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THEN AND NOW: WHAT CONSTITUTES VIRTUE AND CHARACTER IN A STATESMAN

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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School for Summer and Continuing Education
Georgetown University
Washington, DC
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To my father,
Chris Henick, Jr.,
who twelve years ago this month
encouraged me to attend Georgetown University
one day and complete my education
with an undergraduate degree;

and

Phyllis O'Callaghan, Ph.D.,
Georgetown University,
who was the academic advisor
that I never had before...
I am forever grateful
Abstract

Working in national elective politics for nearly a decade as a political operative, I have observed first-hand the professional actions of winning and losing candidates, Congressmen and Congresswomen, United States Senators, Governors, and, yes, Presidents. In all of these different campaigns and elections for public office, one issue invariably remains subconsciously in the decision-making psyche of the electorate: character and the excellence of character, which is virtue. In the recent United States presidential campaign, absent of any great ideological fissures separating the two major political parties, the issue of character emerged from its latency as a quantifier for leadership. Across the political continuum and throughout the national media, the question was asked: Is the issue of character a legitimate argument for public discourse and germane to the qualities of a statesmen? I submit that it is.

This thesis will examine, explore, and ultimately seek to answer what have been the virtues, qualities, and attributes of a statesman, both during the ancient times of Aristotle and the early philosophers and now in the contemporary political environment of today.

First, I will attempt to establish the universal and unchanged definition of character and virtue in a statesman down through the ages. Utilizing the four moral virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance in Aristotle's
Rhetoric, and select dialogues from Plato's Statesman. I will attempt to establish what virtue is or has been. Rather than a study of behaviorism in a statesman per se, this thesis will illustrate the characteristics of virtue and, with it, the association with political leadership. Namely, how character is a trait of virtue and the correlation of virtue to statesmanship.

Second, once those definitions are established, I will further relate character to the dimension of choice and decision in a statesman and how those choices affect the common good.

Third and finally, I will attempt to define character and its relationship to contemporary times. Questions addressed are: Is character relevant today? Does character in our political leaders really matter? Do private personal inconsistencies from the public persona inhibit the abilities for political leadership? Has our modern-day culture and society changed so fundamentally that we now have a different acceptability threshold in the selection of our political leaders than the early Western philosophers had intended? Peering through the prism of media coverage in the 1992 American presidential campaign, I will complete this thesis by seeking a contemporary definition of character in our political leaders and how this may reflect our own character of today.
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For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things...

Aristotle
_Nicomachean Ethics_

How few were left who had seen the Republic? The state had been transformed, and nothing was left of the old, untainted morality.

Tacitus
_Annals_

I. Then and Now: The Consistency of Virtue

As an admitted non-professional historian studying the past, I feel compelled to first make a point of clarification before plunging ahead. For an initial disclaimer, my aim and overriding intention for this thesis is to avoid clouding the past with overlapping interpretations and accepted generalizations of the present. In a recent article entitled "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue" for _The Atlantic Monthly_, Douglas L. Wilson forewarns of the risks involved when one prescribes modern-day standards for the past. "It may be inevitable that every age should refashion its historical heroes in a contemporary idiom, but doing so
philosopher Aristotle -- who in his own right knew something about exercising moral influence upon political leaders such as Hermias, Philip of Macedon, and his son Alexander, who would later become known as Alexander the Great -- would write in *The Rhetoric*:

> We may define a good thing as that which ought to be chosen for its own sake; or as that for the sake of which we choose something else; or as that which is sought after by all things, or by all things that have sensation or reason, or which will be sought after by any things that acquire reason; or as that which must be prescribed for a given individual by reason generally, or is prescribed for him by his individual reason, this being his individual good.\(^4\)

Conversely, Aristotle reveals in *The Rhetoric* that, "...any wrong that any one does to others corresponds to his particular faults of character."\(^5\)

By having this admirable characteristic of long continuance, the definition of character then by its very nature constitutes virtue. The definition of character and virtue is forever loyal in its stability and abiding fidelity to the objectivity of a political leader who has the elemental desire to make moral judgments. Without the constant denominator of virtue, mankind cannot move forward to acquire practical wisdom, and along the way, possess the characteristics of excellence. D.S. Hutchinson begins his introduction of *The Virtues of Aristotle* by stating,


\(^5\) Ibid., p. 1359.
"Aristotle does say that the really virtuous man will have practical wisdom as well as the various virtues of character, but he also says that one cannot acquire practical wisdom without first acquiring the virtues."\(^6\) In the *Fabric of Character*, Nancy Sherman adds a similar account by stressing the inescapable bond of character and practical reasoning by referring to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* VI: "...it is not possible to be fully good without having practical wisdom, nor practically wise without having excellence of character."\(^7\) To further explore the qualities and attributes of what is required to be a virtuous political leader, a discussion of the definition of Aristotle's four moral virtues and how these particular traits relate to character is in order.

