal behavior revealed a strange personality and deeply flawed character.

He was known to have cheated on his wife, connived at vote stealing, and enriched himself in office. He deceived and manipulated political associates and habitually bullied and abused subordinates. His social conduct caused Miss Manners to blush. Despite all that, serious biographers—even those most critical of Johnson—seem to agree that he was sincerely devoted to the idea of government programs that would relieve hardship and improve the lot of all unfortunate or needy Americans.

While pushing Congress to enact such programs, he was diverted, at first reluctantly, to the struggle for civil rights of blacks carried on by leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. Johnson did not disagree with most of the objectives of people like King, but he at first resented them as spoilers who would divide liberal efforts and evoke backlash against broader measures that would benefit blacks along with everyone else. When it became unavoidable, Johnson threw himself into the civil rights struggle with appeals to fundamental American values and achieved results that are now considered a legacy of transcendent moral significance. But at the same time, Johnson compromised his moral standing by deceptions about Vietnam intended to shelter his initial great moral purpose, his vision of the Great Society. The latter, by the way, although frequently dismissed as a failure, turns out to have left some enduring monuments. Do we base LBJ's moral legacy on Vietnam or on civil rights and Medicare?

How do personally flawed people do morally important things? The most common form of moral achievement is when the President seeks support by showing the relevance of his purposes to ethical principles or moral sentiments long held in the American people. If he can't persuade in advance, he may make decisions in confidence that they will eventually be seen in such light. Scholars have called this "leading with the grain" of public belief. The bases of reference can be as narrow as the Boy Scout oath, as specific as the Ten Commandments, or as broad as the concepts of freedom, justice, and equality that comprise America's civic religion: fundamentals of the Judaic-Christian tradition, incorporated and applied in venerated statements like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address.

We see moral leadership when the president calls for aid to victims of earthquakes, floods, and famine, or of outrageous political violence, all over the world. Many military interventions overseas, such as in Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia, and Kosovo, also are made acceptable to

the public on such grounds. As President George Bush mobilized opinion here and abroad for the Gulf War he may have been thinking about oil, but his rhetoric emphasized Saddam Hussein's tyranny and foreign aggression. Foreign policy experts preach that such foreign ventures should be strictly justified in terms of our national interest, but most of them seem to have difficulty understanding that in the minds of American citizens the national interest includes a moral dimension—the belief that we ought to try to end or alleviate starvation, oppression, or mass murder when it is reasonably within our means to do so.

Unfortunately, the morally correct course of national policy is usually not completely clear or widely agreed on. The most obvious reason is that this is a very large, complicated country, one becoming more diverse all the time as new groups of differing geographic origins, cultural traditions, and religious beliefs are added to the mixture—and acquire effective voice and vote. While there may be enough common threads of belief to hold the country together (at least we hope so!), the presence of significant numbers of people with differing cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and political expectations means a diversity of ethical systems and moral priorities against which the issues of the day are considered. It takes genuine skill and sophistication to achieve moral leadership in such a diverse polity.

## Moral Debate is Seldom Clear

Of course, moral debate about leaders' proposals is seldom all clearly right on one side and wrong on the other. Leaders of moral purpose often encounter opposition from people with competing principles and values. The issue in such controversies is which principles, whose values, are most relevant to the present and future, and which ones have been eroded by time and history. The intense moral beliefs of present-day Christian conservatives on such issues as abortion and prayer in schools are opposed by others on constitutional grounds of church-state separation and ethical beliefs in individual freedom. Many people seem to feel no strain in being all for individual liberty on some matters and for public enforcement of moral values on others. Examples: abortion and gun control. These are areas in which presidential leadership may contribute to national clarification of moral priorities—but may also end in frustration and failure for both leaders and followers.

Leadership, of course, is not a one-way

process in which the president points out moral implications to a previously inattentive public. It is usually a reciprocal business between leader and respondents. Presidents are called upon by sectors of the public to define issues in moral terms, leading to moral dialogue—or, more precisely, “trialogue”—among the believers, the president, and the unconverted. In such situations some presidents respond more readily than others, which can reflect either a natural bent toward moralizing or a calculating willingness to use moral ammunition for short-term political gain. Presidents are well advised to be cautious about jumping into moral arguments brought into the public arena. Embracing causes may, if history turns out right, bring honor to their name, but there is high risk that public moral crusades will lead only to division and unresolved conflict. Most presidents, I think, sense the dynamite in moral issues and understand that there are always some people, often sizable groups and factions in the country, who wish to cast moral beliefs into public measures for the control of others and will not be satisfied until their entire moral agenda is politicized. Does moral leadership lie in embracing and articulating such demands, or in resisting them?

