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John Fox Sullivan, Publisher

This Week

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WE FOUND IT—IN US

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The Lack of Leadership: We Found It—In Us

by Amitai Etzioni

Amitai Etzioni is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and Director of the Center for Policy Research. He currently serves as Senior Advisor to the Executive Office of the President.

"Give me a *strong* leader" is the number one theme of the current election campaign. From Kennedy to Connally, from Brown to Reagan, Carter has been charged with lack of leadership. And, Carter, far from denying the validity of the need, says that *he* is the leader—resolute but restrained, powerful but prudent. The public, in one of the most dramatic swings in the history of public opinion polls, doubled Carter's approval rating, with his demonstration of leadership during the Iran crisis as the swing reason (77 per cent approved of the President's handling of the Iranian situation). As these lines go to press, it is impossible to predict the public's final judgment of the President; however, Americans *have* spoken on one point: they do want a potent leader.

One can readily empathize with the public's feeling. It is very reassuring if one can see in the President a supra-papa figure, in a world rampant with sudden irrational explosions and domestic malaise. Alas, 20 years of sociological studies and eight months of full-time "kibitzing" at the White House, suggest to me that there are deep reasons such leadership is neither forthcoming nor desirable. My main thesis is that, while presidential leadership might be somewhat amplified, both the way the American polity is structured and the historical stage American society is going through strongly agitate *against* strong presidential leadership. Indeed, much of what is projected on the President, what *the* leader is to do, we must do ourselves. To spell out my reason for advancing this unpopular thesis, I need to examine the various roles fulfilled by the President.

THE PRESIDENT AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL

The American polity has built into it a bit of sociological mischief: it amalgamates the role of symbolizing the nation with that of the Chief Executive who inevitably is closer to some constituents, values, interests, than to others. The amalgamation generates a built-in tension: if the presidency's halo is made to shine brighter, the resulting mystification may be used

to shield the President-as-Chief-Executive from public criticism. If, on the other hand, the halo is stripped, the President is perceived to no longer adequately embody the nation. America is served best when neither element prevails—when the President is neither excessively glorified nor secularized.

In the last decade, we have seen the presidency first tilting in one direction, then in the other. Under Nixon, efforts were made to run up monarchic symbolism. This was one aspect of what was called "the Imperial Presidency;" it was accompanied by grand abuse of power by the President as Chief Executive.

Carter has been hailed for deliberately demystifying the presidency. He cut back the fleet of limousines, put the presidential yacht up for sale, and stripped down the guards, colors, flags and trumpets, etc. At the same time, Carter foreswore the abuse of powers associated with the Imperial Presidency. IRS files are better protected. The CIA was prohibited from electronic surveillance within the U.S.A., mail opening was severely restrained, etc.

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There is now a sense that the demystification may have swung too far—a wish for the President to return to stand on the national pedestal. However, it is difficult to exactly calibrate how much mystification is desirable, and it is quite clear that if the White House would lean heavily again on the symbols of power—this would quickly evoke fears of a return to abuses of power.

THE PRESIDENCY AND CONGRESS

The inability of President Carter to get his program "through" Congress, in which his party has a solid majority in both houses, is seen as another sign of lack of leadership. On the other hand, Carter's staff points

out that, by now, his legislative record is quite solid. Both points are somewhat off the mark because they imply that the personality, political savvy and competence of the staff are major factors in "guiding" Congress. Actually, under the present circumstances, a much more effective presidential leading of Congress is difficult to envision.

Structurally, of course, the American constitutional system rests on the assumption that Congress will not be putty in the hands of the executive branch. Moreover, the very same people who wish the President to get "through" Congress would quite properly shout "foul" if he pushed through programs they expected their elected representatives to oppose.

Also, Congress, as of the 1974 reform, has lost much of whatever structure it used to have. Committee chairmen lost much of their control over subcommittees and members; seniority's sway was vastly curtailed; the staff ballooned to a point where it is poorly supervised. Public financing of presidential candidates channeled even more lobbying monies to congressional elections.

Many Members of Congress realize that the pendulum has swung too far from semi-autocratic rule toward semi-anarchy. But few if any would consent to restructure Congress to make it easier for the President to have his way. Thus, all the talk about a return to a LBJ-mastery of Congress disregards both the unconstitutional nature of a domination by the executive, and that forces in Congress, more than in the White House, make such a return quite impossible.

THE PRESIDENT AS COALITION-BUILDER

The semi-anarchic Congress may quite well represent the current state of the union. Americans in the late '70s did not provide their elected representatives with a clear mandate to support major movements on legislative fronts. Such coalitions are needed to provide the transmission belts that transport social needs into Washington politics. Another look at LBJ is instructive here: aside from knowing Congress well, and the liberal use of manipulation of individuals, LBJ was a coalition-builder. He knew how to identify issues which brought together a sufficiently massive number of major organized socio-political groups to prod Congress. It was a coalition of 37 liberal, labor, white and black, civic groups that eked out of Congress the civil rights act in 1964; similar coalitions promoted other elements of the Great Society programs.

