

# **Warriors, Rebels & Saints**

# Warriors, Rebels & Saints

The Art of  
Leadership  
from  
Machiavelli to  
Malcolm X

**Moshik Temkin**

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*To my family, my students, and my friends*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

ONE FINE SEPTEMBER DAY OVER A DECADE AGO, I ENTERED A classroom at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government where I was scheduled to teach, expecting a sparse turnout. To my astonishment, I found several dozen students crowded inside, peering at me, intrigued. There was not enough space for everybody. Many stood near the entrance. I thought I was in the wrong room. But I wasn't. They had all enrolled in a new course that I titled, simply, "Leaders and Leadership in History." The course was a sort of experiment: an attempt to get students of public policy, of different ages, walks of life, and parts of the world, to see how the study of history could be relevant for them. It was in that first class that I asked my students a question that had popped into my head: *Do leaders make history, or does history make leaders?* I have asked this question at the start of this course ever since, wherever I teach it.

I started the course that first time not knowing quite what to expect. Many of my public policy students were conditioned to think that almost everything can be quantified and measured, and economics dominated their curriculum. History courses were not mandatory for the students, and when they were offered, they were not highly attended. Perhaps I am not objective, but I thought that public policy schools that aim to teach aspiring public servants how the world works should emphasize the study of history. But history, for its own sake, wasn't enough. It had to be taught in a way that made

it *matter* to these students. Many of them wanted to learn *how* to be leaders—or to understand what good leadership was. But these things are not formulas or abstractions, which is how they are often taught. How can one grapple with the rise or fall of individual leaders, with the basis of their authority, with the culture of their governance, or with the costs of their decision-making, without a deep grasp of the historical circumstances in which they are acting? What better way, in other words, to learn about leaders and leadership than through concrete examples from history?

And so, I set up the course in standard fashion. Over the semester, I would take my students through a variety of cases that would allow us to explore central, universal questions about leaders and leadership. Over the course of that first year, and in the years that followed, the class would only grow larger. This presented new challenges: My students ranged in age from eighteen to eighty, it seemed, and came from every conceivable social, cultural, and religious background. Some had studied history in college and beyond, while others never learned history after high school or even elementary school—certainly nothing beyond the basic history of their own country. They were police officers, politicians, activists, pilots, laborers, civil servants, doctors, venture capitalists, scientists, artists, designers, undergraduates, refugees, and lawyers. Many of them spoke English as their second, sometimes third language. There were Ivy League graduates and also lifelong learners without a college degree. Some were the children of royalty, and others were the first people in their families to have attended high school.

When I started teaching the course, I had hoped that it would be a good way to get students from these different backgrounds, and from all over the world, interested in what history had to offer them as aspiring public servants. What I did not expect was the overwhelming interest that emerged from all quarters. Among the students who took the class I found a curiosity and hunger for engaging with questions about the nature of authority, good governance, bold leadership, and sound decision-making. Over the years I have been teaching this

class, these questions seem to have taken a new pressing (and dark) urgency as we struggle to understand the rapidly changing world around us, and what politics—and leadership—might mean for us and our communities in the years ahead. I was always aware of the drama of the past, but as a professional historian in an elite academic setting I had focused mostly on a rational understanding of it, through scholarly research and historiographical exchange. I hadn't anticipated that teaching history in this way, to these students, would shake them, or me, as much as it did. I learned, relatively late in my academic career, that teaching history can be emotionally powerful as well as intellectually stimulating. The experience brought me back to why I wanted to be a historian in the first place.

In my course, I wanted students to envision what it meant to make choices in the direst circumstances, to put themselves in the shoes of a leader struggling against all odds in the face of despair or death; or, alternately, to imagine themselves trying to survive in a world of corruption or tyranny (a situation that, for some of them, was not far-fetched). I saw an opportunity to use art—including literature and film—to heighten the excitement of the past. I have long believed that the best citizens, and leaders, are exposed to transformative, moving art. So for my course, I selected films and novels that not many of my students had encountered, and made these works the subjects of our study. To understand the stark choices facing ordinary people living under the Nazi occupation of France, I had them watch Jean-Pierre Melville's 1969 film *Army of Shadows*. To emphasize the violent righteousness of the anticolonial struggles of the twentieth century, they would see Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. To think deeply about what it meant to challenge the absolute power of a vicious dictator, I assigned them Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*, about the Dominican Republic under Rafael Trujillo. To appreciate the folly of America's war in Vietnam and the role played by the country's "best and brightest," I chose Errol Morris's documentary about the life of Robert McNamara, *The Fog of War*. None of these works was perfect. They were all flawed as historical

sources. But they were important in distinct ways, and they made history feel compelling. My teaching built on the ways these works made events feel vivid and real. I wanted to channel their power.