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II. Aristotle and the Four Moral Virtues

In Book I, Chapter IX of *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle considers the forms of virtue: prudence (*prudentia*), justice (*justitia*), fortitude (*fortitudo*), and temperance (*temperantia*) by detailing the characteristics of each quality. What is genuinely notable is the overwhelming philosophical agreement among philosophers down through the ages equating these virtues to the quality of goodness in human existence. Yves R. Simon affirms this by saying, "The list is the same in Plato and in Aristotle, in the Stoics and in an eclectic like Cicero, in the medieval moralists and in the Renaissance moralists, and, insofar as they are interested in such subjects, even in the modern moralist writers. Such a consensus is not often found in the history of philosophy, and it gives this list a special weight." Moreover, these qualities are what the ancient philosophers strove for in statesmanship. Wittingly, these ancient philosophers laid the framework of the conditions for political leadership, thereby aiming for a perfect state. As generations come and go, the state retains the character embodied within these requirements for political leadership despite sequential change in office holders. Aristotle clearly has statesmanship in mind when he writes, "Virtue is, according to the usual view, a faculty of providing and preserving good things; or

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a faculty of conferring many great benefits, and benefits of all kinds on all occasions."

By defining the forms of virtue in *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle connects the chronicles of moral philosophy to character and the principled political prowess in a statesman. Aristotle consciously couches the four moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance within other forms and then dedicates the remainder of the passage to define each one:

The forms of Virtue are justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, wisdom. If virtue is a faculty of beneficence, the highest kinds of it must be those which are most useful to others, and for this reason men honour most the just and the courageous, since courage is useful to others in war, justice both in war and in peace. Justice is the virtue through which everybody enjoys his own possessions in accordance with the law; its opposite is injustice, through which men enjoy the possessions of others in defiance of the law. Courage is the virtue that disposes men to do noble deeds in situations of danger, in accordance with the law and in obedience to its commands; cowardice is the opposite. Temperance is the virtue that disposes us to obey the law where physical pleasures are concerned; incontinence is the opposite. Prudence is that virtue of the understanding which enables man to come to wise decisions about the relation to happiness of the goods and evils that have been previously mentioned.

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10 Ibid.
Aristotle knew full well the nature of virtue. As far as Aristotle is concerned, by voluntary and intentional action, virtue is a disposition. Disposition is essential in understanding the traits of character and the excellence of character which is virtue. For the statesman, to have character is to be disposed to freely choose what is virtuous, not to act out of sheer habit. This decisive antecedent permitting action is none other than human will. Yves R. Simon emphatically writes in *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, "Moral virtues either exist in the will, are dispositions of the will, or they are moral virtues insofar as they are dispositions of powers, abilities, faculties controlled by the will."\(^{11}\) Simon further relates disposition to the act of choosing virtue by stating:

> To position means to put, and to dispose means to put things in certain order. Its primary sense is to arrange things in place, probably because of the way our mind is connected to our senses. But 'to dispose' also means, in all cases, to arrange the parts of a given whole with a view to an effect pertaining to the whole.\(^{12}\)

This moral arrangement or philosophical constellation of sorts is made up of the four moral traits: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. All of these qualities constitute virtue and orbit around the gravitational influence of prudence. For the ancient philosophers, prudence is the central interlocutor to all of the other virtues. Hence, prudence is practical wisdom. In *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Josef Pieper relies on the order of this systematic matrix of traditional moral virtues. Pieper implies that prudence is locked into goodness; justice and fortitude, for

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\(^{11}\) Simon, *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, p. 95.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 79.
example, cannot go in a diametrically opposite direction of prudence. "Omnis virtus moralis debet esse prudens -- All virtue is necessarily prudent,"\textsuperscript{13} states Pieper. "For whatever is good must first have been prudent."\textsuperscript{14} He continues, advancing the significance of prudence as a virtue, by stating:

Prudence is the cause of the other virtues' being virtues at all. For example, there may be a kind of instinctual craving, but only prudence transforms this instinctive governance into the 'virtue' of temperance. Virtue is a 'perfected ability' of man as a spiritual person; and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as abilities of the whole man, achieve their 'perfection' only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say upon the perfected ability to make right decisions.\textsuperscript{15}

For the ancients, the true statesman's ethos was built upon this foundation of whole "perfection." By having these four moral traits, a virtuous person had practical wisdom to make ethical decisions and rational judgments. Thus the intellectual virtue called practical wisdom assured for the statesman an alacrity to obey one's own reason and instincts, despite crosscurrent temptations. A statesman with these qualities of character is a steady and restrained leader who is guided by ethical conduct. While philosophers of the day were wrestling with moral and immoral questions of human reality, these properties of virtue fulfilled the definition of a rational being. Therefore, if a person could demonstrate the ability of self-control and act accordingly, surely he would merit a place for public service and political leadership, thereby benefiting the state.