Some of our greatest presidents have practiced deferral and avoidance on what have come to be seen as transcendent moral issues. One who chose not to firmly grasp a great moral issue was Franklin D. Roosevelt, in relation to the fate of Europe's Jews. Before World War II, as knowledge of Hitler's persecutions became widespread, FDR made some proposals for international rescue of Jewish refugees, but he backed off when other nations failed to respond. For the United States to act alone and accept large numbers of Jews would have required changes in the law; neither Congress nor American opinion was prepared for anything like that, and Roosevelt made no serious efforts to persuade them. During the war the full extent of the Holocaust may not have been known, but FDR and his associates must have had a pretty good understanding of what was happening to the Jews; nevertheless, he did not stress the issue.

Was Roosevelt morally insensitive? Perhaps, to some degree. But his avoidance can be explained—if not justified—on political grounds. He had edged into the war, keeping just a half-step ahead of American opinion. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor had resolved that issue, Roosevelt and Churchill could define the war on the partly prudential, partly moral basis of defending America, putting down totalitarian aggression, and restoring freedom to the nations of Europe and Asia. That resonated with almost

everyone in America and Britain and provided adequate political support for prosecuting the war. FDR may have feared that giving emphasis to a particular class of Hitler's victims would lead to divisiveness among the Allies, or that full disclosure of the horrors of the Holocaust would unleash a fury of recrimination and demands for revenge that would be hard to control. Politicians generally fear issues getting out of control.

Their actions may seem insensitive or cynical at times, but democratic leaders have to take up great issues selectively and avoid overloading the moral agenda. Calls for action based on visions of the good give life and meaning to politics, but precisely because they rest on higher values they also create tensions in a democratic system that must accommodate many competing interests and viewpoints. Issues based on high principle are difficult to handle politically because to true believers they are by definition sacrosanct, non-negotiable; compromise becomes a betrayal of truth, an immoral act. If too many moral issues are pressed in the political arena the usual outcome is bitter conflict, stalemate, and frustration. Persons and groups unable to have their way, to see their values achieved, may become disillusioned and lose faith in politics. Democracy is healthier when most of the issues under discussion are subject to negotiation and compromise.

I do not mean to suggest that the United States is anywhere near that point, but we do well to remember what can happen if too many people in a nation lose confidence in the system and begin looking for a new order in which their values are guaranteed to prevail. Someone who offers moral leadership toward such a regime plays with fire. The world has seen enough of holy wars in which opponents were deemed immoral, not worthy of consideration, dangers

to the truth and subject to suppression or actual elimination. In a system committed to a single moral vision the leader and the priests and preachers who interpret the code have enormous power and in extreme cases their own persons become sacrosanct. We don't need ayatollahs in America.

So we end in a puzzle, a challenge. We need moral leadership at the right times and on the right issues. But who can say for certain what those times and those issues are, and who is the right leader for them? We must approach the selection of leaders with caution and sensitivity to moral issues but never expect that any politician will solve all the moral puzzles for us. Paradoxically, great leadership sometimes has to avoid moral issues, defer achievement, and compromise so that the country can hang together and the political process can continue. Ideally, politics may be a collective search for the good. In everyday life, it is a morally ambiguous business. ●

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Mr. Henry is a Professor Emeritus and retired Dean of the School of Community and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. Previously he was Professor of Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia and senior staff member of the Brookings Institution. His writings have emphasized the American Presidency. He has served frequently as consultant to government agencies in Richmond and Washington. Some of the material in this article was used previously in contributions to the First Unitarian Church of Richmond and the Richmond Forum.*

VOL. 76 NO. 5 JULY 2000

Editor: William H. Wood  
Graphic Design: Susan Wormington

*The Virginia NEWS LETTER* (ISSN 0042-0271) is published ten times a year by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206; (804)982-5704, TDD: (804) 982-HEAR.

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Periodical postage paid at Charlottesville, Virginia.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206.

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