Over the course of a semester, our discussions ranged from King David to the nineteenth-century suffragists, from Franklin Roosevelt to the French Resistance, from Malcolm X to Margaret Thatcher, from Mahatma Gandhi to Fela Kuti. We paid close attention to how leaders operated within, or pushed against, the constraints of their time. We observed how entrenched frameworks for decision-making led to tragic outcomes that may have seemed inevitable. We touched on notions of loyalty, defiance, responsibility, and sacrifice. The examples we looked at hit close to home for many of my students, either because the topic was their own country's history or, more often, because it resonated with their own memories or experiences. Some of my students had lived through revolution, civil war, displacement, military occupation, and other disasters. Many others worked in government or public service and had dealt with difficult situations that were not so different from the ones we were looking at. Some came from authoritarian countries and faced the choice of whether to work within a dictatorship, fight against it, or try to escape. Some brought strong national feelings to the classroom and found it hard to participate in a dispassionate discussion of the darkest days in their country's past. Students described to me the disorienting experience of realizing that they knew nothing about the history we were learning, or that what they thought they knew about it was wrong, while others felt that they had previously been taught pure propaganda. But the most frequent response from my students was their realization that they were part of history, that the world they lived in was shaped by history, that events in the past are echoed by events in the present, that they are themselves historical actors with the ability to shape the future, for better or worse.

The aim of this book is to teach about leadership in the past, and to reflect on leadership in our own day, by capturing the same energy, emotion, and spirit of inquiry that have animated discussions

in my classroom. My hope is that it helps readers answer the following question: What does history teach us about the sort of leaders and leadership that are needed to tackle the real problems facing our world today? At the same time, I want to avoid easy celebration of leaders and leadership. Instead, I put forth a critical, even skeptical view of leadership. I hope to show how one can identify, or *be*, a good leader, but I also want readers to come away with confidence in their ability to challenge established leadership, to be wary of their leaders, even to aim to replace them. Learning from leadership is not just about success. We can learn just as much—sometimes more—from failure.

History is full of dark, difficult moments. In many ways we are in such a moment now. It is the art of leadership in these moments that most interests me, and that features in this book. It is when times are hard, even desperate, that we often see unlikely people emerging as leaders, sometimes transcendent or important ones. This book deals with many shocking events, and in doing so it reflects the reality of our world. It does not attempt to escape or deny that reality by focusing primarily on the uplifting and cheery sides of history. The stories here do not always have happy endings. Rather, my goal is to get readers to confront the problems and challenges of our world head-on, once they have finished reading—and find inspiration in unlikely or surprising places. In looking honestly at leaders and leadership in history, this book aims to show readers that we are all living through history, and while we are products of the past, we are also the makers of the future.

## CHAPTER 1

# The King, the Prince, and the Leader in Our Heads

IF YOU ENTER A BOOKSTORE AND PERUSE THE SHELVES FOR BOOKS on famous leaders in history, chances are that you will find a recurring cast of characters staring at you from the bombastic covers of the bestselling ones: Winston Churchill. Napoleon Bonaparte. Abraham Lincoln. Genghis Khan. Mao Zedong. They will often be military or imperial leaders, on horses or in uniform or armor, who triumphed in big wars or led their nation through crisis, and they are usually men.

