

Political Prudence and the Ethics of Leadership

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aspirations and the demands of political achievement had many to despair of the relationship between ethics and political leadership. This article builds upon the classic theory of normative prudence to argue that political prudence serves as a vital moral resource for leaders to bridge that gap. Political prudence covers the normative practices derived from the requirements of political achievement. The ethics of prudence focuses upon the obligation of a leader to achieve moral self-mastery, to attend to the context of a situation, and through deliberation and careful judgment to seek concrete outcomes that are legitimate and durable. Political prudence requires foresight, openness to experience and reason, timing, linking means and ends, seeking durability and legitimacy of outcomes, and building community. This account of political prudence argues that prudence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethical leadership.

A vital policy initiative fails due to skilled opposition. A fine program disintegrates under pressure of an unanticipated backlash. A powerful and strong institution collapses when its long-time leader departs. A new leader full of good intentions soon flees office overcome by frustration and ineffectiveness. These all-too-familiar examples highlight the haunting reality that good intentions, moral conviction, and even technical competence do not guarantee success in political and administrative life. This disjunction of ethics and achievement has inspired many to despair of the relationship between ethics and leadership, best summed up by Niccoló Machiavelli, "the man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous" (Machiavelli, 1773, 15). This realist view argues that leaders cannot afford ethics in a world of serious responsibilities, powerful institutions, and committed adversaries (Morgenthau, 1757; Walz, 1757; Cohen, 1787). The realist view competes with an alternative moral conception of leadership in the natural law and the Kantian traditions, which argues that leaders should follow the requirements of ethics (Gierke, 1734; Kant, 1757).

The leadership literature reflects this split between realpolitik and moralism. Classic studies focus upon the tactical and personality dimensions of successful leadership (Neustadt, 1776; Tucker, 1775). A number of writers, however, call for an explicit recognition of the moral nature of leadership (Burns, 1778; Gardner, 1990; Terry, 1995). These studies succeed in identifying the moral nature of leadership but seldom provide consistent guidelines about where leadership ethics should focus. Recent theorists have argued that a virtue based ethics focuses upon the moral quality of the person and can inform an ethics of leadership (Galston, 1771; Norton, 1771; Cooper, 1787; Cooper and Wright, 1772). From the time of Aristotle, theorists have argued that of all the virtues, prudence represents the linchpin of political judgment and that any theory of leadership needs to develop an account of prudence (Coll, 1771; Dunn, 1785; 1790, esp. 177-215; Dobel, 1790).

Building on this tradition, I will argue that political prudence is a central moral resource for political leaders. This article presents an account of political prudence focusing upon its operational requirements. These requirements provide a moral framework to guide and evaluate actions. This article will discuss the relationship between virtue and leadership, prudence as a virtue derived from the requirements of political achievement, and the normative responsibilities and obligations that flow from political prudence.

Virtue and Leadership

Leadership entails ethics because leaders have responsibilities. Persons in positions of leadership make a difference; they can bring about changes in behavior that would not occur without their presence and actions. Leading is not always linked to official authority; in fact, leadership opportunities exist throughout political and organizational life. Individuals or institutions rely on leaders to accomplish tasks. Fellow citizens, colleagues, and subordinates depend on the leader and are vulnerable to the consequences of his or her actions. They rely on the leader's competence and promises. Citizens depend on official leaders to protect their security, welfare, and basic interests. Colleagues and other officials depend on leaders to enable them to perform their work. Leaders who hold office are responsible for respecting that reliance, vulnerability, and dependence.

The ethics of responsibility requires leaders to attend to the consequences of their actions (Weber, 1969).¹ Their first responsibility, however, resides in what Adam Smith called self-mastery. All virtues and the personal capacity to live up to promises, obey the law, and follow directives depend upon this primary moral capacity (Smith, 1976, III, 6.3).

People in positions of responsibility have an obligation to control their passions and overcome temptations. Without this basic self-discipline they could abuse their power for their own purposes. Thoughtless, rash, or impulsive actions could harm or exploit those who depend on the leader or cause the leader to fail in performing vital responsibilities. When internal or external stimuli affect leaders, they should have the self-control not to react instantly. Their actions should be based on reflection, not driven by reactive emotions. Without self-command moral life remains impossible (Smith, 1976, VI, 3, I-19). Self-mastery, however, only lays the groundwork for ethical leadership.

