



Leaders of Men

Woodrow Wilson

June 17, 1890

Only those are 'leaders of men,' in the general eye, who lead in action. The title belongs, if the whole field of the world be justly viewed, no more rightfully to the men who lead in action than to those who lead in silent thought. A book is often quite as quickening a trumpet as any made of brass and sounded in the field. But it is the estimate of the world that bestows their meaning upon words: and that estimate is not often very far from the fact. The men who act stand nearer to the mass of men than do the men who write; and it is at their hands that new thought gets its translation into the crude language of deeds. The very crudity of that language of deeds exasperates the sensibilities of the author; and his exasperation proves the world's point. He may be *back* of the leaders, but he is not the leader. In his thought there is due and studied proportion; all limiting considerations are set in their right places, as guards to ward off misapprehension. Every cadence of right utterance is made to sound in the careful phrases, in the perfect adjustments of sense. Translate the thought into action and all its shadings disappear. It stands out a naked, lusty thing, sure to rasp the sensibilities of every man of fastidious taste. Stripped for action, a thought must always shock those who cultivate the nice fashions of literary dress, as authors do. But it is only when thought does thus stand forth in unabashed force that it can perform deeds of strength in the arena round about which the great public sit as spectators, awarding the prizes by the suffrage of their applause.

Here, unquestionably, we come upon the heart of the perennial misunderstanding between the men who write and the men who act. The men who write love proportion; the men who act must strike out practicable lines of action, and neglect proportion. This would seem to explain the well-nigh universal repugnance felt by literary men towards Democracy. The arguments which induce popular action must always be broad and obvious arguments. Only a very gross substance of concrete conception can make any impression on the minds of the masses; they must get their ideas very absolutely put, and are much readier to receive a half-truth which they can promptly understand than a whole truth which has too many sides to be seen all at once. How can any man whose method is the method of artistic completeness of thought and expression, whose mood is the mood of contemplation, for a moment understand or tolerate the majority whose purpose and practice it is to strike out broad, rough-hewn *policies*, whose mood is the mood of action? The great stream of freedom which

"broadens down from precedent to precedent,"

is not a clear mountain current such as the fastidious man of chastened taste likes to drink from: it is polluted with not a few of the coarse elements of the gross world on its banks; it is heavy with the drainage of a very material universe.

One of the nicest *tests* of the repugnance felt by the literary nature for the sort of leadership and action which commends itself to the world of common men you may yourself supply. Asking some author of careful, discriminative thought to utter his ideas to a *mass-meeting*, from a platform occupied by 'representative citizens.' He will shrink from it as he would shrink from being publicly dissected! Even to hear *some one else*, who's given to apt public speech, re-render his thoughts in oratorical phrase and make them acceptable to a miscellaneous audience, is often a mild, sometimes an acute, form of torture for him. If the world would really know his thoughts for what they are, let them go to his written words, con his phrases, join paragraph with paragraph, chapter with chapter: then, the whole form and fashion of his conceptions impressed upon their minds, they will know him as no platform speaker can ever him known. Of course such preferences greatly limit his audience. Not many out of the multitudes who crowd about him buy his books. But, if the few who can understand read and are convinced, will not his thoughts finally leaven the mass?

The true leader of men, it is plain, is equipped by lacking such sensibilities, which the literary man, when analyzed, is found to possess as a chief part of his make-up. He lacks that subtle power of sympathy which enables the men who write the great works of the imagination to put their minds under the spell of a thousand individual motives not their own but the living force in several characters they interpret. No popular leader could write fiction. He could not write fiction. He could not conceive the Ring and the Book the impersonation of a half-score points of view. An imaginative realization of other natures and minds than his own is as impossible for him, as his own commanding, dominating frame of mind and character is impossible for the sensitive seer whose imagination can give life to a thousand sperate characters. Mr. Browning could no more have been a statesman-if statesmen are to be popular leaders also-than Mr. Disraeli could write a novel. Mr. Browning could see from individual's point of view intellectual sympathy came amiss to him. Mr. Disraeli could see from no point of view but his own,-and the characters which he put into those

works of his which were *meant* to be novels move as mere puppets to his will, -as the men he governed did. They are his mouthpieces simply and are as little like themselves as were the Tory squires in the Commons like themselves after they became his chess-men.

One of the most interesting and suggestive criticisms made upon Mr. Gladstone's leadership during the life of his ministries was that he was not decisive in the House of Commons as Palmerston and Peel had been before him. He could not help seeing two sides of a question: the force of objections evidently told upon him. His conclusions seemed the nice result of a balancing of considerations, not the commands of an unhesitating conviction. A party likes to be led by very absolute opinions: it chills it to hear it admitted that there is some reason on the other side. *Mr. Peel* saw both sides of many questions; but he never saw both sides at once. He saw now one, and afterwards, by slow and honest conversion, the other. While he is in opposition Mr. Gladstone's transparent honesty adds to his moral weight with the people: for in opposition only the whole attitude is significant. But it was different when he was in power. For a governing party particulars of posture and policy tell. For them the consistency of unhesitating opinion counts heavily as an element of success and prestige.

That the leader of men must have such sympathetic and penetrative insight as shall enable him to discern quite unerringly the motives which move other men *in the mass* is of course self-evident; but the insight which he must have is not the Shakespearian insight. It need not pierce the particular secrets of *individual* men: it need only know what it is that lies waiting to be stirred in the minds and purposes of groups and masses of men. Besides, it is not a sympathy that serves, but a sympathy whose power is to command, to command by knowing its instrument. The seer, whose function is imaginative interpretation, is the man of science; the leader is the mechanic. The chemist knows his materials interpretatively: he can make subtlest analysis of all their affinities, of all their antipathies; can give you the point of view of every gas or metal or liquid with regard to every other liquid or gas or metal; he can marry, he can divorce, he can destroy them. He could suppose fictitious cases with regard to the conduct of the 'elements' which would appear most clever and probable to other chemists: which would appear witty and credible, doubtless, to the 'elements' themselves, could they know. But the mining-engineer's point of view is very different. He, too, must know chemical properties, but only in order that he may *use* them-only in order to have the right sort of explosion at the right place. So, too, the mechanic's point of view must be quite different from that of the physicist. He must know what his tools can do and what they will stand; but he must be something more than interpreter of their qualities-and something quite different. "It is the general opinion of locomotive superintendents that it is not essential that the men who run locomotives should be good mechanics. Brunel, the distinguished civil engineer, said that he never would trust himself to run a locomotive because he was sure to think of some problem relating to his profession which would distract his attention from the engine. It is probably a similar reason which unfits good mechanics for being good locomotive runners."¹