\textsuperscript{13}Josef Pieper, \textit{The Four Cardinal Virtues} (University of Notre Dame, 1966), p. 5.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 7
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 6.
If prudence is the overarching rational concern for conduct in a statesman and governs all action, the second virtue listed, justice, regards the statesman's actions towards others. In this altruistic moral sense, the disposition of justice is not only concerned with one's own interests but is also "other-regarding." Josef Pieper compares justice as a duty to the "other" in The Four Cardinal Virtues. "Iustitia est ad alterum" -- Justice is directed toward the other man,"\textsuperscript{16} writes Pieper. Pieper refers to St. Thomas Aquinas in the Summa Theologica to justify his interpretation of justice by reciting, "It is proper to justice, as compared with the other virtues, to direct man in his relations with others; ... on the other hand the other virtues perfect man only in those matters which befit him in relation to himself."\textsuperscript{17} Justice, then, is all-embracing. Without justice, the statesman could not be a social being, thereby the experience of the whole chain of virtue would be disrupted and unfulfilled.

The remaining two moral virtues are fortitude and temperance. These two preservative virtues mediate the statesman's emotions and control one's fears and desires. I am reminded of Plato's allegory of the charioteer in the Phaedrus where the charioteer is emblematic of will and desire and has to judge and control two horses: one noble and good, and the other representing uncontrollable appetite. Yves R. Simon would explain in The Definition of Moral Virtue that:

\textsuperscript{16}ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{17}ibid.
...as in the case of other such basic drives in man, the control of the drive toward the pleasurable (and away from the unpleasant) calls not just for a qualitative but also for an existential disposition. Here it is not enough just to know when it is enough; one must also be able actually to give up the excess pleasure (and not be pained by the renunciation). We say that he has the virtue, the habitus of temperance, which is but a rational disposition of the drive toward the pleasurable and away from the unpleasant.  

Fortitude is the disposition to face pain and peril while avoiding the temptation of cowardice or rashness. Fortitude, when not linked to prudence, is merely aggressive passion. When tempered with prudence, fortitude becomes courage. A courageous statesman therefore is also a prudent, just, and wise statesman. Josef Pieper would add, "...categorically: without prudence, without justice, there is no fortitude; only he who is just and prudent can also be brave; to be really brave is quite impossible without the same time being prudent and just also." In sum, fortitude and temperance reside in the emotions and discipline the rational will of justice. Prudence and justice can never be wholly disconnected from fortitude and temperance. Therefore, the statesman is equipped with all of the faculties which make up excellence in character to lead the state.

In further examining these virtues and how they are allied with political statesmanship in terms of the whole, St. Thomas Aquinas in the Thirteenth Century not only wrote extensively about these four moral virtues, he

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18Simon, The Definition of Moral Virtue, p. 103.
19Piper, The Four Cardinal Virtues, p. 123.
also equated them with political power. Sister M. Rose Emmanuella Brennan
clearly expresses in *The Intellectual Virtues According to the Philosophy of St.
Thomas* that:

> Virtue, according to the very word, is associated with the idea of
power. Its implication of strength and courage made *virtus* equivalent
to *manliness* in particular Ciceronian usage; while in a general sense it
signified the perfection or excellence of a thing and corresponded to the
Greek, *arete*. As St. Thomas employs the word, it means *the
completion of a power* (potentia completum) for it is by reason of a
thing's being in possession of its complete power that it is able to
pursue its own impetus or motion toward the proper end. Again, he
says it is the *ultimate of a power*, because virtue inclines to that which,
ultimately the power can attain....

Having these four moral traits of prudence, justice, fortitude, and
temperance, the statesman, therefore by nature, has the political power to meet the
moral demands of public leadership. These four virtues are the excellences of
character which constitute a statesman. For the ancient philosophers, the state will
ultimately have these characteristics as well and mirror the statesman with these
virtuous qualities. Furthermore, Plato, as Aristotle after him, writes in the
*Statesman* how these four virtues provide the statesman with the necessary skills to
serve the public well. It is within these virtues that the statesman possesses the
features of practical reason and choice to make grand judgments for the

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common good. In the following discussion, these practical qualities of a statesman are further discussed. Select dialogues from Plato's *Statesman* will then underscore choice and the statesman's "perfect skill."
III. Qualities of a Statesman

A. Choice and Decision

In the political arena, and in particular in a Republic which holds direct or indirect democratic representative elections, the *demos* or people have the ultimate political authority over their elected leaders. These elected leaders must have an inner-fabric or moral certitude to make good and rational judgments for themselves and, subsequently, the people they serve. Aristotle established a predicate that the most cogent qualification for success in democratic leadership "rests with the supreme authority to give authoritative decisions."²¹ These instinctive qualities define the moral characteristics of a true and genuine statesman, as opposed to mediocrity or, worse, emotional "anger or slight" in our leaders.²² Nancy Sherman conclusively writes in *The Fabric of Character*, "The definition of virtue makes this painfully clear: to have virtue is to be able to make the choices characteristic of the person of practical wisdom. 'Virtue', Aristotle says, 'is a character state concerned with choice, lying in the mean relative to us, being determined by reason and the way the person of practical wisdom would determine it.'"²³ Simply, the statesman has the innate capability of choosing when monumental

²²Ibid., p. 1380
²³Sherman, *Fabric of Character*, p. 5.
choices are necessary. To make rational and wise decisions and to act accordingly is the hallmark of a statesman.