Virtue ethics extends self-mastery to the way people should develop their character and patterns of reaction and engagement with life. It attempts to identify the characteristics required by a person who has responsibilities (Cooper, 1987). A virtue embodies a pattern of habitual perception and behavior. The patterns and habits arise from how a person is raised, but also from his or her training and self-development. To possess a virtue such as prudence means that a person's emotions and perceptions are trained and aligned with moral purposes so that they support rather than subvert responsible judgment. Personal actions play out over time as choices that react back and form habits. The choices build a pattern of judgments that habitually identify and internalize the morally important aspects of a situation (Sherman, 1989). Personal virtues are not immutable. People can train themselves over time to approach problems in different manners, to judge according to dif-

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ferent standards, and to choose different ways (Budziszewski, 1988).

A virtue-based ethics reinforces leadership ethics because it focuses on the responsibility of the person. Without this focus, the exercise of power reduces to what Vaclav Havel called the "innocent power," of the individual actor who becomes an "innocent tool of an 'innocent, anonymous power, legitimized by science, cybernetics, ideology, law, abstraction and objectivity—that is, by everything except personal responsibility to human beings as persons and neighbors," (Havel, 1986:136-158).

Responsible political leaders should exercise judgment that unites moral and practical concerns in a world of conflict (Anderson, 1977; Beiner, 1983; Steinberger, 1993, chs. 1, 2, 5).² A leader's virtues define the stable cognitive and emotional responses to that world which guide, inform, and sustain judgment and action. This involves not just trained emotions but also a trained perception where an individual identifies the morally salient aspects of a situation and frames a judgment around these aspects (Sherman, 1989). Virtues do not replace laws, norms, or duties in political life, but they give life to these moral imperatives. When situations grow complicated or no self-evident moral answers emerge, virtues provide the stability of judgment and endurance to pursue moral commitment across time and obstacles.

Virtues alone cannot sustain a full political ethics. Many virtues such as courage, temperance, justice, generosity, and mercy cluster around political action. But virtues understood as simple dispositions without judgment can be blind and fall prey to Aristotle's reminder that any aspect of life carried to an extreme can become a vice (Aristotle, 1969, II). They require judgment in their exercise. If a person wishes to be generous, she or he still needs to decide when to be generous, to whom, and how much. Similarly, multiple virtues, like principles, might confront other virtues and it will often be unclear what concrete action is required of a moral commitment or virtue? Finally, virtues can be subsumed by other less desirable ends. For example, a soldier may behave with courage but serve an evil cause; evil dictators can act with mercy; greedy individuals can show generosity to friends. Virtues alone cannot provide the moral foundations of all action (Smith, 1976, VI, iii, 12). They co-exist in dialogue with norms, principles, and conceptions of the good society that bound them and give them a direction. Consequently, classical discourse about political judgment cites prudence as the central virtue because it gives concrete "shape," to the moral aspirations, responsibilities, and obligations of a person (Aquinas, 1967, qu. 47, art. 2, 5, 7; Pieper, 1966).

Unfortunately modern accounts of political prudence have done little to bolster prudence's traditional role. Building on Hobbes, the modern accounts generally postulate prudence as a form of extended rational self-interest (Hobbes, 1967, chs. 22-25; Grundstein, 1986; Smith, 1976, VI 3). Prudence reduces to algorithmic accounts of how to maximize goals within constraints and over time or becomes the engine for garnering consent among self-interested agents. It suffers from a very high level of abstraction

and offers little help in the formation of the goals themselves (Parfit, 1986; Bricker, 1986). Adam Smith referred to such prudence as important but limited, a virtue commended with "cold esteem," but incapable of sustaining a full moral life (Smith, 1976, VI, i, 14).

This article builds on an older account of political prudence, which Alberto Coll (1991) identifies as "normative prudence." Normative prudence focuses upon the obligation of the leader to achieve moral self-mastery, attend to the context of the situation, and through deliberation and careful judgment seek the ends of political excellence.