Keep browsing and you will quickly encounter another variant of this literature, featuring prominent men (and sometimes, women) in the business or corporate world: Bill Gates. Warren Buffett. Carlos Slim. Jeff Bezos. With varying degrees of sophistication or nuance, these men (and sometimes, women) are treated as heroes, role models, and inspirations. They are portrayed as uniquely powerful individuals—able to overcome, through sheer force of will, or ruthless intelligence, the obstacles they faced. Such books are celebrations of individuality. You will usually read little in them about all the things that provided the basis for the success stories but that the protagonists personally had nothing to do with, like being born to

wealthy parents in a socially and economically stable country with myriad educational and commercial opportunities. The message from this literary cottage industry is that where there's a will, there's a way. Leaders built themselves up, mostly on their own, and achieved greatness through their own unique qualities. They made their own history.

It is hard to escape this view of leaders and leadership. It is all around us, in popular culture and school curricula. We tend to teach, and study, "Great Men." All over the world, people are in search of figures who can lead them past crises and catastrophes. Yet all over the world, people feel repeatedly let down by their leaders. Perhaps that is why leaders from a supposedly glorious past continue to loom so large in the gloomy present. But why specific figures are associated with "leadership," and whether they were indeed as great as we imagine, and which of their actions or qualities proved essential to their popularity over time, has as much to do with us and the way we think about leadership as it does to do with them. We bring our own biases and preconceptions to the subject: the leaders we embrace reveal as much about our specific times and places as they do about any supposedly eternal virtues.

There is, however, a common stock of ideas about leaders and leadership found in the pillar of our cultures all over the world—mythology. The earliest written texts in human history teach us about kings, gods, wars, and our own origins. To take just one major example, for billions of people around the world the Bible is not just a book, or even just a sacred book, but *the* source of how to think about the world, how we should live in it, and how it should be ruled. This is true whether one is religious and venerates the biblical text as God's Word or one rejects its authority. Both the religious person and the secular person are products of a civilization that has been shaped by (among other things) the Bible and its values. For that reason the ideas the Bible presents, the image it gives of leaders, and the lessons about leadership that we are meant to draw from it

are a foundation of how many people all over the world think about leadership—for better and worse.

THE BOOK OF II Samuel, chapters 11 to 18, narrates perhaps the most dramatic, bloody, and heartbreaking story arc in the Old Testament. It begins with King David, sitting in his palace in Jerusalem, lazily gazing at a woman bathing in a nearby house. The king has his servants bring her to him. The woman, Bathsheba, is married to a Hittite named Uriah, a soldier in the Israelite army, who is off fighting the Ammonites in one of the endless wars of conquest that had helped make David a powerful and wealthy king in the first place. David sleeps with Bathsheba—the ancient reader might have seen this as seduction, the modern reader will recognize this as something uglier—and from this tryst Bathsheba conceives. The king, eager to hide his indiscretion, summons Uriah to him from the battlefield. After feting him in the palace, he sends him to have a conjugal visit with his wife so that he will be assumed to be the father of David's child. But Uriah ruins David's plan when he refuses to go to his house and instead sleeps outside the king's door. He explains to David that he could not possibly sleep with his wife and feel the pleasures of home while his fellow soldiers are mired in battle: "The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing."<sup>1</sup>

Uriah's honor and integrity force King David to greater duplicity: he rewards Uriah by sending him back to the battlefield with a private message to deliver to David's general, Joab. The message instructs the general to place Uriah in the front line of the battle, where he is likely to be killed. And so it happens. Uriah the Hittite dies in the battle—because of a note that he was ordered to take to his commander without knowing its contents. Back in Jerusalem,

the unwitting (and pregnant) Bathsheba grieves for her husband, but not for long; David sends for her and makes her the newest of his many wives.

David is a sacred figure to Jews, Christians, and Muslims: a favorite of God, the modest shepherd boy from the tribe of Judea who was ordained by God to be king; who felled the mighty Philistine warrior Goliath with only a sling and rock; who played the harp for the troubled and tormented first king of the Israelites, Saul; who saw the face of God, and spoke to God, and according to Jewish tradition, wrote the psalms; and whose house would be kings of Israel in perpetuity, and the Messiah would come from his lineage. In II Samuel, David rises to great power and expands his kingdom by triumphing in wars, protected and beloved by God, and always with righteousness.

But in his behavior toward Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite, David is human, not godly—even low and immoral and slothful. He no longer leads men on the battlefield or sets a personal example of modesty and courage but is content to sit in a luxurious palace, a fat cat, a peeping tom, while others fight and die on his behalf. This is a jarring image for those who only know David by reputation, as an icon, filtered through mythology or belief. But things are only going to get worse.