In the context of choice and reasoned restraint in a statesman, I am reminded of a political theory from the Enlightenment period. In his political masterwork *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes bases his philosophical thought on mankind's sense of the political environment which surrounds him -- i.e., the state of nature. Freedom, according to Hobbes, is conditioned by man's natural inclination for self-preservation and his pursuit of the good life. This pursuit is response-oriented by the statesman, and tempered by expected results of self-restraint and decision-making when wielding political power and the consequences which follow this action. An example of this is taken from *Leviathan*'s "Second Part of Commonwealth." Thomas Hobbes axiomatically begins by stating, "The final cause, end, or design of men, who naturally love liberty, and domination over others, in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in commonwealths, is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life." Hobbes claims that the nature of man, albeit rational, needs an overarching unit rule. To maintain human freedom the statesman needs, in the literal sense, an omnipresent internal *sequestrare*. Like Hobbes before him, George Will -- the modern-day author and political commentator -- wrote in the definitive treatise *Statecraft As Soulcraft*:

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Freedom is not only the absence of external restraints; it also is the absence of irresistible internal compulsions, unmanageable passions and uncensorable appetites. From the need to resist, manage and censor the passions there flows the need to do so in the interest of some ends rather than others. Hence freedom requires reflective choice about the ends of life.\textsuperscript{25}

James David Barber, a contemporary political scientist who writes about American presidential style, world view, and patterns of character, defines decision-making in a political leader as based upon the disposition of character and the "whole" arrangement of virtue. Barber states in \textit{The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House}:

Every story of Presidential decision-making is really two stories: an outer one in which a rational man calculates and an inner one in which an emotional man feels. The two are forever connected. Any real President is one whole man and his deeds reflect his wholeness.\textsuperscript{26}

In another example, American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Novak writes about culture and character in \textit{The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism} by tying the system of a democratic republic and the outcome of its culture based on choices and reveals, "What ultimately determine the character of a culture are its choices. Individuals, like cultures, reveal what they understand of

life through their choices." Aristotle confirms this coupling of individual and cultural choice in the Rhetoric. "We shall learn the qualities of government in the same way as we learn the qualities of individuals, since they are revealed in their deliberate acts of choice; and these are determined by the end that inspires them." Novak additionally points to the four moral virtues as *sine qua non* for choice to occur. By having these virtues, the statesman has the capacity to reflect and reach reasonable decisions. "Virtue is the pivotal and deepest American idea. Indeed, 'Virtue' was the inscription (later supplanted by *Novus Ordo Seclorum*) at first inserted as the motto on the Great Seal of the United States," Novak claims.29 "According to the American idea (learned from Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, Paris, and London), liberty springs from *reflection* and *choice*. Habits such as temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence provide the calm that makes human acts of *reflection* and *choice* possible."30

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30 Ibid.
B. Plato's Statesman: The Common Good

Plato, the great Athenian philosopher whose whole lifetime pursuit was focused towards the development of statesmen, places a high premium on an individual’s ability to demonstrate discernible qualities. An example is taken from the introduction of Plato: The Collective Dialogues, "At the peak of the system is the statesman, the man who has a grasp of the scheme of things." For Plato, the universal art of Statesmanship can be acquired by individuals who intentionally desire to lead a good life and seek a moral education. Select passages from Plato's dialogues, including the Statesman, reveal an understanding of how a person can achieve the qualities of leadership, not merely through noblesse oblige, but by having the insight and perception to make good judgments which affect the common good. By having this virtue of practical wisdom and knowledge, thus, the attribute of nobility can be rightfully attributed to the statesman.

Once Plato has established the higher order of the statesman, he utilizes the technique of dialogue to underscore the elements of persuasion or oratory, and the art of judiciousness. All of these particular qualities are necessary for public leadership and sets the statesman apart from others in society, however,

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Plato encompasses all three in a deliberative faculty mutually inclusive with one another and reserves that insight for the statesman. An example of this can be taken directly from Plato's *Statesman*:

Stranger: If you will view the three arts we have spoken of as a group with a common character you will be bound to see that none of them has turned out to be itself the art of statesmanship. This is because it is not the province of the real kingly art to act for itself but rather to control the work of the arts which instruct us in the methods of action.\(^{32}\)

Through cognitive intellect, the statesman is able to discern a given situation and deploy a correct decision by controlling "them according to its power to perceive the right occasions for undertaking and setting in motion the great enterprises of state."\(^{33}\) Therefore, the statesman has an innate ability over others in society in choosing a methodology to form a consensus which is vital for the common good. This will become the statesman's "perfect skill," --i.e.:

Stranger: It is concerned with the laws and with all that belongs to the life of the community. It weaves all into its unified fabric with perfect skill. That name is one which I believe to belong to this art and to this alone, the name of "statesmanship."\(^ {34}\)

The final quality of the statesman which Plato underscores through his dialogue is that of the ability to improve the well being of its citizens -- the common good. Education of the young in the community lays the framework and

\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 1077.
\(^{33}\)Ibid.
\(^{34}\)Ibid.
leaves the public a legacy that "produces the type of character fitted for his own
task of weaving the web of state."\textsuperscript{35}

Stranger: Do we realize that it is the true statesman, in that he is the
good and true lawgiver, who alone is able -- for who else should possess
the power -- to forge by the wondrous inspiration of the kingly art this
bond of true conviction uniting the hearts of the young folk...