Political Prudence

Most virtues can best be understood as the normative practices entailed in seeking excellence in a domain of human conduct. The standards of excellence derive from the ends of the activity within the domain of conduct (MacIntyre, 1984; Cooper, 1987). This article argues that political prudence encompasses the logic of excellence in political achievement and extends the range of moral concerns and justifications. Excellent political achievements consist of outcomes that: (1) gain legitimacy, (2) endure over time, (3) strengthen the political community, (4) unleash minimum unforeseen consequences, (5) require reasonable use of power resources, and (6) endure without great violence and coercion to enforce the outcome (Dobel, 1988, 29-44).

Political prudence consists of a family of justifications derived from excellent achievement in the domain of politics. Prudent judgment identifies salient moral aspects of a political situation which a leader has a moral obligation to attend to in making a decision. This approach moves the understanding of prudence beyond recitation of examples and extracts reference points that give an intellectual content to virtue's demands.

Political prudence encompasses seven overlapping dimensions of political achievement clustered into three related areas. The first area clusters around the capacities a leader should cultivate to act with prudence: (1) disciplined reason and openness to experience, and (2) foresight and attention to the long term. The second area clusters around the modalities statecraft leaders should master: (3) deploying power; (4) timing and momentum, and (5) the proper relation of means and ends. The third area clusters around the attributes of political outcomes to which prudent statecraft should attend: (6) the durability and legitimacy of outcomes, and (7) the consequences for community. To be politically prudent, a leader should attend to each of the seven dimensions. Failure to account for them means a leader is guilty of negligence.³

Disciplined Reason and Openness

The Latin derivation of prudence means to view or see and reinforces the emphasis upon self-mastery. Prudence requires disciplined reason—the ability to see and think clearly and not be overcome by passions or egocentricity. Talleyrand suggested that good leaders should bear little malice and hold few grudges in politics (Cooper, 1932, 43, and passim). Emotion-driven decisions undisciplined by reflection can lead to irresponsible judgments, failure, or great loss for little gains. Everyone who depends upon a leader relies

upon the leader to remain clear-eyed and think through actions.

Prudent reason builds upon openness and attention to the complexity of reality. Good judgment requires good information and a willingness to learn. Prudent leaders strive to see the world clearly and seek out knowledge of the physical, social, and economic world around them. Additionally, reason and openness lead to deliberation and learning. Cardinal Richelieu, like Machiavelli, urged public officials not to listen to flatterers and friends in making off-the-cuff judgments. A clear sign of prudence is the willingness of a person to seek the advice and help of skilled experts in making policy. Richelieu emphasized the need to build a capacity for honest and expert advice into institutions and encourage individuals to speak the truth, not hide it (Richelieu, 1961; Machiavelli, 1973, XVII, XVIII). This approach requires self-knowledge so leaders can hire to complement their knowledge and strengths. This capacity to learn from and utilize others more capable than oneself highlights the centrality of reason, deliberation, and openness to prudent judgment. It also guards against the self-deception to which many leaders fall prey (Goldhamer, 1978; Janis, 1982).

Attention to openness also means that a prudent leader does not close off options needlessly or prematurely, or overcommit to one solution. Any action might generate unanticipated consequences and harms. Prudence requires that leaders be willing to rethink actions and confront the problems as well as the good of their actions. A consistent enemy of prudent judgment is ideological rigidity, which interprets all information within one frame of reference and drives to one outcome regardless of costs. To be driven by emotion, vengeance, anger, ambition, or pride violates the responsibilities of leadership and the requirements of prudence.

Much prudent knowledge focuses upon historical knowledge. Such knowledge involves discovering as much as possible about the history of institutions, allies, and adversaries. A leader should try to learn their practices and understandings, to be able to work with them and avoid being manipulated or making ignorant mistakes. Leaders have special obligations to understand the level of trustworthiness as well as the intentions and capacities of people, especially adversaries. This obliges leaders to develop a capacity to project themselves into the minds of others and know their cultural and historical background (Neustadt and May, 1986). Not exploring and understanding the historical aspects of a case violates political prudence.