Soon after Uriah's death, the prophet Nathan pays King David a visit. Prophets, in the ancient biblical tradition, have a crucial role: since they have the power of prophecy, they carry the word of God and serve as spiritual authorities and advisers. Nathan is thus one of the few people who can speak directly and freely to David, without fear. Nathan tells him a story, a parable:

There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup, and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came

to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible then tells us that upon hearing this story, “David burned with anger against the man” and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.” Nathan’s response to David is, “You are that man.” And Nathan continues,

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: “I anointed you king over Israel. . . . I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.” This is what the LORD says: “Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you.”

Upon hearing Nathan’s words, David collapses in guilt, saying, “I have sinned against the Lord,” but Nathan reassures him that God will spare his own life. This turns out to be small consolation. From this point on, and for a long period, David and his family experience a stunning series of tragedies, making David wish that God *had* just punished him with death.

First, Bathsheba’s baby, David’s son Jedediah, becomes gravely ill. David and his servants pray and cry and fast, to no avail: the baby dies. (After this, Bathsheba becomes pregnant again—this time with

Solomon, whom we are told God loves, and who would eventually succeed David as king.)

The biblical author then recounts the grim episode involving three of David's older children, Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom. These dismal events have inspired great works of art and contentious theological debates and have ruined the innocence of generations of Bible-studying children. Amnon becomes obsessed with his half sister Tamar; at the advice of his friend, he pretends to be ill and asks that Tamar be sent to his house to feed him. David instructs Tamar to go. She does, and kindly bakes and offers to feed Amnon cakes of meat, but he declines, instead asking her to lie with him. When she is horrified at the idea and tries to placate him by telling him to speak about his desire with their father, he attacks and rapes her, despite her begging him to stop. Once finished, he is consumed with "hatred" for her and throws her out of his house angrily, to which she says, "No! Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me."<sup>3</sup>

The devastated Tamar goes to her brother Absalom, who upon learning of what happened never speaks to his half brother Amnon again; we are told that "he hated Amnon because of what he had done to his sister Tamar."<sup>4</sup>

Two more years pass. Absalom seems to have moved on (about Tamar we are told nothing). But then through trickery, he manages to gather all the king's sons—his brothers and half brothers—and instructs his servants to murder Amnon, as revenge for the rape of Tamar. When the news gets to King David (who had turned down Absalom's invitation to join the gathering), he is first horribly misled to believe that Absalom has killed *all* his male siblings, David's sons. Absalom flees Jerusalem and goes to Geshur, where he stays for three years. David is described as much more sad than angry; he "longed to go to Absalom, for he was consoled concerning Amnon's death."<sup>5</sup>

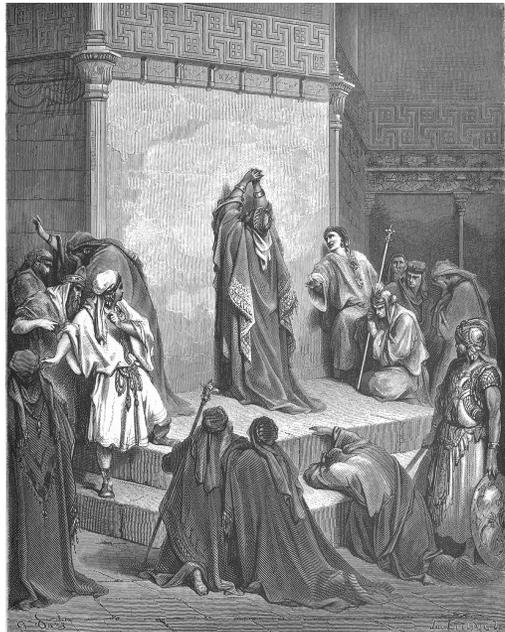
The rest of the episode is both moving and shocking. Absalom and David reconcile after three years of estrangement, a tender moment that inspired great works by artists from Rembrandt to Marc