Carter, it is said, is no coalition-builder and hence is unable to provide his legislative initiatives with the needed socio-political backup. Indeed, the White House, especially in 1977-78, focused on technical analyses of the merits of various programs (tax reform, first set of energy bills, etc.) with little consultation with major relevant constituencies. There was a feeling that programs which are expertly designed, and of virtue, should not be soiled with a political give-and-take

necessary in any wide coalition building. And, appeal to the public-at-large was confused with political base building. Indeed, one of the most remarkable insights into Carter, the engineer-preacher, can be gleaned from his neglect of the distinction between single-issue interest groups and broadly based segments of the organized public. The President states that he is willing to confront *any* special interest group, "no matter how benevolent." James Reston lauded Carter for standing up to the lobbies, such as the "labor lobby, the Israeli lobby, the oil and gas lobby, and the automobile lobby, to begin with. Also, the lobbies for blacks, the Chicanos, the cities, the farmers and abortion." As a result, many of the Carter legislative initiatives were sent to Congress politically naked, without a coalition to back them up, open to manipulation by special interests on the Hill.

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However, this line of reasoning does not take into account that in the late '70s, and early '80s, even a White House keen on coalition building would face a quite different socio-political environment from the one in which LBJ thrived. First and foremost, there is now a greater diversity of interest, values and sentiments, and much less of an ability to accommodate them to the age of shortages.

The radically different ways the energy crisis affects different parts of the union illustrates well the new societal condition of contemporary America. While some parts of the country suffer, other parts are growing silly rich. Thus, energy costs in the Northeast are a staggering 97 per cent above the national average. At the same time, some states have OPEC-like problems as they are flooded with royalties and fees for the oil and gas they export. Decontrol alone will pour an extra \$33 billion into Texas in the '80s. Alaska seriously considered granting each person (not family!) \$2,000 per annum as a kind of share in the state's oil revenues. Similarly, as highlighted in the debate about the windfall tax on profits, oil producers vie with oil consumers over hundreds of billions of dollars, a stake never paralleled in U.S. history.

Other old bases of coalition building have eroded, and no main new ones have evolved. The typical Democratic coalition included liberals, labor unions, minorities and the South. The number of liberals is declining, and their activism is waning. White liberal groups and minorities have moved apart. Labor unions are weakening, and the South is no longer solidly Democratic.

The significance of coalition-building is often

overlooked when the difference between election politics and in-between-election-year politics is disregarded. During the campaign, it is possible to carry the election by appealing directly to the electorate, using TV extensively, and otherwise creating or capturing a mood, say, of generalized alienation and of opposition to big government. However, a legislative record and major programs cannot be achieved this way. Between elections, the public-at-large is relatively ineffectual, and the socio-political muscle needed to back up presidential initiatives is organized social groups (civic, ethnic and religious) and other broadly based interest groups (such as the Farm Bureau, the National Education Association). When it is said that the Carter people are more able to campaign than to govern, one points to the White House's preoccupation with the public-at-large, and the relatively weak socio-political backup of its efforts. One should, though, not disregard the fact that one cannot build much of a coalition when the building stones have weakened, and are not coalescing because of the growing diversity of interests and fading consensus among the groups which make up America.

THE PRESIDENT AS GALVANIZER

The "great leader" theory of the presidency has a ready cure for diversity and dissensus. A great leader, it is said, would use the White House as a pulpit. He would utilize his almost unlimited ability to command attention, to flag new issues, to identify new shared concerns and to *provide* the bases for consensus and coalition-building.

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Fortunately for America, no society, at least no society that has not broken down in a severe crisis, responds this way to *any* leader. Most people, most of the time, have interests, values and views of their own which, in turn, are anchored in like-minded social groups, composed of one's family, friends and neighbors. No wonder it takes Madison Avenue millions upon millions of advertising dollars, the use of motivation research, and much repetition, to move America from one product to another, when the differences among them are minimal (say, as between two mouthwashes, aspirins or toothpastes). Studies show that any attempt to change more significant preferences by the use of mass appeals (say, about smoking, mental patients or the United Nations) leave Americans largely unaffected. It is this anchoring that protects the American people from political demagogues.

Carter discovered the limits of using the White House as a pulpit when he tried, time and again, to mobilize the public's support for his energy program. By and large, Americans responded to the characterization of the energy drive as "the moral equivalent of war" with a combination of yawn and disbelief. To the extent that the public gradually came around, it has been due more to real-world events, e.g., the Iranian crisis and rising prices, than to presidential speech-making.

Moreover, the great leader theory ignores the fact that those rare situations that created opportunity for a DeGaulle or a Churchill involved *deep* national crises, a direct threat to the nation from an enemy at the door, and/or a deep economic crisis, and/or a stalemate of the democratic institutions. To put it differently, there is a direct connection between the fraying of the institutional fabric and how open its members are to direct appeal by national leadership: the greater the breakdown, the more there is a need and opportunity for grand leadership. In the U.S.A. of 1980, the hunger for leadership reflects the fact that American institutions have weakened—to *some extent*. But the public's keen fear of "dangerous" politicians, its inclination to define those who go for the charismatic mantle as demagogues, its sensitivity to violations of the Constitution, all reflect that America's erosion of identity, economy and society is rather mild in comparison to the crisis of pre-DeGaulle France, not to mention the challenge to Britain of 1939.