Imagine Thackeray leading the House of Commons, or Mr. Lowell on the stump. How comically would their very genius defeat them. The special gift of these two men is a *critical* understanding of other men, their fallible fellow-creatures. How could their keen humorous sense of what was transpiring in the breasts of their followers and fellow-partisans be held back from banter? How could they take the mass seriously-themselves refrain from laughter and also from the temptation of provoking it? Thackeray argue patiently and respectfully with a dense country member, equipped with nothing but diverting scruples and laughable prejudices? Impossible. As well ask a biologist to treat a cat or a rabbit as if it were *a pet* with no admirable machinery inside to tempt the dissecting knife.

The competent leader of men cares little for the interior niceties of other people's characters: he cares much-everything for the external uses to which they may be put. His will seeks the lines of least resistance; but the whole question with him is a question of *the application of force*. There are men to be moved: how shall he move them? He supplies the power; others supply only the materials upon which that power operates. The power will fail if it be misapplied; it will be misapplied if it be not suitable both in kind and method to the nature of the materials upon which it is spent; but that nature is, after all, only its means. It is the *power* which dictates, dominates: the materials yield. Men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader.

It often happens that the leader displays a sagacity and an insight in the handling of men in the mass which quite baffle the wits of the shrewdest analyst of *individual* character. Men in the mass differ from men as individuals. A man who knows, and keenly knows, every man in town may yet fail to understand a mob or a mass-meeting of his fellow-townsmen. Just as the whole tone and method suitable for a public speech are foreign to the tone and method proper in individual, face to face dealings with separate men, so is the art of leading different from the art of writing novels.

Some of the gifts and qualities which most commend the literary man to success would inevitably doom the would-be leader to failure. One could wish for no better proof and example of this than is furnished by the career of that most table of great Irishmen, Edmund Burke. Everyone knows that Burke's life was spent in Parliament, and everyone knows that the eloquence he poured forth there is as deathless as our literature; and yet everyone is left to wonder in presence of the indubitable fact that he was of so little consequence in the actual direction of affairs. How noble a figure in the history of English politics: how large a man; how commanding a mind; and yet how ineffectual in the work of bringing men to turn their faces as he would have them, toward the high purposes he had ever in view! We hear with astonishment that after the delivery of that consummate speech on the Nabob of Arcot's debts, which everybody has read, Pitt and Grenville easily agree that they need not trouble themselves to make any reply.

His speech on conciliation with America is not only wise beyond precedent in the annals of debate, but marches also with a force of phrase which, it would seem, must have been irresistible; and yet we know that it emptied the House of all audience! You remember what Goldsmith playfully suggested for Burke's epitaph:

"Here lies our good Edmund, whose genius was such,
We scarcely can praise it, or blame it, too much;
Who, too deep for his hearers, still went on refining,
And thought of convincing while they thought of dining:
Though equal to all things, for all things unfit,
Too nice for a statesman, too proud for a wit;
For a patriot too cool; for a drudge disobedient,
And too fond of the right to pursue the expedient.
In short, 'twas his fate, unemploy'd, or in place, sir,
To eat mutton cold, and cut blocks with a razor."

Certainly this is too small a measure for so big a man, as Goldsmith himself would probably have been the first to admit; but the description is *almost* as true as it is clever. It is better to read Burke than to have heard him. The thoughts which miscarried in parliaments of George III have had their triumphs in parliaments of a later day, -have established themselves at the heart of such policies as are to-day liberalizing the world. His power is literary, not forensic. He was no leader of men. He was an organizer of thought, but not of party victories. "Burke is a wise man," said Fox, "but he is wise too soon." He was wise also too much. He went on from the wisdom of to-day to the wisdom of to-morrow, to the wisdom which is for all time. It was impossible he should be followed so far. Men want the wisdom which they are expected to apply to be obvious, and to be conveniently limited in amount. They want a thoroughly trustworthy article, with very simple adjustments and manifest present uses. Elaborate it, increase the expenditure of thought necessary to obtain it, and they will decline to listen, you must keep it in stock for the use of the next generation.

Men are not led by being told what they do not know. *Persuasion* is a force, *but not information*; and persuasion is accomplished by creeping into the confidence of those you would lead. Their confidence is not gained by preaching new thoughts to them. It is gained by qualities which they can recognize at first sight by arguments which they can assimilate at once: by the things which find easy and intermediate entrance into their minds, and which are easily transmitted to the palms of their hands or to the ends of their walking-sticks in the shape of applause. Burke's thoughts penetrate the mind and possess the heart of the quiet student. His style of saying things fills the attention as if it were finest music. But his are not thoughts to be shouted over; his is not a style to ravish the ear of the voter at the hustings. If you would be a leader of men, you must lead your own generation, not the next. Your playing must be good *now*, while the play is on the boards and the audience in the seats: it will not get you the repute of a great actor to have excellencies discovered in you afterwards. Burke's genius, besides, made conservative men uneasy. How *could* a man be *safe* who had so many ideas?

Englishmen of the present generation wonder that England should ever have been ruled by John Addington, a man about whom nothing was accentuated but his dullness; by Mr. Perceval, a sort of Tory squire without the usual rich and diverting blood or any irregularity of his kind; by Lord Castlereagh, whose speaking was so bad as to drive his hearers to assume that there *must* be some great purpose lurking behind its amorphous masses *somewhere*, simply because it was inconceivable that there should be in it so little purpose as it revealed. Accustomed to the aggressive and persistent power of Gladstone, the epigrammatic variety of Disraeli, the piquant indiscretions of Salisbury, they naturally marvel that they could have been *interested* enough in such men to follow or in any wise heed them. But, after all, the Englishman has not changed. He still has a sneaking distrust of successful men of thought like Mr. John Morley. An Englishman is made as uncomfortable and as indignant now by the vagaries of a man like Lord Randolph Churchill as he formally was, in times he has forgotten, by the equally bumptious young Disraeli. The story is told of a thorough-going old country Tory of the time when Pitt was displaced by Addington that, going to tell a friend of the formation of a new ministry by that excellent mediocrity, he repeated with unction the whole list of common-place men who were to constitute the new Government, and then, rubbing his hands in demonstrative satisfaction, exclaimed, "Well, thank God, we have at last got a ministry without one of those confounded men of genius in it!" Cobden was doubtless right when he said that "the only way in which the soul of a great nation can be stirred, is by appealing to its sympathies with a true principle in its unalloyed simplicity," and that it was "necessary for the concentration of a people's mind that an individual should become the incarnation of a principle"; but the emphasis should be laid on the "unalloyed simplicity" of the principle. It will not do to incarnate too many ideas at a time if you are to be universally understood and numerously followed.