Young Socrates: That is certainly as one would expect.

Stranger: The ruler who cannot weld that bond we will never honor
with those glorious titles, "statesman" and "king."\textsuperscript{36}

The values inherent in our statesmen eventually are the interconnectedness
in how we, the public, reciprocate and bestow praise and reserve an historical
place in our hearts and literature for these individuals who seek and serve in public
office. Aristotle would follow Plato and attribute praise to the statesman:

Again, those actions are noble for which the reward is simply honour,
or honor more than money. So are those in which a man aims at
something desirable for some one else's sake; actions good absolutely,
such as those a man does for his country without thinking of himself;
actions good in their own nature; actions that are not good simply for
the individual, since individual interests are selfish.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 1081.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.
In praising the qualities of a statesman, the clear and consistent definition of character reveals the relevancy of character and virtue in our political leaders, not only in the past but also in the present. The following discussion entitled *Hexis: The State of Character* cites various definitions of character from both then and now and relates character to Aristotle's four moral virtues and the meaning of character today.
IV. Hexis: The State of Character

The question of character and its relationship to virtue comes up time and time again throughout many of the texts I have reviewed. Invariably, the question is asked, "What is character?" "What is its relationship to virtue?" First, two authors dive into the origins of the word "character" by underscoring its Greek derivative. Joel J. Kupperman, author of Character, begins his explanation by stating, "The Oxford English Dictionary derives character from the Greek for an 'instrument for making and graving, impress, stamp, distinctive mark, distinctive nature.'"38 A second author, Gail Sheehy, again explains in Character: America's Search for Leadership that:

The root of the word "character" is the Greek word for engraving. As applied to human beings, it refers to the enduring marks left by life that set one apart as an individual. Commonly, distinctive marks of character are carved in by parental and religious imprinting, by a child's early interactions with siblings, peers at school, and authority figures. The manners of one's social class and the soil in which one grows up often remain indelible, and certain teachers and coaches or books and ideas may leave a lasting impression. Character is also marked by where a person stood at great divides in his or her nation's history. But what matters even more, particularly in a would-be leader, is how many of the passages of adult life have been met and mastered, and what he or she has done with the life accidents dealt by fate.39

By attempting to go straight to the heart of the matter, Kupperman reveals what will be the harbinger of the Aristotelian understanding of disposition. Kupperman emphatically writes, "Character has a vital role in how we act. The person who always yields to temptation quickly, without a struggle, would be spoken of as having no character. To have no character, therefore, is to be morally unreliable." Kupperman ultimately leads to the issue of moral choice and value judgment. He points to character's most common usage. "If character, in most of its uses, has to do with the ways in which we most commonly tend to think and act, then the thoughts and actions that are related to moral choice loom the largest." He adds by stating, "To have good character suggests the presence of virtues and the absence of major vices." Character, and the virtues embodied therein, establish a framework for moral and rational judgments for any person, but especially a statesman.

In a more formal approach to understanding character, the introduction of good, by its nature, moves character into a quality of excellence. By introducing this distinction, temperament and disposition come into play in the Aristotelian term called hexis. In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle imparts definitively by stating, "there are three kinds of things in the soul, feelings, capacities, and hexeis...." D.S. Hutchinson in The Virtues of Aristotle would write, "Aristotle

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40Kupperman, Character, p. 7.
41Ibid.
42Ibid., p. 8.
43Hutchinson, The Virtues of Aristotle, p. 5.
has a great deal to say about what a *hexit* is. It is a special sort of disposition, which is itself a quality...."44 Hutchinson literally equates *hexit* with *arete*. "A *hexit* is either an excellence or an aberration; an excellence is a *hexit* which is a perfection, and something is perfect when it is most in accordance with its nature."45

Hutchinson continues with his categorical description of *hexit* by advocating that:

There are two sorts of rational *hexit*, and excellences of character are rational by being obedient to reason. Excellences of character are dispositions for feelings, dispositions of desires, and dispositions to enjoy or dislike things. They are also dispositions to choose courses of conduct, choice being deliberately reached decision. These are the elements of Aristotle's doctrine of virtue.46