Foresight and the Long Term

The Latin derivation of the term prudence also suggests that prudent leaders exercise foresight. They try to anticipate future issues and scan the power and interests of the actors in their political world. For Machiavelli, the hallmark of a good leader was the capacity to foresee and address political problems early (Machiavelli, 1973, III). Foresight also requires that leaders try to think through the consequences of action and avoid actions where probable negative consequences will overwhelm the good sought. In a similar way, this foresight and attending to reality causes leaders to give special consideration to preparation for reasonable contingencies and to dealing with the power and hostility of others. Successful foresight also enables leaders to act when opportunity arises.

Foresight drives a leader to a long-term view. Thinking of the

long term disciplines reason to think more clearly and be less overwhelmed by the passions of the moment or the clamor of groups demanding immediate solutions. Although everyone is dead in the long run, this discipline of reflection focuses upon issues of durability and legitimacy and drives prudence beyond the narrow self-interest of a particular person. For instance, the moment of victory truly tests prudent statecraft. When Napoleon defeated Austria at **Ulm**, **Talleyrand** could not convince him to treat Austria well. Napoleon's short-term ambition sowed the seeds of the long-term alliances against him. After the German victory at Sadowa, on the other hand, **Bismarck** persuaded the Kaiser to treat Austria leniently and sowed the seeds of a future **alliance** (Cooper, 1932, 149). The long-run perspective will compete with and conflict with the short-term requirements of power and maintaining a coalition to attain a goal. At the Versailles conference the British prime minister, Lloyd George, usually allied with President **Woodrow Wilson**, constantly fought to ameliorate the worst impositions upon Germany. At several points, however, he acceded to issues like war reparations and the war-guilt clause either to hold France in the coalition or satisfy his parliamentary supporters (**Lentin**, 1993).

Viewing from the long term enables a leader to link achievements to the discovery and unfolding of what one's moral commitments require in a constrained situation. When Dag **Ham-marskjold** became secretary general of the United Nations, he worked with great care to build the **office** of the secretary general into a significant actor in the international arena. The institution had no real resources and little stature. With a constant attention to "the long run," he created **an** important role by building on the rhetorical and legal possibilities of the United Nations Charter, incessantly practicing self-disciplined civility, and creating a crucial role as an intermediary who enabled leaders to escape from the rhetoric and confrontation in which they were enmeshed **as** in the Lebanon crisis of 1958. Every action he took was predicated on the notion that "only partial results can be expected in each generation" and humans and institutions must "grow" into solutions to problems (Jones, 1993). Prudent leaders understand that preparation for windows of opportunity, building coalitions, and building acceptance of policies all depend on sustained efforts that often play out as momentum and direction of movement rather than as a static and determinable outcome.

Deploying Power

In political life power determines the range of possibilities for achievement. Too often people in positions of authority disdain the exercise of power as contaminating them or the office. They believe their technical competence or authority should ensure their position. No one with responsibilities, however, can stand above the play of power. All **official** life is rife with politics, and official or **unofficial** leadership requires skillful mastery of the art of acquiring and deploying power. Political achievement depends upon attention to one's own power as **well** as the ability to perform the hard work of marshaling power and resources to the achievement of goals.

A leader should also understand and appreciate the power of adversaries and allies. When Konrad Adenauer became president of a war-devastated Germany after World War II, he presided over a

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desperately weakened country with little effective power. Yet he developed his own power base by gaining the trust and respect of his allies as well as playing on their own fears to gain their aid in Germany's redevelopment and to gain support for Germany's **rearmament** and reintegration into the Western European community (Hodge, 1993). Good leaders understand power in all its manifestations and know how to create it even when none exists. Power must also endure for achievements to endure, and the deployment of power should look toward durability as well as **initial** success. When Nancy Hanks took over the fledgling National Endowment of the Arts in the late **1960s**, the agency struggled with **little** support and much skepticism. Hanks built allies within the executive office, Congress, and the arts community and worked to build a rhetorical mission that connected arts funding with the aspirations of democratic life. Her nonpartisan institution building enabled the endowment to flourish through numerous changes of administration and controversy (**Wyszomirski**, 1987).