Cobden himself is an excellent case in point. Embodying a true principle of unhampered commerce in its "unalloyed simplicity," he became a power in England second to none. Never did England so steadily yield to argument, so steadily thaw under persuasion, as while Cobden occupied the platform. Cobden was singularly equipped for leadership, -especially for leadership of this practical, business like kind. He had in him nothing of the literary mind, which conceives images and is dominated by associations: he conceived only facts, and was dominated by programs of reform. Going to Greece, he found Issus and Cephissus, the famed streams of Attica, ridiculous rivulets and wondered that the world should pause so often to study such Lilliputian states as classical Hellas contained when there were the politics of the United States and the vast rivers and mountains of the new continents to think about.

"What famous puffers those old Greeks were!" he exclaims. He journeyed to Egypt and sat beside Mehemet Ali, one of the fiercest warriors and most accomplished tyrants of our century, with a practical eye open to the fact that the royal viceroy was a somewhat fat personage who fell into blunders when he boasted of the cotton crops of the land he had under his heel, and a shrewd perception that his conductor and introducer, Col. C., had hit upon the wrong resource in beginning the conversation by a reference to the excellent weather in a latitude "where unlimited sunshine prevails for seven years together. He keeps the world of practical details under constant cross-examination. And when, in later days, the great anti-corn-law League is in the heat of its task of reforming the English tariff, how seriously this earnest man takes the vast fairs, the colossal bazaars, and all the other homely, bourgeois machinery by means of which the League keeps itself supplied at once with funds for its work and with that large measure of popular attention necessary to its success. This is the organizer, who is incapable of being fatigued by the commonplace-or amused by it-and who is thoroughly in love with working at a single idea.

Mark the simplicity and directness of the arguments and ideas of such men. The motives which they urge are elemental; the morality which they seek to enforce is large and obvious; the policy they emphasize purged of all subtlety. They give you the fine gold of truth in the nugget, not cunningly beaten into elaborate shapes and chased with intricate patterns. "If oratory were a business and not an art," says Mr. Justin McCarthy, "then it might be contended reasonably enough that Mr. Cobden was one of the greatest orators England has ever known. Nothing could exceed the persuasiveness of his style. His manner was simple, sweet, and earnest. It persuaded by convincing. It was transparently sincere.

But we see the same things in the oratory of Bright, with whom oratory was not a business but an art. Hear him appeal to his constituents in Birmingham, that capital of the spirit of gain, touching what he deemed an iniquitous foreign policy;

"I believe," he exclaims, "there is no permanent greatness in a nation except it be based upon morality. I do not care for military greatness or military renown. I care for the condition of the people among whom I live. There is no man in England who is less likely to speak irreverently of the Crown and Monarchy of England than I am; but crowns, coronets, mitres, military display, the pomp of war, wide colonies, and a huge empire, are, in my view, all trifles light as air, and not worth considering, unless *with* them you can have a fair share of comfort, contentment, and happiness among the great body of the people. Palaces, baronial castles, great halls, stately mansions, do not make a nation. The nation in every country dwells in the cottage; and unless the light of your constitution can shine *there*, unless the beauty of your legislation and the excellence of your statesmanship are impressed there on the feelings and conditions of the people, rely upon it you have yet to *learn* the duties of government.

"May I ask you, then, to believe, as I do most devoutly believe, that the moral law was not written for men alone in their individual character, but that it was written as well for nations, and for nations great as this of which we are citizens. If nations reject and deride that moral law, there is a penalty which will inevitably follow. It may not come at once, it may not come in our lifetime; but, rely upon it, the great Italian poet is not a poet only, but a prophet, when he says,-

"The sword of heaven is not in haste to smite,
Nor yet doth linger."

We have experience, we have beacons, we have landmarks enough. We know what the past has cost us, we know how much and how far we have wandered, but we are not left without a guide. It is true we have not, as an ancient people had, Urim and Thummim-those oracular gems on Aaron's breast-from which to take counsel, but we have the unchangeable and eternal principles of the moral law to guide us, and only so far as we walk by that guidance can we be permanently a great nation, or our people a happy people."

How simple, how evident it all is, -how commonplace the motives appealed to, -how old the moral maxim-how obvious every consideration urged. And yet how effective such a passage is, -how it carries, -what a thrill of life and of power there is in it. As simple as the quiet argument of Cobden, it is yet alight with passionate feeling. As direct and unpretentious as a bit of conversation, though elevated above the level of conversation by a sweep of accumulating phrase such as may be made effectual for the throwing down of strongholds.

Style has of course a great deal to do with such effects in popular oratory. Armies have not won battles by sword-fencing, but by the fierce cut of the sabre, the direct volley of musketry, the straightforward argument of artillery, the impetuous dash of cavalry. And it is in the same way that oratorical battles are won: not by the nice refinements of statement, the deft sword-play of dialectic fence, but by the straight and speedy thrusts of speech sent through and through the gross and obvious frame of a subject. It must be clear and always clear what the sentences would be about. They must be advanced with the firm tread of disciplined march. Their meaning must ring clear and loud.