Another author, Yves R. Simon in The Definition of Moral Virtue, takes umbrage at the interpretation of *hexit* as habit by past philosophical scholars. He points to Aristotle's Ethics where a Greek word translated "in Roman letters becomes *hexit*."47 Simon defends the classical translator W.D. Ross by saying, "So he [Ross] does his best and renders *hexit* as 'a state of character.' Actually, this is not such a bad translation where Aristotle uses *hexit* to describe moral virtue."48 By using the technique of negation, Simon cleverly supplants the phrase "state of character" with the word "habit" and makes a vivid illustration. "It is the

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44Ibid.
45Ibid.
46Ibid., p. 6.
48Ibid.
conventional translation of the Latin habitus as 'habit,' however, that creates the worse problem," he concludes. "For if instead of 'state of character' Aristotle's four moral virtues -- temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence -- are called 'habits,' his whole theory of ethics quickly dissolves into nonsense."\(^49\)

Thus, for the statesman, character is more than just behavioral habit. It is the ability to make deliberate choices which affect everyone in society. This *hexit*, or excellence in character, is the relationship to contemporary times. The early definitions of character are still applicable today, yet the public expectations are far different now than they were then. Despite changing expectations, by nature, we still strive for this definitive perfection in our leaders. Thus we must ask: Is character relevant today?

\(^{49}\)Ibid. p. 57.
Ancient political philosophy demanded subtle statesmanship, but held out the promise of nobility. Modern political philosophy demands less of statesmen -- indeed, it insists on modest even banal aims -- but it promises clarity and certainty.

George F. Will
*Stagecraft As Soulcraft*

V. Today's Citizen: Is Character Relevant?

For today's American citizen, does character in our political leaders really matter? For myself, living in contemporary times, bestowing the title of "statesman" is mostly reserved for hindsight once a political leader has served the public and has moved on to become an elderly wise sage, who may have wisdom and historical knowledge on certain topics, yet whose political influence has waned because of changing times. In many cases nowadays, finding a consensus on who actually is a statesman may be problematic. For over twenty years now, former President Richard Nixon has tried to redeem his tarnished reputation and finally be accepted as a reflective statesman on American foreign policy. Even Clark Clifford, the venerable advisor and confidant to American Democratic Presidents has been enmeshed recently in an international banking scandal, where
his name and trust have been questioned. Perhaps our contemporary dilemma is posed because of the private vis-à-vis public perception of character, and, for that matter, what we demand in our political leaders today. George F. Will, the modern-day American commentator and author, notes:

Ethics and politics, welded together by Aristotle and the ancients, have been pried apart by moderns who argue that legislators must not allow their 'private' ethics to intrude upon the political task, which is merely to provide for the satisfaction of mankind's common desires, such as the desires for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness\footnote{George F. Will, Statecraft As Soulcraft, p. 79.}

With the modern-day chase for a conflict of ethics charge, any question on conduct or impropriety either raised by journalists in the media or by a political opponent can have a cataclysmic effect on a political leader's public persona. This private/public question of character (Does it inhibit one's abilities for leadership) is the most frequently asked today. Admittedly, in my experience in elective campaigns, I have found that hypocrisy is one of the most salient issues in politics. This hypocrisy is most acute when there is a contradiction between the private and public persona of a political figure. In avoiding the inevitable trap of "presentism," I can wholeheartedly state that Aristotle would say there is no distinction of the private/public characteristic in a political figure. For the early philosophers, the statesman's perfection was predicated on the "whole" person. Metaphorically, Aristotle's statesman would prove the adage "what you see is what you get." Therefore, with this modern-day dichotomy based on public
perception, Aristotle would be hard pressed to locate a statesman unless the political figure possessed all the characteristics of whole perfection and the public agreed accordingly.

If it is not enough that we are asking questions of character in our present-day political leaders, we are now probing back into our past political leaders' personal lives to explore the issue of character, typically reserved for "statesman status." By doing so, we may be making it virtually impossible as American citizens to realistically elevate our present-day political leaders as statesmen. "A question that was once reasonably clear has become a muddle: How should we remember the leading figures of our history? By their greatest achievements and most important contributions or by their personal failures and peccadilloes?" queries Douglas L. Wilson for *The Atlantic Monthly* in an article entitled "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue." Wilson suggests changing times inevitably engender scrutiny and, for example, questions whether John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. should "come in for reappraisal" while we still have memories of them. Wilson gingerly asks:

Do the revelations about such things as Kennedy's womanizing, his not-so-heroic war record, and his non-authorship of a book for which he accepted the Pulitzer Prize detract from his positive accomplishments as President? Do the revelations about King's philandering and his plagiarism as a graduate student have any bearing on his conspicuous achievements as a civil-rights leader? Or is this a case of asking the

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question backward? Is it perhaps more appropriate and revealing to ask, Are the significant contributions of Kennedy and King, which affected the lives of millions of Americans, in any way diminished by subsequent revelations about their shortcomings and failing in other areas? In this climate the difficulties of judging a figure like Thomas Jefferson by an appropriate standard are considerably compounded.\textsuperscript{52}