Titian's painting *An Allegory of Prudence* embodies the Renaissance understanding of the prudent leader **that** highlights these concerns. A man's head has three facets, youth, maturity, age. Each aspect of the man looks in a different direction surrounded by an animal avatar. A dog look to the rear, a lion look across the plane to the viewer, and a boar look forward. The dog respects history and what came before; the lion look to the present with strength and fortitude; the boar seek to divine the future and anticipate the consequences of action. In more colloquial terms, prudent leaders cover their rear, their flank, and their front.

Timing and Momentum

Given the importance of circumstances and power to achievement, the ability to time one's actions to accord with the greatest strength of a position and the weakest position of an opponent is crucial. Sometimes this takes years of patient preparation working to attain a particular alignment of power and produce the cultural and political conditions for acceptance. It may mean working patiently for a shift in the terms of debate or an incident that galvanizes support around an issue, **as** President Lyndon Johnson did when he used John Kennedy's assassination to make the civil rights bill a testimony to a martyred leader. Similarly, President Harry Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall used the communist threat in Eastern Europe as the opportunity to overcome domestic opposition and isolationism and push the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe after World War II (**Pogue**, 1987, chs. 12-15). Political leadership involves the ability to act with care and wait with patience, then move **with** quickness and surety when the opportunity arises. As Machiavelli suggests, the lion and the fox should dwell in the same person or leadership cadre (Machiavelli, 1973, XVIII).

Prudent leadership does not mean cautious or cramped leadership. Although it is profoundly important to avoid harm and loss,

Saint Thomas Aquinas argued that prudence actively seeks to accomplish good (Aquinas, 1967, 47). A prudent leader's intelligence looks for opportunities that permit action to be taken consonant with goals and power. Principles, laws, and norms seldom dictate one clear action in concrete situations. As long as one does not expect a utopian fulfillment of all goals, then every action and attainment will only approximate moral aspirations. Achievements often consist of a direction and unfolding of goals, of initiating and sustaining momentum towards greater achievement later. For ten years Congress could not revise the Clean Air Act because of the complex politics involved. Senator George Mitchell, Democratic majority and minority leader during this period, was committed to a revision that did not destroy the law's intent. He spent much of that decade laying down the foundations of a compromise one step at a time by authorizing reports or keeping various issues alive in subcommittees. When President Bush signaled his willingness to work for a bill and break a decade of gridlock, Mitchell pulled together the various strands which he had woven together over the years to make a compromise possible (Cohen, 1992). Patience and timing do not reduce to opportunism or quiescence but represent a dialogue between possibilities and ideals.

Statecraft never achieves final or perfect solutions. Given the constraints of politics and the power of others, most outcomes comport only partially with one's moral aspirations. They will be imperfect. In such a world, leaders need to think in terms such as movement, direction, and momentum as they adapt and learn from the possibilities and from experience (Behn, 1991). An achievement may not be perfect, but when thinking of the long term, of the need to build the foundations of legitimacy and durability, a leader may often settle for movement along a road. Timing also involves the capacity to remember, as Titian hints, that the past, the future, and the present must always be seen as a continuum. Actions should account for the past, attend to the present with its constraints and opportunities, and aim with care and humility to future consequences. Any leader who does not account for all these dimensions of time risks moral negligence.

Means and Ends

The tradition of normative prudence emphasizes the importance of aligning the means and the ends. In the press of daily politics, pressures to reach an end often override qualms about the means. Linking the two is crucial to prudent leadership. This has three dimensions. The first dimension is finding the right means to attain an end. The means of influence are many and varied, and the right combination of deliberation, persuasion, incentives, coercion, and authority is crucial. Misfits between means and ends will result in failure. Just as important the means used affect the quality of relations in an organization or politics at the end.

Second, the means used, the resources expended, and the opportunities forgone should be proportionate to the end sought. Additionally, the means must substantially contribute to the end and not be gratuitous, wasteful, or inefficient. While the use of coercion is most often cited as the test case for the requirements of proportionality and contribution, these standards apply to all dimensions of political action. In 1986, the Reagan administration sought to deter leaks and spying by pushing a program to require

lie detector tests of all government officials with access to classified material. Secretary of State George Shultz fought the program to the point of threatening resignation. He believed the proposed solution would undercut his entire leadership style of building trust on trust. It would sabotage the culture of the State Department and put innocent people at risk while not deterring trained spies. In all these terms the lie detector test failed the proportionality test (Shultz, 1993, 712, 800-804).