There is also much in physical gifts, as everybody knows. The popular leader should be satisfying to the eye and to the ear: broad, sturdy, clear-eyed, musically voiced, like John Bright; built with the statu[r]e and mien of a Norse god, like Webster; towering, imperious, persuading by voice and carriage, like Clay; or vast, rugged, fulminating, like Daniel O'Connell, fit for a Celtic Olympus. It is easy to call a man like Daniel O'Connell a demagogue, but it is juster to see in him a born leader of men. We remember him as the agitator, simply, loud, incessant, a bit turbulent, not a little coarse also, full of flouts and jibes, bitter and abusive, in headlong pursuit of the aims of Irish liberty. We ought to remember him as the ardent supporter of every policy that made for English and for human liberty also, a friend of reform when reform was unpopular, a champion of oppressed classes who had almost no one else to speak for them, a battler for what was liberal and enlightened and against what was unfair and prejudiced, all along the line. He was no courter of popularity: but his heart was the heart of his people: their cause and their hopes were his. He was not their slave, nor were they his dupes. He was their mouth-piece. And *what* a mouth-piece! Nature seems to have planned him for utterance. His figure and influence loom truly grand as we look back to him standing, as he so often did, before concourses mustered, scores of thousands strong, upon the open heath to hear and to protest of Ireland's wrongs.

"His Titan strength must touch what gave it birth;
Hear him to mobs and on his mother earth."

Here is the testimony of one who saw one of those immeasurable assemblies stand round about the giant Celt and saw the Master wield his spell:

"Methought no clarion could have sent its sound
Even to the centre of the hosts around;
And, as I thought, rose the sonorous swell,
As from some church-tower swings the silvery bell.
Aloft and clear, from airy tide to tide,
It glided, easy as a bird may glide;
To the last verge of that vast audience sent,
It play'd with each wild passion as it went;
Now stirred the uproar, now the murmur still'd,
And sobs or laughter answer'd as it will'd.
Then did I know what spells of infinite choice,
To rouse or lull, has the sweet human voice;
Then did I seem to seize the sudden clue
To the grand troublous Life Antique-to view
Under the rock-stand of Demosthenes,
Mutable Athens heave her noisy seas."

This huge organization, this thrilling voice, ringing out clear and effectual over vast multitudes were, it would seem, too big, too voluminous for Parliament. There were no channels offered there which were broad and free enough to give effective course to the crude force of the man. The gross and obvious vigour of him shocked sensitive, slow, and decorous men, not accustomed to have sense served up to them with a shout. The open heath was needed to contain O'Connell. But even in Parliament where the decorum and reserve of debate offered him no effective play, his honesty, his ardour for liberty, his good humour, his transparent genuineness won for him at last almost his due meed of respect.

The whole question of leadership receives sharp practical test in a popular legislative assembly. The revolutions which have changed the whole principle and method of government within the last hundred years have created a new kind of leadership in legislation: a leadership which is not yet, perhaps, fully understood. It used to be thought that legislation was an affair proper to be conducted only by the few who were instructed, for the benefit of the many who were uninstructed: that statesmanship was a function of origination for which only trained and instructed men were fit. Those who actually conducted legislation and undertook affairs were rather whimsically chosen by Fortune to illustrate this theory, but such was the ruling thought in politics. The Sovereignty of the People, however, that great modern dogma of politics, has erected a different conception-or, if so be that, in the slowness of our thought, we adhere to the old *conception*, has at least created a very different *practice*. When we are angry with public men nowadays we charge them with *subserving* instead of forming and directing public opinion. It is to be suspected that when we make such charges we are suffering our standards of judgment to lag behind our politics. When an Englishman declares that Mr. Gladstone is truckling to public opinion in his Irish policy, he surely cannot expect us to despise Mr. Gladstone on that account, even if the declaration be true, inasmuch as it is now quite indisputably the last part of the Nineteenth Century, and the nineteenth is a century, we know, which has established the principle that public opinion *must* be truckled to (if you *will* use a disagreeable word) in the conduct of government. A man, surely, would not fish for votes, (if that be what Mr. Gladstone is doing) among the minority-particularly if he be in his eightieth year and in need of getting the votes at once if he is to get them at all. He must *believe*, at any rate, that he is throwing his bait among the *majority*. And it is a dignified proposition with us-is it not?-that as is the majority, so ought the government to be.

Pray do not misunderstand me. I am not radical. I would not for the world be instrumental in discrediting the ancient and honorable pastime of abusing demagogues. Demagogues were quite evidently, it seems to me, meant for abuse, if we are to argue by exclusion: for assuredly they were never known to serve any other useful purpose. I will follow the hounds any day in pursuit of one of the wily, doubling rascals, however rough the country to be ridden over. But you must allow me to make my condemnations tally with my theory of government. Is Irish opinion ripe for Home Rule, as the Liberals claim? Very well then: let it have Home Rule. Every community, says my political philosophy, should be governed for its own interests, as it understands them, and not for the satisfaction of any other community.

Still I seem radical, without in reality being so. I advance my explanation, therefore, another step. Society is not a crowd, but an organism; and, like every organism, it must grow as a whole or else be deformed. The world is agreed, too, that it is an organism also in this, that it will die unless it be vital in every part. That is the only line of reasoning by which we can really establish the majority in legitimate authority. This organic whole, Society, is made up, obviously, for the most part, of the majority. It grows by the development of its aptitudes and desires, and under their guidance. The evolution of its institutions must take place by slow modification and nice all-round adjustment. And all this is but a careful and abstract way of saying that no reform may succeed for which the major thought of the nation is not prepared: that the instructed few may not be safe leaders except in so far as they have communicated their instruction to the many -except in so far as they have transmuted their thought into a common, a popular thought.

Let us fairly distinguish, therefore, the peculiar and delicate duties of the popular leader from the not very peculiar or delicate misdemeanors of the demagogue. Leadership, for the statesman, is *interpretation*. He must read the common thought: he must test and calculate very circumspectly the *preparation* of the nation for the next move in the progress of politics. If he fairly hit the popular thought, when we have missed it, are we to say that he is a demagogue? The nice point is to distinguish the firm and progressive popular *thought* from the momentary and whimsical popular *mood*, the transitory or mistaken popular passion. But it is fatally easy to blame or misunderstand the statesman.