Wilson continues his line of questioning about Thomas Jefferson's character while considering the historical conditions of that time. "How could the man who wrote that 'all men are created equal' own slaves. This, in essence, is the question most persistently asked of those who write about Thomas Jefferson, and by all indications it is the thing that contemporary Americans find vexing about him."\textsuperscript{53} Wilson tries to explain this perceived character contradiction in Jefferson by illuminating Jefferson's judgment during the social conditions of the eighteenth century:

The question carries a silent assumption that because he practiced slaveholding, Jefferson must have somehow believed in it, and must therefore have been a hypocrite. My belief is that this way of asking the question, as in the cases of Kennedy and King, is essentially backward, and reflects the pervasive presentism of our time. Consider, for example, how different the question appears when inverted and framed in more historical terms: How did a man who was born into a slaveholding society, whose family and admired friends owned slaves, who inherited a fortune that was dependent on slaves and slave labor, decide at an early age that slavery was morally wrong and forcefully declare that it ought to be abolished?\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., pp. 62-65.
\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., p. 66.
\textsuperscript{54}Ibid.
I include this passage not to defend Thomas Jefferson's character, but to illustrate how we look at the issue of character and virtue at the close of the twentieth century. In a startling indictment Joel J. Kupperman admits, "Most of us in the latter part of the twentieth century are not moralistic and, thus, will have a less simple and reductive view of what good character is."\textsuperscript{55} A lot has changed over the last twenty-two and a half centuries since the days of the early philosophers, or has it? In his recent book entitled \textit{Restoration: Congress, Term Limits and the Recovery of Deliberative Democracy}, George F. Will writes, "Jefferson was twenty-one centuries distant from Aristotle and is less than two centuries distant from us. However, his world more closely resembled Aristotle's than ours..."\textsuperscript{56} In contemporary American politics, the demands on government and its leaders have far exceeded what the early Western philosophers had in mind when they were structuring the early communal life in the city-states. Anywhere in American government today, the "state" has some role in people's lives, ranging from regulation and taxation to subsidization. E.J. Dionne, a political reporter for \textit{The Washington Post}, aptly summed up this fact in a rather blunt book on today's political environment entitled \textit{Why Americans Hate Politics}, by writing, "Paradoxically, by expecting politics to settle too many issues, we have diminished the possibilities of politics."\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55}Kupperman, \textit{Character}, p. 9.
My attempt here is not to parrot the cynicism which accompanied the recent 1992 presidential campaign but however to demonstrate the environment of what modern-day citizens look for and expect in their elected leaders. What is redeeming is that character and virtue do seem to matter. The definition of character has not changed, it is the cultural expectations and public perception that have changed both for the political figure and the public. What both delighted me personally as well as confirmed my thesis was the Georgetown University Liberal Studies Program lecture given by David McCullough, author of Truman. McCullough stated what I had detected as to why Harry Truman has become so popular in retrospect, particularly in this past presidential election cycle. His adoration is predicated on a nostalgic yearning in the electorate for character. In fact, McCullough closes his biography on Truman by remembering what Eric Severeid said nearly forty years after Truman: "I am not sure he was right about the atomic bomb, or even Korea. But remembering him reminds people what a man in that office ought to be like. It's character, just character." 

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VI. 1992 and the American Presidency: The Character Question

For the American electorate, the office of Presidency is like no other. As Americans, we place and confer all of our emotional hope for the future in this person and the office it represents. Moreover, we place our trust in the Presidency. It is no wonder that presidential election years encourage more eligible voter turnout than "off-presidential" election years. Simply, trust is the reason for turnout. Our original founding "statesmen" intentionally ill-defined the Presidency while designing the Constitution. That is because they trusted George Washington's character, and left it up to him to define the office. Washington's virtue not only validated the Constitution but ensured the integrity of the Presidency. "Thomas Jefferson later paid tribute to Washington's 'perfect' character, noting especially his integrity, prudence, dignity, and sense of justice,"\(^{59}\) writes Thomas C. Reeves, author of A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy. "The awesome power of the office has for two centuries prompted Americans to seek presidents who are morally as well as intellectually excellent to lead them."\(^{60}\) Reeves admits to the currency of character in presidential elections by writing:

\(^{60}\)Ibid.
Thus, from the beginning, Americans have sought presidents with good character; that is, those qualities specified by Jefferson, those same virtues agreed on throughout history. Ideally the occupant of the White House should exemplify those virtues that have seemed to ensure wise and just leadership. And thus, the issue of character has arisen in virtually every presidential campaign.\(^6\)

As we saw in Aristotle and Plato, the issue of character is not a new one. The campaign for President in 1992 would be no exception. America elected its forty-first President in 1988 on a question of trust. As presidential candidate, George Bush had solemnly promised the American people he would not raise their taxes. By mid-term of his presidency, he had abandoned his pledge to the American people, suffered the consequences and sacrificed their trust and confidence in him, despite successfully leading a world-wide coalition into a foreign war.