Third, prudent leaders recognize that means profoundly affect the end. Ends achieved with morally problematic means can be undermined by the illegitimacy, resentment, and anger that are the moral residuals of excessive and immoral methods to attain goals. The means used can also rebound and affect the quality of humanity of the people pursuing the policy. The United States learned during the Vietnam War that the means used can undermine the legitimacy of the leaders and institutions pursuing the policy. Additionally the means used, as in forming a coalition, rebound forward upon the outcome of the goals. Mitchell's final bill on clean air was shaped by the needs to keep the coalition together, ranging from tax breaks for ethanol to subsidies to end acid rain (Cohen, 1992).

Coercion looms as the most dangerous means and poses special concerns. Politics often appear to take on a Mephistophelian character because it seems to reduce to issues of coercion and violence. But all prudent political achievement should breed accomplishments that endure and gain legitimacy with an economical use of coercion. The more sustained coercion is required to enforce an achievement, the less likely it is that the achievement has earned legitimacy or will endure over time.

Coercion, however, is often necessary to define the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The threat of coercion is often crucial to give others the incentive to comply with an outcome. At other times, government coercion can deter, defend, and set boundaries on regime behavior and protect individuals from exploitation. Prudent leaders, however, recognize coercion and violence as dangerous means that can entangle and poison the ends sought. They should be used with economy and care (Wolin, 1960). Gains wrought by coercion have their own dynamic and exact a never-ending cost from a society in terms of resources spent, investment deferred, and social strictures imposed.⁴ Over time coercion can silence and induce grudging acceptance, but it also elicits violent counteractions. Forced compliance strategies can create a world of illusory agreement and brittle acceptance, but unending application of coercion generates moral problems and is inconsistent with the core of prudence.

Durability and Legitimacy

Excellent political achievement endures. Fleeting success or actions that arouse backlashes to what a leader sought to achieve should not qualify as acts of excellent political achievement. A prudent leader will work to ensure that achievements will endure and gain legitimacy in the eyes of the individuals who must live with them. Political achievement earns its legitimacy with people by the provision of benefits, respect for the people's interests and commitments, and links to their cultural terms of right. David Lilienthal served as a founding commissioner of the Tennessee

Valley Authority (TVA). The public corporation was approved after a ten-year congressional battle and faced great opposition and skepticism. **Lilienthal**, much like Nancy Hanks at the National Endowment of the Humanities, worked with other members of the TVA Board to develop a legitimizing rhetoric of grass roots democracy coupled with strong consultation to anchor the TVA. The TVA focused **its** mission on the provision of basic needs that benefited the local constituencies and wedded them to it. The rhetoric blunted the conservative opposition to public provision of such services while the benefits cemented local and regional support. This combination stabilized the mission and support of the TVA for its first several decades (Hargrove, 1987). Prudent leaders should always attend to their government's legitimacy and credibility. These are essential social and political resources for the society, and leaders are responsible not to squander but to protect, restore, and augment them.

When Konrad Adenauer worked to establish democratic practices in Germany after World War II, he realized that provision of economic welfare and prosperity would earn the government trust and legitimacy in a way nothing else could. Adenauer, allied with his brilliant finance minister, Ludwig Erhard, devoted time and energy to forge a viable and vibrant economy even as he used fear of the communists to unite his state and garner American support and aid for his fledgling state (Hodge, 1993; Ellwood, 1992). Together they helped create a strong viable democracy and the greatest European political success of the postwar era.