Our temperament is one of logic, let us say. We hold that one and one make two and we see no salvation for the people except they receive the truth. The statesman is of another opinion. 'One and one doubtless make two', he is ready to admit, 'but the people think that one and one make more than two and until they see otherwise we shall have to legislate on that supposition'. This is not to talk nonsense. The Roman augurs very soon discovered that sacred fowls drank water and pecked grain with no sage intent of prophecy, but from motives quite mundane and simple. But it would have been a revolution to say so in the face of a people who believed otherwise, and executive policy had to proceed on the theory of a divine method of fowl appetite and digestion. The divinity that once did hedge a king, grows not now very high about the latest Hohenzollern; but who that prefers growth to revolution would propose that legislation in Germany proceed independently of this accident of hereditary succession?

In no case may we safely hurry the organism away from its habit: for it is held together by that habit, and by it is enabled to perform its functions completely. The constituent habit of a people inheres in its thought, and to that thought legislation, -even the legislation that advances and modifies habit, -just keep very near. The ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people. He cannot be of the school of the prophets; he must be of the number of those who studiously serve the slow-paced daily demand.

In what, then, does political leadership consist? It is leadership in *conduct*, and leadership in conduct must discern and strengthen the tendencies that make for development. The legislative leader must perceive the direction of the nation's permanent forces, and must feel the speed of their operation. There is initiative here, but not novelty. There are old *thoughts*, but a progressive *application* of them.

There is such initiative as we may conceive the man part of the mythical *centaur* to have exercised. Doubtless the centaur acted, not as a man, but as a horse, would act, the head conceiving only such things as were possible for the performance of its lower and nether equine parts. He never dared to climb where hoofs could gain no sure foothold: and he knew that there were four feet, not two, to be provided with standing-room. There must have been the caper of the beast in all his schemes. He would have had as much respect we may suppose, for a blacksmith as for a haberdasher. He must have had the standards of the stable rather than the standards of the drawing-room. The headship of the mind over the body is a like headship for all of us: it is observant of possibility and of physical environment.

The inventing mind is impatient of such restraints: the aspiring soul has at all times longed to be loosed from the body. But such are the conditions of organic life that if the body is to be put off dissolution must be endured. As the conceiving mind is tenant of the body, so is the conceiving legislator tenant of that greater body, Society. Practical leadership may not beckon to the slow masses of men from beyond some dim unexplored space or some intervening chasm: it must daily feel under its own feet the *road* that leads to the goal proposed, knowing that it is a slow, a very slow, evolution to wings, and that for the present, and for a very long future also, Society must *walk*, dependent upon practicable paths, incapable of scaling sudden, precipitous heights, a road-breaker, not a fowl of the air. In the words of the master, Burke, "to follow, not to force, the public inclination, -to give a direction, a form, a technical dress, and a specific sanction, to the general sense of the community, is the true end of legislation." That general sense of the community may wait to be aroused, and the statesman must arouse it; may be inchoate and vague, and the statesman must formulate and make it explicit. But he cannot and he should not do more. The forces of the public thought may be blind: he must lend them sight; they may blunder: he must set them right. He can do something, indeed, to *create* such forces of opinion; but it is a creation of forms, not of substance: - and without such forces at his back he can do nothing effective.

This function of interpretation, this careful exclusion of individual origination it is that makes it difficult for the impatient original mind to distinguish the popular statesman from the demagogue. *The demagogue* sees and seeks *self-interest* in an acquiescent reading of that part of the public thought upon which he depends for votes; *the statesman*, also reading the common inclination, also, when he reads aright, obtains the votes that keep him in power. But if you will justly observe the two, you will find the one trimming to the inclinations of the moment, the other obedient only to the permanent purposes of the public mind. The one adjusts his sails to the breeze of the day; the other makes his plans to ripen with the slow progress of the years. While the one solicitously watches the capricious changes of the weather, the other diligently sows the grains in their seasons. The one ministers to himself, the other to the race.

To the literary temperament leadership in both kinds is impossible. The literary mind conceives images, images rounded, perfect, ideal; unlimited and unvaried by accident. It craves outlooks. It handles such stuff as dreams are made of. It is not guided by principles, as statesmen conceive principles, but by conceptions. Principles, as statesmen conceive them, are threads to the labyrinth of circumstances; principles, as the literary mind holds them, are unities, instrumental to nothing, sufficient unto themselves. Throw the conceiving mind, habituated to contemplating wholes, into the arena of politics, and it seems to itself to be standing upon shifting sands, where no sure foothold and no upright posture are possible. Its ideals are to it more real and more solid than any actuality of the world in which men are managed.

The late Mr. Matthew Arnold was wont now and again to furnish excellent illustration of these points. In the presence of the acute political crisis in Ireland, he urged that no radical remedy be undertaken, -except the *very* radical remedy of changing the character of the English people. What was needed was not home rule for Ireland but a sounder home conscience and less Philistinism in England. 'Wait', he said, in effect, 'don't legislate. Let me talk to these middle classes a little more, and then, without radical measures of relief, they will treat Ireland in the true human spirit.' Doubtless he was right. When America was discontented, and, because England resisted of home rule, began to clamour for home *sovereignty*, peradventure the truest remedy would have been, not revolution, but the enlightenment of the English people. But the process of enlightenment was slow; while the injustice was pressing: and revolution came on apace. Unquestionably culture is the best cure for anarchy; but anarchy is swifter than her adversary. Culture lags behind the practicable remedy.

There is a familiar anecdote that belongs just here. The captain of a Mississippi steamboat had made fast to the shore because of a thick fog lying upon the river. The fog lay low and dense upon the surface of the water, but overhead all was clear. A cloudless sky showed a thousand points of starry light. An impatient passenger inquired the cause of the delay. "We can't see to steer," said the captain. "But all's clear overhead," suggested the passenger, "you can see the North Star." "Yes," replied the officer, "but we are not going that way." Politics must follow the actual windings of the channel: if it steer by the stars it will run aground.

You may say that if all this be truth: if practical political thought may not run in straight lines, but must twist and turn through all the sinuous paths of various circumstance, then compromise is the true gospel of politics. I cannot wholly gainsay the proposition. But it depends almost altogether upon how you conceive and define compromise whether it seem hateful or not, -whether it *be* hateful or not. I understand the biologists to say that all *growth* is a process of compromise: a compromise of the vital forces within the organism with the physical forces without, which constitute the environment. Yet growth is not dishonest. Neither need compromise in politics be dishonest, -if only it be progressive. Is not compromise the law of society in all things? Do we not in all dealings adjust views, compound differences, placate antagonisms? Uncompromising thought is the luxury of the closeted recluse.