Chagall, showing the powerful bond between father and son. But eventually Absalom is overcome once again by his demons and launches a full-scale rebellion against his father, who is forced to flee from his palace in Jerusalem for fear of his own son. Eventually, after a bloody war between Absalom's army and those who remain loyal to David, Absalom is killed, in gruesome fashion: when his head is trapped in the boughs of an oak tree as the mule that he is riding during the battle runs beneath it, Joab and his men execute the rebel son in cold blood with three darts to the heart. David, upon learning of Absalom's death (but not about how he died), does not celebrate his victory in the war and his restoration to the throne; instead, he is shattered, and the episode ends on a sorrowful note, with David wailing in grief, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"<sup>6</sup>

THIS HORRIFIC MORALITY TALE has inspired and impacted great artists, deep thinkers, and ordinary people over the centuries. It represents a theological conception of leadership: David is king by

"David Inconsolable at the Death of Absalom,"  
Gustave Doré, 1866

*(Prisma Archivo/  
Alamy Stock Photo)*



divine right. This powerful idea persists into the modern age: there are still monarchs and other rulers in the world who claim to have God's support. In the Old Testament, David is the king because God has empowered him to be the king. Earlier, the Hebrews were a wandering people with "judges" who led them, temporarily, through different hardships and crises. Almost all of them were men, but there was one woman judge (Deborah). They were not absolute rulers with complete power, but more like guides or military leaders in an emergency. Like much of what is in the Bible, this is the mythological version of a historical phenomenon that predated the rise of great civilizations and empires, when peoples were living nomadically in clans and tribes and came together when threatened by other tribes or peoples. But, under constant attack by their enemies, especially the Philistines, and aware of the great empires (such as Egypt) that dominated their region, the Israelites ask the prophet Samuel to petition God to give them a king, as their neighbors and enemies had. Samuel offers the people a warning about what kings do:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, God tells the chosen people, once you get a king, there is no going back. The people, undeterred by Samuel's bleak prophecy (which more than came true), choose to have a king rule over them. And once they do, as God warned them through Samuel, that power is not meant to be challenged by other men—because the king is God's choice. At the same time, the emergence of a king with earthly power but still *under* God is a conception of leadership that is constrained by a sort of morality, before those terms existed. King David abuses his power, and it is implied that the sorrows and violence that follow are God's punishment for the original sin against Uriah the Hittite. Both David's successes and his sufferings are guided by God. Indeed, the two books of Kings recount the rises or falls of a constant stream of rulers who succeed or fail based almost entirely on one sole factor: whether they did right or wrong "in the eyes of the LORD." It is clear to us that David knows this dynamic well, which is why he does not simply and brazenly kill Uriah the Hittite and take Bathsheba for himself. David does what he does in a roundabout, deceiving way because he knows he has something he must hide. But he forgets that there is no hiding from an all-seeing God.

Why is this story written this way? A religious person might believe that the Bible gives us God's literal word and is simply factual. But from a secular perspective, we see the Bible as the product of human beings with human intentions. We understand that people have always found ways both to empower certain people to be leaders, sometimes with great authority, and also to limit the power of their rulers. On the one hand, the conception of leadership found in this biblical story gives the leader almost limitless power. But on the other hand, it implies that there is a threshold even he cannot pass. He cannot simply do as he wishes. He is always subservient to the higher power of God, which serves as a substitute for a moral code. And so, even if ordinary people cannot check their leaders, God can. And faith in God, worshipping God, doing God's work, means that the people can be sure of her protection from a leader that abuses her

power; even the powerful king is under the same divine authority as the lowest of his subjects, putting him and them on an equal level before God, who holds everyone, from the strong to the weak, to the same moral standard.

It is impossible to know which comes first—the emergence of a leader or the description of what an ideal leader should be. The Bible, like other foundational sources for civilizations, sets up expectations for leadership and it also demands that we submit to, and accept, the authority of a leader. At the same time, and perhaps more important, people have found ways to limit the power of their rulers—if not by secular means, as in the modern era, then by divinely inspired means. Therein lies the tension at the heart of this construction of leadership: on the one hand, it gives the leader (really, a ruler) almost unlimited power, affirmed by divine right. Any revolt against him is a revolt against God. On the other hand, there is always oversight, in the form of God. Even the most powerful earthly leader cannot surpass God’s power and authority.