The means used **also** affect the quality and durability of the outcome. When George Washington led the fight for independence in the United States, he instructed his soldiers not to steal or forcibly take supplies but wherever possible to buy them and respect the property rights of the landowners. At the same time, he treated the **loyalists** with leniency to prevent long-term alienation from the new state. He believed that only such treatment could build **loyalty** and legitimacy for the beleaguered American government (Flexner, 1974). In perhaps his greatest act of prudence, he retired from the presidency after two terms. This set an indelible precedent, ensured a peaceful transition of power for a revolutionary regime, and ended all aspirations for a monarchical government (Wills, 1984). In all these cases, **durability depends upon** connecting the achievement to the perceived interests of the parties and citizens involved and realizing the intimate connection of ends to means. Accomplishments or policies, however well-intentioned or morally defensible, will not endure if they do not ground themselves in the interests of those affected. Without this focus, many solutions will erode, dissipate, or require greater and greater amounts of coercion to maintain.

Building Community

Prudent leaders hold special responsibilities to maintain and strengthen community foundations. Excellent political achievements do not stand in isolation but sustain the legitimacy of institutions and build community. Vadav Havel has argued that "those who find themselves in politics therefore bear a heightened responsibility for the moral state of society, and it is their responsibility to seek out the best in that society, and to develop and strengthen it." Havel discusses the special obligation of leaders to sustain an **inclu-**

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sive society where diverse groups and interests can engage in political and civil conflict and cooperation. The conditions of social integration, the capacity of members and groups within a society to interact peacefully, and to act with a modicum of civility and respect towards each other, cannot be controlled by leaders, but they can be influenced by example and policy (Havel, 1992, 4-6). President Nelson Mandela of South Africa responded to just these concerns about long-term community when, after years of imprisonment and with terrorism and tensions rising, he became the first **black leader** of his country. He initiated a careful campaign of national reconciliation designed simultaneously to reassure the once dominant white minority and provide hope and rewards for the newly enfranchised black majority. The policies attempted the very **difficult** feat of creating a political community where civil war once raged, and establishing trust where little existed (Mandela, 1994).

This obligation to strengthen the communal affiliations and bonds among members of the society should inform and constrain judgments as a substantive demand of political prudence. The possibility of political community depends upon trust. Trust for each other and trust in institutions are the social resources and capital that leaders and major institutions should work to create and sustain. Without trust among citizens, institutions, and leaders, the capacity of the society to act for common purposes **declines**. The cost of common endeavors increases as does the interaction costs of all social relations. Like all social capital trust is created by interactions over time and is solidified by the meaningful creations of social welfare from the pattern of interactions and communal affiliations. Prudent leadership entails special responsibilities to maintain this dimension of community and its common possibilities (Dunn, 1990).

Prudent Leadership

Prudence does not encompass all public ethics. It does, however, expand the range of moral resources available to leaders and avoids the overdrawn distinctions between politics and **morality**. The morality of statecraft is neither demonic nor romantic, but built upon the foundations and circumstances of human ethics. To the extent that all moral action is underdetermined and takes place in a world of limited resources and constraints set by circumstances, all morality is imperfect. **All** relational morality strives for the best outcome "all things considered" or "given the circumstances." Politics does not differ fundamentally from the morality by which most people live everyday. Political leadership may be shaped by the responsibility to others and by the lack of mutuality or problems posed by hostility and threats, but it differs from everyday morality in degree, not in kind.

Understanding prudence as a shaping and active virtue connected to foresight and dynamic judgment means that prudence does not reduce to caution or conservatism. The British historian G. M. Trevelyan described Lord Grey's actions in the Reform Act of 1832, which abolished the rotten boroughs in Britain and extended the suffrage, as "one of the most prudent acts of daring in history." Trevelyan added that a "a more perfect bill (judged by 20th century standards) would have failed to pass in 1832, and its rejection would sooner or later have been followed by a civil war" (Trevelyan, 1920, 268, 372). As many prudent leaders do, Lord Grey saw the need to act boldly to avoid severe problems, and then he carefully set out to gain the greatest good permitted by the circumstances of the time as well as building a coalition and solution that would endure and earn its own legitimacy despite its imperfections. In a similar vein, when Secretary of State George Shultz recognized the fundamental shift that had occurred in the Soviet Union with the advent of **Mikhail** Gorbachev, he began the arduous task of changing President Ronald Reagan's ideological hostility toward the Soviet Union. Shultz worked to persuade a recalcitrant administration to change 40 years of unremitting enmity towards the Soviet Union to one of cautious support of reform (Shultz, 1993). Political prudence possesses extraordinary versatility, and it has been a modern mistake to narrow its application to self-interest or a cautious and tepid disposition.