Untrammelled reasoning is the indulgence of the philosopher, of the dreamer of sweet dreams. We make always a sharp distinction between the literature of conduct and the literature of the imagination. 'Poetic justice' we recognize as being quite out of the common run of experience.

Nevertheless, leadership does not always wear the harness of compromise. Once and again one of those great Influences which we call a *Cause* arises in the midst of a nation. Men of strenuous minds and high ideals come forward, with a sort of gentle majesty, as champions of a political or moral principle. They wear no armour; they bestride no chargers; they only speak their thought, in season and out of season. But the attacks they sustain are more cruel than the collisions of arms. Their souls are pierced with a thousand keen arrows of obloquy. Friends desert and despise them. They stand alone: and oftentimes are made bitter by their isolation. They are doing nothing less than defy public opinion, and shall they convert it by blows? Yes. Presently the forces of the popular thought hesitate, waver, seem to doubt their power to subdue a half score stubborn minds. Again a little while and those forces have actually yielded. Masses come over to the side of the reform. Resistance is left to the minority, and such as will not be convinced are crushed.

What has happened? Has it been given to a handful of men to revolutionize by the foolishness of preaching the whole thought of a nation and of an epoch? By no means. None but Christian doctrine was ever permitted to dig entirely new channels for human thought, and turn that thought rapidly about from its old courses: and even Christianity came only in the "fulness of time" and has had a triumph as slow-paced as history itself. No cause is born out of time. Every successful reform movement has had as its efficient cry some principle of equity or morality already *accepted* well-nigh universally, but not yet universally applied in the affairs of life. Every such movement has been the awakening of a people to see a new field for old principles. These men who stood alone at the inception of the movement and whose voices then seemed as it were the voices of men crying in the wilderness, have in reality been simply the more sensitive organs of Society-the parts first awakened to consciousness of a situation. With the start and irritation of a rude and sudden summons from sleep, Society at first resents the disturbance of its restful unconsciousness, and for a moment racks itself with hasty passion. But, once completely aroused, it will sanely meet the necessities of conduct revealed by the hour of its awakening.

Great reformers do not indeed *observe* times and circumstances. Theirs is not a service of opportunity. They have no thought for occasion, no capacity for compromise. But they are none the less *produced* by occasions. They are early vehicles of the Spirit of the Age. They are born of the very times that oppose them: their success is the acknowledgment of their legitimacy. For how many centuries had the world heard single, isolated voices summoning it to religious toleration before that toleration became inevitable, because not to have had it would have been an anomaly, an anachronism. It was postponed until it should fit into the world's whole system, -and only in this latter time did its advocates become leaders. Did not Protestantism come first to Germany, which had already unconsciously drifted very far away from Rome? Did not parliamentary reform come in England only as the tardy completion of tendencies long established and long drilled for success? Were not the Corn Laws repealed because they were a belated remnant of an effete system of economy and politics? Did not the abolition of slavery come just in the nick of time to restore to a system already sorely deranged the symmetry and wholeness of its original plan? Take what example you please and in every case what took place was the destruction of an anomaly, the wiping out of an anachronism. Does not every historian of insight perceive the *timeliness* of these reforms? Is it not the judgment of history that they were the products of a period, that there was laid upon their originators, not the gift of creation, but in a superior degree the gift of insight, the spirit of the age? It was theirs to hear the inarticulate voices that stir in the night-watches, apprising the lonely sentinel of what the day will bring forth.

Turn to religious leaders, and similar principles will be found to govern their rise and influence. Of course among religious leaders there is one type which stands out above all the rest, catching the eye of the world. This is the type to which Bernard of Clairvaux, Calvin, and Savonarola belong. Of course Bernard was no Protestant reformer, as Calvin was, and Savonarola played the part towards the Church neither of Calvin nor of Bernard. But I do not now speak of ecclesiastical reform; I speak simply of leadership. There is one transcendent feature in which these three men are alike. Each spoke to his generation of righteousness and judgment to come. Each withstood men because of their sins, and each himself dominated because of eloquence and purity and personal force.

Perhaps there is no beauty in any career that may justly be preferred to the beauty which was wrought into the life of the saintly abbot of Clairvaux, the man who, without self-assertion, was yet raised to rule, first over his fellows in the church, afterwards once and again over kings and in the affairs of nations, because he feared God but not man, because he loved righteousness and hated the wrong. When caught in the entanglements of fierce international disputes, men called to quiet Clairvaux for help, and there came out of the cloister a man simple in mien and habit, simple also in life and purpose, but bearing upon his sweet, grave face a stamp of godly courage that sent to the heart of the haughtiest men a thrill of awe; a man regarding his fellowmen with a calm gaze that nevertheless glowed with such a clear perception of the truth as held the proudest men in check. Pride and Self-Will broke against the spirit of this quiet man as if they were the mist and he the rock. He stood in the midst of his generation a master, a living rebuke to sin, a lively inspiration to good.

There is much less of grace, but there is no less of power in the figure of Savonarola, the pale, burning man who substituted a pulpit for the throne of the Medici, who made the dimly lighted, church where were to be heard the oracles of God, the only centre of power. How excellent, and how terrible, is the force of the man, *lashing* Florence into obedience with the quick whips of his almost inspired utterances. And then there is Calvin, ruler and priest of Geneva:- how singular and how elevated is the place such men

hold among the greater figures and forces of history. Theirs, it would seem, was a leadership of rebuke. With how stern a menace did they apprise men of their sins and constrain them to their duty. Their sceptre was a scourge of small whips; their words purified as with flame; they were supreme by reason of the spirit that was in them.