THIS IS OF COURSE only one biblical episode, and the Bible itself is but one example of foundational mythology—the texts and stories that gave our ancestors a sense of themselves, their world, and their history. But it is representative. Humans continued to organize their societies in mostly religious and monarchical fashion for centuries to come; for Christians, this revolved around the man they believe was not only the son of God but the direct descendant of King David—Jesus Christ.

In the modern era, there were major shifts in how societies—and states—governed themselves (though the religious, monarchist, hereditary form of leadership continued to exist). This history is complex, even if we only look at the “West,” because it represents the moment when leadership begins to become independent of God. When divine authority lessens, leadership must be explained and justified in new terms. In this regard, in the history of how humans

have thought about leadership perhaps no one was more impactful than Niccolò Machiavelli.

Machiavelli is best known as the author of *The Prince*, which he wrote in 1513 but which was only published in 1532.<sup>8</sup> From Machiavelli we learn how to think not only about leadership but about historical inquiry itself. Perhaps Machiavelli's most incisive and revealing statement on the rewards and meaning of studying history can be found in his "Letter to Francesco Vettori":

When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. On the threshold I strip off my muddy, sweaty, workday clothes, and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the antique courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity, reply to me. And for the space of four hours, I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death: I pass indeed into their world.<sup>9</sup>

These words, which Machiavelli wrote during one of his darkest periods, express in a powerful way what it means to grapple with history, to search for knowledge and inspiration in the past (though why he sets the amount of time to precisely four hours we shall perhaps never know). We are here to do the same. Like the Bible, *The Prince* is a foundational work; whether one has read it or not, we live in a world that it has helped shape, directly or indirectly, for better or for worse.<sup>10</sup>

A lot of people use the term "Machiavellian" to describe immoral, even diabolical scheming for power. But that is a great oversimplification, even misunderstanding, of *The Prince*. Machiavelli wrote the book in stressful, difficult personal circumstances—he was out of work and out of favor with the new powers that be in Florence,

the Medici family. After fourteen years of serving as a senior official in the Florentine republic under the previous regime, Machiavelli found himself stripped of all power and responsibility, banished from public life, even imprisoned and tortured. But he remained passionately interested in politics, and, drawing on his experience and reflections over a decade and a half of tumultuous events, he wrote *The Prince* as a sort of guide for any leader wanting to succeed, perhaps with the idea and goal of getting in the good graces of his city's rulers. Machiavelli circulated the manuscript among friends, but it was not published until after he died. In his lifetime he was better known for his plays and other writings, and although *The Prince* began to develop a notorious reputation before its publication, it did not help its author, and Machiavelli never got back to anywhere near power.

The intrigue of Florentine politics in Machiavelli's era is interesting, and his life was full of drama, but for us, the general historical context in which he wrote his ideas is more significant. Although he was writing in Italy during a period of instability and conflict, and where, somewhat exceptionally, there were more republican governments and smaller kingdoms than in other parts of Europe and the world, the early sixteenth century in Europe (as elsewhere) was, overall, an era of increasingly powerful monarchs ruling over growing states and societies. And nearly two millennia after the biblical story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah was written, *The Prince* was still part of a world in which the existence of God was as real to nearly everyone in Europe as the sun and the moon. Machiavelli did not challenge the authority of monarchical rulers or deny the existence of God; this is irrelevant to what he was trying to do. But as a thinker, or theorist, of power and leadership, he took his readers in a secular direction, mainly by observing and explaining that men (and we are still talking about *men*) have some individual control over how successful or unsuccessful they will be as rulers or leaders. Machiavelli acknowledged that God played some role in human affairs; at various points in *The Prince*, he seems to take for granted the idea that rulers rose and fell at least in part because of God's

will, and because of “fortune” (which he coupled with “God”). But he also claimed that there was “free will” and that while “fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions,” “she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less.”<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Machiavelli recounts several miracles and punishments that God was responsible for, and with which he directed what happened in the world, but he adds that “God is not willing to do everything, and thus take away our free will and that share of glory which belongs to us.”<sup>12</sup>