The character question again appeared in 1992. A relatively nationally-unknown southern Governor would emerge through the 1992 Democratic presidential primaries as nominee and rival for the presidency. For Bill Clinton, the character question became a central issue in his candidacy. Richard Harwood would write in *The Washington Post*:

In Governor Clinton's case, the hash- simmered for years before it was offered to the nation. His life story -- women, conflicts of interest and

\(^{6}\)Ibid.
much of the rest -- was written in Arkansas in the 1970s and '80s. It has been exhumed, piece by piece, over the past few months from newspaper files in Little Rock and other towns, then re-explored and republished with fresh perspectives and "spins." A lot of this new-old news wound up on the front pages of our major newspapers, was quoted and misquoted by Governor Clinton's political opponents and eventually created the central issue within the Democratic Party: Bill Clinton's "character."62

Soon, Bill Clinton's personal liabilities would become his public liabilities. In the scope of the Aristotle's four moral virtues, temperance would be his publicly perceived weakness. In March of 1992, Connecticut Primary exit polling revealed that 48 percent of the Democratic voters said "Clinton lacked the honesty and integrity they deem essential in a president."63 To overcome this public perception, Bill Clinton demonstrated and relied on a singular trait within the four forms of Aristotle's four moral virtues. In what Bill Clinton lacked in temperance, he made up in residual fortitude. Adroitly, Clinton moved the focus from himself and onto the predicament of the country. E.J. Dionne would later write, "Bill Clinton said today that the incessant questioning of his character was diverting the country from President Bush's failures and the need for change."64 In a campaign appearance in Nashville, he talked tough by implying he did indeed have the necessary character to be President. "Harry Truman said if you can't stand the heat

get out of the kitchen. I may be down to my third layer of skin, but I'm still in the kitchen."65 This display of political wherewithal and courage won over previous skeptical observers. Hendrik Hertzberg would write favorably about this dimension of character in *The New Republic*:

In New Hampshire, he [Clinton] has walked through the valley of political death with voice uncracked, composure unruffled, energy undiminished, humor intact. He has shown no sign of self-pity or bitterness, which means either he feels none, which would be impressive, or that he is capable of an utterly convincing bluff, which would be more so (and is a highly useful quality in a leader). The integrity of Clinton's private character, judges The Press, may be doubted; the strength of his public character, after this past month, may not be.66

By reconciling his private and public life into one and contritely taking the character issue head on, he used it as an advantage. Bill Clinton's political fortitude would ultimately prove to dispel "his" character issue, thereby avoiding a mortal injury to his candidacy. In Chicago he stated, "The true test of character is admitting your mistakes, learning from them, seeking forgiveness for them and going on and doing better with your life. That is what I have been trying to do in my public and private life."67 In turn, voters responded that character was relevant, yet when pressed to choose, the economic conditions of the country took

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65 Ibid.
precedent over any character issue still in question. Throughout it all, in the face of highly negative personal publicity and the greatest electoral turbulence in three decades, Governor Bill Clinton defeated an incumbent President and won the Presidency in a three-way race with less than a majority of the popular vote.

What does this say about character and virtue in a statesman, both then and now? For the citizenry, in ancient Greece and in today's America, character and the excellence of character which is virtue is still vital to secure the moral content of a state and nation. We, like the citizens long ago, rely on our leaders' virtue and the nature of their statesmanship. Bill Clinton's recent display of election-year fortitude gave him strength to win in a political environment where questions about character are still paramount now as they were then. It is still unknown, however, whether he possesses the "other" Aristotelian virtues of prudence, justice, and temperance which would lead to whole perfection and genuine statesmanship. If the 1992 presidential campaign and the character question is a case study on anything, it may be about our own character today.

As a student at Georgetown University, I posed a question in an earlier essay: Will society disregard the axiom that the past is prologue and mistakenly avoid the blueprints of what history can provide for plotting the future? I replied, albeit inwardly, that we must learn from the past -- our past -- in order to shape our future. The intensive study of character and virtue as a definition and as a unique attribute and trait within political leaders both then and now, is bound to
have an ancillary affect on our social consciousness and reasoning. Moreover, this historical insight provides a keener understanding of practical wisdom and what it means to live a virtuous life. Gail Sheehy, author of Character: America's Search for Leadership, affirms this parallelism by stating:

Finally, examining how character is formed in our national leaders is an effective way to learn about ourselves. We can learn from these case histories what is demanded, what works, and what is the price for avoiding or denying confrontation with life's major passages.68

She concludes about character in our political figures in modern times and writes:

These are case histories that instruct us in how, and how not, to conduct ourselves to win at life. We can use these characters as mirrors of our own character -- reflecting both our flaws and strengths. Seeing how their various attempts to change and adapt have played out from earliest childhood through public life can be a catalyst for taking steps to change ourselves.69

With opportunities such as those in today's modern world, statesmanship should virtually be in reach of anybody who strives for the meaning of virtue.

68Sheehy, Character: America's Search for Leadership, p. 27.
69Ibid.


**Periodicals**