And yet it does not seem to me that even these men escape from the analysis which must be made of all leadership. I have said that no man thinking thoughts born out of time can succeed in leading his generation, and that successful leadership is a product of sympathy, not of antagonism. I do not believe that any man can lead who does not act, whether it be consciously or unconsciously, under the impulse of a profound *sympathy* with those whom he leads, -a sympathy which is insight, -an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect. The law unto every such leader as these whom we now have in mind is the law of love. In the face of Savonarola, marked and hollowed as it is by the fierce flames of his nature, solemn, sombre, cast in the mould of anxious fear rather than in the mould of hope, is nevertheless to be seen but a close mask for an inward beauty of tenderness. The sensitiveness of a woman lurks in the stern features, not to be identified with any one of them, and yet not to be overlooked. In Calvin, too, love is the sanction of justice. And in Bernard it is love that reigns, not enmity towards his fellowmen. Such men incarnate the consciences of the men whom they rule. They compel obedience, not so much by reason of fear as by reason of their infallible analysis of character. Men *know* that they speak justice, and obey by instinct. By methods which would infallibly alienate *individuals* they master multitudes, and that is their indisputable title to be named leaders of men.

It is a long cry from Savonarola and Calvin to Voltaire, but it is to Voltaire that I at this point find it convenient to resort for illustration and comment. The transition is the more abrupt because I cannot claim leadership for Voltaire in any of the senses to which I have limited the word. But there are literary men, nevertheless, who fail of being leaders only for lack of initiative in action; who have the thought, but not the executive parts of leaders; whose minds, if we may put it so, contain all the materials for leadership, but whose wills spend their force, not upon men, but upon paper. Standing as they do, half way between the men who act and the men who merely think and imagine, they may very neatly serve our present purpose, of differentiating leaders from the quieter race of those who content themselves with thought. And of this class Voltaire was a perfect type.

Our slow world spends its time catching up with the ideas of its best minds. It would seem that in almost every generation men are born who embody the *projected* consciousness of their time and people. Their thought runs forward apace into the regions whither the race *is advancing*, but where it will not for many a *wearry* day arrive. A few generations, and that point, thus early descried, is passed; the new thoughts of one age are the commonplaces of the next. Such is the literary function: it reads the present fragments of thought as completed wholes, and thus enables the fragments, no doubt, in due time to achieve their completion. There are, on the other hand, again, other periods which we call periods of critical thought, and these do not project their ideas as wholes, but speak them incomplete, as parts. Whoever can hit the latent conceptions of such a period will receive *immediate* recognition: he is simply the articulate utterance of itself.

Such a man, of such fortune, was Voltaire. No important distinction can be drawn between his mind and the mind of France in the period in which he lived, - except, no doubt, that the mind of France was diffused, Voltaire's concentrated. It was an Englishman, doubtless who said he would like to slap Voltaire's face, for then he could feel that he had given France the affront direct. I suppose we cannot imagine how happy it must have made a Frenchman of the last century to laugh with Voltaire. His hits are indeed palpable: no literary swordsman but must applaud them. The speed of his style, too, and the swift critical destructiveness of it are in the highest degree exhilarating and admirable. It is capital sport to ride atilt with him against some belated superstition, to see him unseat priest and courtier alike in his dashing overthrow of shams. But for us it is not vital sport. The things that he killed are now *long* dead; the things he found it *impossible* to slay, *still triumph* over all opponents-are grown old in conquest. But for a Frenchman of the last century the thing was *being done*. To read Voltaire must have made him feel that he was reading his own thoughts; laughing his own laugh; speaking his own scorn; speeding his own present impulses. Voltaire shocked political and ecclesiastical magnates, but he rejoiced the general mind of France. The men whom he attacked felt at once and instinctively that this was not the mere premonitory flash from a distant storm, but a bolt from short range; that the danger was immediate, the need for some shelter of authority an instantaneous need. No wonder the people of Paris took the horses from Voltaire's coach and themselves dragged him through the streets. The load ought to have been light, as light as the carriage, for they were pulling themselves. The old man inside the coach was presently to die and carry away with him the spirit of the eighteenth century. If Voltaire seriously doubted the existence of a future life, we have no grounds for wonder. It is hard to think of him in any world but this. It is awkward to conceive the Eighteenth Century given a place in either of the realms of eternity. It would chill the one; it would surely liberalize the other. That singular century does not seem to belong in the line of succession to *any* immortality.

Men who hit the critical, floating thought of their age, seem to me leaders in all but initiative. *They* are not ahead of their age. They do not conceive its thoughts in future wholes. They gather to a head each characteristic sentiment of their day. They are at once listened to; they would be followed, if they would but lead.

There are some qualities of the mind of Thomas Carlyle which seem to place *him* in this class. To speak of him is to go a good part of our way back to the great *preachers* of whom I have spoken. Carlyle was the apostle of a vague sort of lay religion, as *imperative* as Calvinism, though less provocative of *organization*-a religion with a sanction but without a hierarchy. He was not all preacher, however; and while he was something less than a prophet, he was also something more than a Jeremiah. He throbbed, as much as a Scotch peasant could, with the pulses of the nineteenth century. He was hotly moved by its forces; he felt with a ke[e]nness which reached the pitch of suffering the puissant influences abroad in his day. He withstood them, it is true; he would have beaten many

of them back with denunciations; but there is a deep significance in his fierce longing for action, in his keen desire to be a leader. It is noteworthy that there is no wholeness in his thought, either, as in most products of the purely literary mind there would be. Its parts are *dissecta membra*. His ideas are flashes stuck out by hot contact with the forces of thought active about him. With almost inarticulate fervour, he seems once and again to break forth with the very spirit of our century on his lips. It would of course be absurd to compare Carlyle with Voltaire, the spiritual man with the intellectual; and yet it seems to me that Carlyle is as representative of the spiritual aspects of our own century as Voltaire was of all the mental aspects of his own very different age. Incoherent and impossible in his proposition of measures, sadly in need of interpretation to the common mind even in his utterance of the thoughts brought to him out of his century, eager often to revert to old standards of action, a figure rugged, amorphous, needing to be explained, Carlyle was yet the very voice of his own age, not a prophet of the next. In his writings are thrown up, as if by a convulsion of nature, the hidden things of the modern mind. Those who lead may well look and learn. His mind is a sub-soil plow and in its furrows may crops be sown.

If there were no other quality which marked the absence of any *practical* gift of leadership in Carlyle, his fierce *impatience* would be sufficient evidence. The dynamics of leadership lie in persuasion, and persuasion is never impatient. "You are poor fishers of men," it has been said of a certain class of preachers; "you do not go fishing with a rod and a line, and with the patient sagacity of the true sportsman. You use a telegraph pole and a cable: with these you savagely beat the water, and bid men bite or be damned. And you expect they will be caught!"