Moreover, in a society whose fabric has thinned but not collapsed, a strong, extra-institutional leader—a leader who will seek to go to the people over Congress' head, disregard political parties and ignore organized segments of the public—will further undermine its structure and unity, precisely when they need restoring. Hence, America does *not* need a leader who will keep it from coming to terms with its domestic issues by some new adventure overseas (the front most tempting for those who seek instant grandeur) or attacking an escapist scape-goating domestic target (like the rising racist focus on non-white immigrants in Britain). On the contrary, America now needs a leader who will make the institutions work more effectively, by using them more aptly or helping their reform, and one who will draw upon them to work out the direction the country is willing to be led.

LEADERSHIP IN THE '80s

To find out in what direction American society might be led, it is necessary to delve into the sources of the current troubled condition. What describes America most succinctly is a *mild* case of the "British disease." The nation must make the transition from a sense of abundant affluence and omnipotence to a world of scarcity, austerity and shared world power. Our institutional disaffection and unsure sense of direction reflect the identity crisis that resulted when "the American century" lasted barely two years, after World War II, and hyper anti-communism waned to be

replaced by nothing. True, we lost no empire and our sense of self and identity were never based on dominating large segments of the world; still, we are less powerful—and more dependent on others—than we have been for generations. True, we didn't build our economy on the captive market of a bunch of colonies, but we did benefit from decades of importation of

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cheap raw material and exportation of relatively high priced industrial products. While our inflation is lower, and our total industrial machinery less obsolescent, than that of the United Kingdom, and our labor unions less oppositional, we do have to contend with high inflation, declining productivity and low economic growth. Above all, our optimism has been tempered (with 67 per cent saying, in April 1979, that the country is in "deep and serious trouble"); our sense of mastery of the future is in question.

Objectively speaking, America's problems are much more manageable than those of Britain, or most other countries. The total U.S. export/import sector is proportionately very small. We sit on enough coal to fuel our economy for centuries. We still are the one (or, one of the two) greatest military powers in the world. Our GNP is high. Our science and technology, though in need, are basically sound, and so on. Hence, once we accept the need to tighten our belts for a while, we have the basic capital and human resources to secure the nation's economic, military and social vitality. Unless we allow the present economic-institutional-psychic erosion to run much longer, what we need is basically a decade or so of shoring up, not major reconstructions or transformation.

There is, at least theoretically, another alternative. Americans could accept a much lower standard of living and a passive world role, by concentrating on those pursuits which are not energy, capital, or labor intensive, such as greater understanding of self and others, more communing with nature, etc. The counter-culture and environmental movements raised these prospects, and they continue to have a measure of appeal to large segments of the public. Most Americans, though, wish to have their cake and eat it: they favor economic and social progress, working less, saving less, curing inflation while ensuring social justice and the quality of life. But these wishes are nothing but the dying pangs of yesteryear optimism. There is a growing realization that even what was once the richest and mightiest nation can no longer advance simultaneously on all desired fronts.

Before national leadership can set an effective program for the '80s, Americans need a grand dialogue with each other, and—within each of us, between our

higher and more base selves, to evolve shared answers to the following questions: (1) Are we willing to give up on our industrial-economic machine, the basis of our affluent way of life and international power, and settle for a "siesta society" of North America? (2) If rebuilding our productive capacity, restoring the vigor of our economy and securing the basis of America's international role is what we seek, are we ready to make the necessary personal sacrifices: pay more for energy, conserve more, work harder, save more, accept smaller wage increases and fewer fringe benefits, and so on? (3) As a community, are we willing to move from two decades of "give me," to a realization that as the sum total of our demands exceeds what our productive capacity yields, and is eating into our basic capital, we will accept a decade of slower growth in "entitlements," even some roll-backs?

Once there is a growing consensus for a period of austerity to secure future vitality, presidential leadership will be able to help advance the new concept and specifics of such a national accord. It may take the form of multiple year wage-price controls, combined with a government promotion of industries most able to export, be productive and provide jobs, or a turn toward a much greater reliance on the private sector via special privileges to investors, exporters, productive labor and energy conservation, or some other format.

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Whatever the accord, it will have to be worked out within the institutional fabric, both because our commitment to it will prevent extra-institutional solutions from working (e.g., going above Congress' head directly to the people only raises congressional opposition and slows progress), and because the eroding institutions themselves need to be shored up to maintain a democratic republic. This, in turn, calls for responsible, not charismatic, leadership. It calls for a realization that as individuals we have sought in recent years to escape the reality of shortages and the social difficulties involved in cutting back on our private and collective aspirations, seeking vainly for a supra-papa to come and do it all for us, at least tell us all what to do.

We all have to adjust our habits and aspirations, at least to some extent, before the country can be effectively led. We have seen the lack of leadership, and it is first and foremost within us. ■