Prudence understood as shaping solutions within constraints also questions the importance of "circumstances" or "necessity" as the overpowering moral force they often appear to be in justifications. What often distinguishes a great from a good leader is his or her capacity to understand that circumstances themselves can be subject to prudent action and change. The argument so often offered as a justification or really an "excuse" for action by "necessity" assumes: (1) that the public purposes remain immutable; (2) that the action required is the only way to achieve the **fixed** purpose; (3) that the circumstances and time constraints require one to do only *this* action at *this* time to achieve those goals.

According to the insights of political prudence, individuals choose that goal from among many. Individuals choose to accept one particular shape as the content of that goal. Individuals choose to accept the circumstances as determinative and do not choose to try and change them or the rules of the game. Statecraft, however, demonstrates that enemies can become friends with effort, imagination, and self-interest; coalitions can be restructured, and resources can be rearranged and redirected to meet goals. Richard Nixon's opening to China demonstrated his grasp that the rules of the Cold War were limitations on action, not laws of history. Through careful preparation, he waited for the right opportunity

and transformed the relations of the United States to the dominant partners of the communist world. In forging the Marshall Plan, President Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall helped change the **political** landscape and co-opt the opposition by connecting European exports to the midwestern farmers. This gained conservative support, just as the later creation of a food stamp program for the poor transformed political constraints by using vouchers, solidifying the support of conservative midwestern farm states for the program. Political prudence understood in this way narrows tremendously the argument from necessity and rejects an unimaginative acceptance of "circumstances" or "conditions" as permanent necessities.

Political prudence deeply informs ethical leadership. Starting with the obligation for self-mastery, it generates a checklist of concerns that responsible leaders have a moral obligation to account for in their judgments. Political prudence is not simply a disposition of character to act, or a narrative of exemplars. It is a virtue linked to the moral responsibilities of political leadership **to-discern** the prudential aspects of a situation. Political prudence's intellectual content arises from the full dimensions of excellence in political achievement. The nature of political achievement generates a family of justifications for action which carry moral weight and to which leaders have an obligation to attend. They should structure perception and reflection in a situation. These justifications provide guidance for the leader, but they also provide standards of judgment for others to assist or criticize actions of leaders. They are: (1) disciplined **reason** and openness to experience and knowledge; (2) foresight and attention to the long term; (3) deployment of power and resources; (4) timing, momentum, and direction; (5) the proper alignment of means and ends; (6) the durability and legitimacy of outcomes; and (7) building and sustaining community

If leaders account for each aspect, they have lived up to part of their ethical responsibilities as leaders; if they fail, they are guilty of moral negligence and irresponsibility. Political prudence does not cover all morality, neither does it guarantee success. Negligent leaders can succeed by accident, by luck, or by the incompetence of others. Paradoxically, even prudent leaders can fail. Political prudence flows from the responsibilities of leadership and power and provides a necessary but not sufficient ground for ethical leadership.



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Notes

1. John Dunn (1990, 193-216) has **correctly** discussed the need to 'democratize prudence' and its obligations beyond those who have assumed responsibility in various positions.
2. The traditional understanding of normative prudence sees it as contributing to the correct choice of moral action on two levels. First, it helps humans sort out and balance decisions when multiple normative **imperatives** conflict. Second, it comprehends efforts to give reality to moral commitments and responsibilities. **Although** these two levels are conceptually distinct, they may interact. For instance, if several principles or goods conflict, a leader may choose to act on the one that he or she

- believes is most feasible, **or** will endure the longest, **or** involves the least amount of violence. The dimensions of prudence then legitimately affect that realm of judgement. This article focuses on the second level of judgement and explores the dimensions involved in political achievement.
3. Both Aquinas and Aristotle develop more elaborate lists of characteristics necessary to judge with prudence (Co!!, 1991, 36-44). Their **characteristics** deeply inform the approach I have developed, which attempts to provide more operational **terms** for them.
4. Paul Kennedy (1987) provides an insightful account of the cost of the projection of power and coercion for dominant powers.

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