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The Conundrum of Democratic Leadership

Review of "Thinking About Leadership." By Nannerl. O. Keohane. Princeton University Press. 297 pp. $27.95

Political power, James David Barber has suggested, "is like nuclear energy: available to create deserts or make them bloom." In democracies, as in all forms of government, much depends on the skill, character, and values of leaders. And yet we don't really know all that much about what they do and how they go about their work.

In Thinking About Leadership, Nannerl Keohane, a professor of public affairs at Princeton University (and the former president of Wellesley College and Duke University), tries to "clear away some of the underbrush to permit a clearer view of the subject." Leaders, she writes, are essential. They determine or clarify the goals of the communities they serve; they mobilize energies to accomplish those goals.

Keohane does not present her own comprehensive theory about leadership. She is skeptical -- and rightfully so -- of "one-size-fits-all" explanations. Neither "trait theory" nor "skills theory," she demonstrates, offer much "in the way of explanatory power" about leadership. Although in some contexts, women do lead differently from men, the impact of institutional cultures and structures "outweigh any effects of gender."

Keohane understands as well that advice about the "right balance between disparate qualities" -- exhibiting warmth or distance; eliciting love or fear -- isn't all that helpful because "it does not come with instructions for knowing when to use one approach and when the other."

Leadership, Keohane reminds us, is as essential in a democracy as it is in a monarchy,
oligarchy, or a dictatorship. But, she asks, in the most important chapter in her book, how can democratic leaders function in "a heavily constrained environment" of checks and balances, partisan conflict, and popular sovereignty. Where citizens -- and critics -- tend to focus more on limiting power and avoiding abuse than on investigating how leaders can be more effective and beneficial.

Political theorists, according to Keohane, haven't provided much guidance. John Dewey identified the "prime difficulty" of democracies: discovering the means by which a scattered, restless, and often distracted public can define and express its interests. The masses, he indicated, respond to "external circumstances, pressure from without, as atoms combine in the presence of an electric charge, or as sheep huddle together from the cold." But Dewey had almost nothing to say about leaders.

Developing "informed support for any initiative, Keohane reminds us, "can be a very time-consuming process." Out of frustration -- or less virtuous motives -- leaders may use emotional persuasion or even appeal to prejudice. "Even conscientious leaders," she suggests, "provide information selectively in order to achieve their goals."

These thought-provoking observations, which are a bit buried in Thinking About Leadership, deserve some elaboration. Inspired by them, I will spend the remainder of this review reflecting on the evolution of -- and possible approaches to -- what Keohane calls "the conundrum of democratic leadership."

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the historian Jeffrey Tulis has observed, the power of the president to command did not depend on his power to persuade. Presidents were expected to report on the State of the Union and make policy recommendations in writing, and direct them to Congress. They rarely delivered "unofficial speeches" about legislative proposals or priorities. This approach, Alexis de Tocqueville suggested, served "as a barrier between the government and the governed, to hold back the one while the other has time to take its bearings."

In the twentieth century, the presidency became rhetorical. Between 1800 and 1900 seven percent of presidential messages were addressed to the people; between 1900 and 2000, more than forty percent were so directed. The president, Woodrow Wilson declared, could not prevail in contests with Congress without the support of the people. And so, influencing public opinion became "the whole art and mastery of politics." The masses could not always sort through information, Wilson suggested, but they could judge the character of their leader and the morality of his cause. Their confidence could be gained by simple and direct arguments "easily transmitted to the palms of their hands or their ends of their walking sticks in the shape of applause."

In the current political climate, the overlap between campaigns and governing, recourse to political polling, and the pervasiveness and power of communications technologies have accentuated the importance of the role of presidents in framing issues that are (or should be) high on the public's agenda.

If presidents don't use the bully pulpit to "sell" their policies, if they don't find a way to simplify (and personalize) without distorting, then someone else, someone more demagogic, may well seize the initiative - and win the battle for the hearts and minds of American voters, many of whom aren't all that interested in politics, don't like politicians, and are restless for results.

Because he failed to frame the issues -- and reacted slowly or not at all to charges of "death panels" and "government takeovers of the economy" -- Barack Obama got less credit for his legislative achievements than just about any president in American history. If he doesn't learn this elemental lesson of leadership, it seems clear, he will imperil his program, his presidency, his
party, and his country.