

“Five keys to democratic statesmanship”

“Historian and best-selling author Paul Johnson describes what great statesmen have to teach us”.

1. First, ideas and beliefs. The best kind of democratic leader has just a few perhaps three or four – central principles to which they are passionately attached and will not sacrifice under any circumstances.

This was true, for instance, of US President Harry Truman, or Konrad Adenauer of Germany, Alcide de Gasperi of Italy, and Robert Schuman of France – all the outstanding men who did most to raise Europe from the ashes of the Second World War and who built up the West as a bulwark against Soviet advance and a repository of free civilisation. Also true of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the two outstanding leaders of the next generation who carried on the work.

2. Convictions. I am not impressed by leaders who have definite views on everything. History teaches it is a mistake to have too many convictions, held with equal certitude and tenacity. They crowd each other out.

A great leader is someone who can distinguish between the essential and the peripheral - between what must be done and what is merely desirable. Mrs Thatcher really had only three musts: uphold the rule of law at home and abroad; keep government activities to the minimum, and so taxes low; encourage individuals to do as much as they can, as well as they can.

There are also, of course, statesman who are necessarily dominated by one overwhelming object dictated to them by events or destiny. Thus Abraham Lincoln felt all else had to be sacrificed to the overwhelming necessity of holding the Union together, behind the principles of 1776. Likewise, Charles de Gaulle, in 1940, advanced the simple proposition that France was not defeated and incarnated it in his person. The way in which both men concentrated all their thoughts, energies, and skills on one end are lessons in single-mindedness and power this can bring to action

A statesman must also be able, for a spell, to place one object of policy before all others, and this Winston Churchill did in 1940, when keeping Britain in the war by successfully preventing a Nazi conquest took precedence over all other aims. Such concentration of effort is itself a product of clarity of vision which includes a strong sense of proportion.

3. Next comes willpower. I think the history of great men and women teaches that willpower is the most decisive of all qualities in public life. A Politician can have immense intelligence and all the other virtues, but if will is lacking he is nothing.

Usually a leader has it in abundance. Will springs from unshakeable confidence in being right, but also from a more primitive instinct to dominate events which has little to do with logic or reason. Churchill had it. De Gaulle had it. Margaret Thatcher had it, to an unusual degree. It could be seen that, surrounded by her male Cabinet colleagues – whose knowledge and technical qualifications were often superior – she alone possessed will, one could almost watch them bowing to it.

Of course, will is often in history the source of evil. Hitler came from nothing to power, and the absolute control of a great nation, almost entirely through the force of his will. And it remained in him virtually to the end.” “Stalin’s dictatorship in Russia, and Mao Tse Tung’s in China, were also largely exercises in personal will. Mao’s overwhelming will, we now know, led to the deaths of 70 million fellow Chinese. The cost of a misdirected will is almost unimaginably high. Those three or four simple central beliefs behind the will must be right and morally sound.

A third virtue is pertinacity. Mere flashes of will are not enough. The will must be organically linked to resolution, a determination to see the cause through at all costs.

There are dark days in every venture, however just. Washington knew this in his long, eight-year war. Lincoln knew this in his long and often agonising struggle with the South.

One aspect of pertinacity is patience. Another is a certain primitive doggedness. One learns a lot about these things by studying Martin Gilbert’s magnificent record of Churchill’s leadership. “It’s dogged as does it” is an old English proverb. True enough. But doggedness should not be confused with blind obstinacy – the obstinacy of a George 111 or a Jefferson Davis. As with will, resolution must be linked to sound aims.

4. **Fourth is the ability to communicate.** The value of possessing a few simple ideas which are true and workable is enormously enhanced if the leader can put them across with equal simplicity.

Ronald Reagan had this gift to an unusual degree – quite unlike his co-worker Margaret Thatcher. While Reagan charmed and mesmerised, she had to bludgeon. There was a comparable contrast between Washington, who had no skill in plausible speechmaking, and Lincoln, not only a great orator for a set occasion, but a man whose everyday remarks carried enormous verbal power.

But where words fail, example can take their place. Washington communicated by his actions and his personality. He was followed because Americans could see that he was an honest, incorruptible and decent man.

Mrs Thatcher too governed by personality. The Russians called her the Iron Lady. You do not need to charm when you are manifestly made of iron. It is a form of communication in itself.

5. **The fifth and last of the virtues we learn about heroes is magnanimity: greatness of soul.**

It is not easy to define this supreme quality, which few even among the greatest leaders possess.

It is a virtue which makes one warm to its possessor. We not only respect and like, we love Lincoln because he had it to an unusual degree. It was part of his inner being. And Churchill, who also had it, made it one of the top quartet of characteristics which he expected the statesman to show.

A passage he penned as the first World War was about to end reads: 'In war, resolution. In defeat, defiance. In victory, magnanimity. In peace, good will.' This is a sentiment which all those in public life should learn by heart. It encapsulates the lessons of history better than entire books"

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"I would like to end by stressing that my perception of heroic virtues is not inclusive. I merely stress the central and essential ones. One thing you learn from history is that a hero who can make the public laugh as well as admire is likely to have a strong and lasting hold on its affections. Here again Churchill stands high. He made us laugh even in the darkest days of 1940, when in reply to the Nazi jibe that 'England in three weeks will have her neck wrung like a chicken', he said, simply but forcefully: 'Some chicken! Some neck!'

Abraham Lincoln, too loved irony. He often achieved an effect with jokes where mere oratory would not work so well. And Mr Reagan communicated and ruled through his enormous collection of one-liners, which he suited to all occasions. And a joke can often enshrine truth, as for instance when I heard him say: 'I'm not too worried about the deficit. It's big enough to take care of itself.'

Margaret Thatcher was often criticised for having no sense of humour. Not true. I once heard her tell a joke to great effect. At the end of a long wearisome dinner with 10 speeches, she – as Prime Minister – was scheduled to speak at the end. I could see that she was furious. She began: 'As the last of ten speakers, and the only woman, I have this to say. The cock may crow, but it's the hen who lays the eggs.'

I reminded Mrs. Thatcher of this recently, and she was delighted. She said: 'My father told me that joke.' And that itself is a reminder that we learn from our parents at the fireside in our childhood perhaps as much or more than from anyone.

But from the heroes of the past we learn, too, and what they teach, by the example of their lives and words, has the special quality of truth by personal example. Thus the good hero lives on, in our minds, if we are imaginative, and in our actions, if we are wise."

"Paul Johnson is a historian, journalist and author of several best-selling books, including the classic Modern Times: The world from the Twenties to the Nineties and most recently Heroes: From Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar to Churchill and de Gaulle. This article is an extract from his recent speech 'Heroes: what great statesmen have to teach us', reprinted by permission from Imprimis (December 2007), the national speech digest of Hillsdale College, Michigan USA."