A wide sympathy and tolerance is needed in dealing with men, and uncompromising men cannot lead. We are sometimes struck in a rather unpleasant way by the apparent pliancy of public men, their apparent laxness as towards the principles they profess. We are inclined to exact of a public character, not only that he incarnate a principle "in its unalloyed simplicity," to use Cobden's phrase again, but also that he incarnate it in active and continuous antagonism to all other principles and *their* incarnations. It is a bit disconcerting to learn that men who sit and debate on opposite sides of the Senate or the House afterwards go off to lunch together between sessions and are always great cronies in private. It throws us out of all our political reckonings to hear that the Irish members of the House of Commons are received into hale fellowship in the smoking-room of the House by the very men who habitually vote for coercion measures when the House is sitting. How can the Irishmen themselves consent thus to smoke and joke with those who are abusing and injuring Ireland every day; and how can obstructionists be acceptable company for Tory ministerialists? We have an uncomfortable impression that these men must surely hold their political principles only in a Pickwickian sense; that their public motives and their private characters are somehow separable; that it is quite unbearable from a moral point of view that the incarnation of one principle should smoke and chat and hobnob with the incarnation of an opposite principle. And in conversation with public men we have received the same disquieting impressions. They are so unassuming in it all! They have such an easy, unimpressed way of talking about influences which they are supposed to be combating with might and main. Surely they are like lawyers, engaging their *minds* in certain causes, but not *themselves*, as easily to be obtained by one side as by the other.

And yet it seems to me that these phenomena of conduct which so disturb us are but further illustrations of the principles of leadership upon which I have most insisted. There is and must be in politics a sort of pervasive sense of compromise, an abiding consciousness of the fact that there is in the general growth and progress of affairs no absolute initiative for any one man, but that each must both give and take. If I am so strenuous in every point of belief and conduct that I cannot meet those of opposite opinions in good fellowship wherever and whenever conduct does not tell immediately upon the action of the state, you may be sure that when you examine my schemes you will find them impracticable, -impracticable, that is, to be *voted* upon. You may be sure that I am a man who must have his own way wholly or not at all. Of course there is much in mere everyday association. Men of opposite parties, seeing each other every day, are enabled to discover that there are no more tails and cloven hoofs on one side in politics than on the other. But it is not all the effect of use and companionship. More than that, it is the effect of openness of mind to impressions of the general opinion, to the influences of the whole situation as to character and strategy. Now and again their [there] arises the figure of a leader silent, reserved, intense, uncompanionable, shut in upon his own thoughts and plans; and such a man will oftentimes prove a great force; but you will find him generally useful for the advancement of but a single cause. He holds a narrow commission, and his work is soon finished. He may count himself happy if he escape the misfortune of being esteemed a fanatic.

What a lesson it is in the organic wholeness of Society, this study of leadership! How subtle and delicate is the growth of the organism, and how difficult initiative in it! Where is rashness? It is excluded. And raw invention? It is discredited. How, as we look about us into the great maze of Society, see its solidarity, its complexity, its restless forces surging amidst its delicate tissues, its hazards and its exalted hopes, -how can we but be filled with awe! Many are the functions that enter into, quick unassuming life. There is the lonely seer, seeking the truths that shall stand permanent and endure; the poet, tracing all perfected lines of beauty, sounding full-voiced all notes of love or hope, of duty or gladness; the toilers in the world's massy stuffs, moulders of metals, forgers of steel, refiners of gold; there are the winds of commerce; the errors and despairs of war; the old things and the new; the vast things that dominate and the small things that constitute the world; passions of men, loves of women; the things that are visible and which pass away and the things that are invisible and eternal. And in the midst of all stands the leader, gathering, as best he can, the thoughts that are completed, that are perceived, that have told upon the common mind; judging also of the work that is now at length ready to be completed; reckoning the gathered gain; perceiving the fruits of toil and of war, -and combining all these into words of progress, into acts of recognition and completion. Who shall say that this is not an exalted function? Who shall doubt or dispraise the titles of leadership?

Shall we wonder, either, if the leader be a man open at all points to all men, ready to break into coarse laughter with the Rabelaisian vulgar; ready also to prose with the moralist and the reformer; with an eye of tolerance and shrewd appreciation for life of every mode and degree; a sort of sensitive dial registering all forces that move upon the face of Society? I do not conceive the leader a *trimmer*, weak to yield what clamour claims, but the deeply human man, quick to know and to do the things that the hour and his people need.

"How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
Who loves his charge, and ever loves to lead;
One whose meek flock the people joy to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear-grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!
They know that outward grace is dust;
They cannot choose but trust
In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,
And supple-tempered will
That bends like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.
His is no [lonely] mountain-peak of mind,
Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
A sea-mark now, now lost in vapours blind;
Broad prairie rather, genial, level-lined,
Fruitful and friendly for all human kind,
Yet also nigh to heaven and loved of loftiest stars."

1 *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. IV, p. 192. "American Locomotives and Cars" *Return to text*

TeachingAmericanHistory.org

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/leaders-of-men/>

*TeachingAmericanHistory.org is a project of the Ashbrook Center at Ashland University
401 College Avenue | Ashland, Ohio 44805 (419) 289-5411 | (877) 289-5411 (Toll Free)
info@TeachingAmericanHistory.org*

© 2006-12 Ashbrook Center | Design by CIV Digital

Song: Leaders of Men. Album: An Ideal for Living. Translations: Greek, Serbian, Spanish. English. A A. Leaders of Men. Born from some mother's womb, Just like any other room. Made a promise for a new life. Made a victim out of your life. When your time's on the door, And it drips to the floor Leaders of Men. 3,093 likes 1 talking about this. Musician/Band. PagesPublic FigureMusician/BandLeaders of Men. English (US) Espa±ol Portugu±s (Brasil) Fran±ais (France) Deutsch. Privacy Terms Advertising Ad Choices Cookies. Leaders of Men Lyrics: Born from some mother's womb / Just like any other room / Made a promise for a new life / Made a victim out of your life / When your time's on the door / And it drips to the floor. Being released closer to the birth of the band, Leaders of Men™ comes up with a more punk, political vibe than the rest of their later work and appears on their debut EP Anê| Read More.