Students who are assigned *The Prince* but have never read Machiavelli before might have heard of some phrases associated with him, such as “it is better to be feared than loved.” These phrases invoke the common ideas about Machiavellianism. But the text itself reveals the full nuance of his thinking, which is not about behaving immorally but about shaping one’s own destiny. In chapter 17 of *The Prince*, entitled “Concerning Cruelty and Clemency and Whether It Is Better to Be Loved Than Feared” (in some ways the centerpiece of his treatise), Machiavelli explains that while love ensures temporary loyalty, human nature is such that this loyalty out of love is fickle and can be corrupted or dismissed; but fear (of punishment) ensures permanent loyalty, which is what the ruler really needs. At the same time, and contrary to the idea that he is advocating for evil or immoral behavior, Machiavelli cautions the Prince not to exercise arbitrary or excessively cruel punishment, such that would earn him public hatred, because that could be his ruin once the subjugated parties got a chance at revenge. This viewpoint shows Machiavelli’s emphasis on appearance and perceptions, his refusal to uphold moral absolutes, but also his awareness of the limits of power and especially his wariness about exaggerated power. Being hated, according to Machiavelli, is not bad because it is the result of immoral acts, but rather because it impedes the Prince’s goals.

Machiavelli’s Prince clearly exists in an entirely new mental universe from the one in II Samuel, one in which leadership is bound not to the supernatural or to morality but to objectives. The prophet Nathan’s stark parable about the rich man and the poor man and their

sheep would be changed under Machiavelli: the Prince shouldn't avoid taking the poor man's sole sheep because it is an immoral act and would anger God; he should avoid it because doing so would make him hated and the people's hatred would thwart his ambitions. On the other hand, because it is "better to be feared than loved," it is fine, and even desirable, that those under the Prince know that he is perfectly capable of taking their sheep (as it were) if they do not do as he tells them—and that he goes through with this punishment when it is necessary and justified. In Machiavelli's world, pretense and appearance are as important as intention and laws. "The Prince" is not a hereditary position of leadership; he is not chosen by God. Leadership is not given from above or a matter of destiny. It is something that can be worked on, improved, polished. The leader can achieve success not by following God's will but by adopting the right advice—ideally Machiavelli's. This is a wholly new way of thinking of leadership because it provides a guide for the aspiring leader based not on what is morally right but on how politics works in the real world. Machiavelli, in that sense, ushers us from the old world to the new, where anything seems possible, and in which the leader makes not only her own destiny but also history.

YET EVEN IN MACHIAVELLI'S brave new world, in which leaders can supposedly shape their own destinies and make their decisions based not on preordained divine will but rather on strategy, tactics, and objectives, not all is possible. Freed (conceptually) from the shackles of morality and higher power, leaders still must deal with quite powerful and resistant things: Structures. Systems. Institutions. Other leaders. Other parts of society. Resisters. Adversaries. Enemies. In a Machiavellian world, perhaps the most daunting challenge facing rulers is other people realizing that the ruler's power is not guaranteed and protected by divine authority, so the ruler can be displaced—without incurring God's wrath.

Reading Machiavelli brings us to the question: Does a leader make history, or does history make the leader? If we want to understand

leadership and how it works in the world, should we be looking primarily at the ways the leader changed the world? Or should we focus on the ways in which the world produced, and then constrained, the leader?

Some people are focused on individuals. Some people are more focused on society. Karl Marx, arguably the most influential and politically consequential thinker of the nineteenth century, was interested in individuals but favored a structural analysis of history. During the later years of the Cold War, Marx suffered from a severe decline in reputation, at least in the West. But more recently, due to the increasingly dystopian state of the global political economy, he has enjoyed something of a comeback. In the debate over whether history or the leader is the most important, Marx would come down on the former side. In his *Eighteenth Brumaire on Louis Napoleon* (1852), he wrote, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>13</sup>

Marx was writing specifically about the postrevolutionary French dictator Louis Bonaparte and his rise to power in 1851, but his comment is a timeless reflection on the question of what individual leaders can do, their importance (if any) in moving history forward, and to what extent they are able to shape or change the reality in which they operate. Marx believed that individual agency (a term he did not use) was limited, because history (those “circumstances . . . transmitted from the past,” as he put it) constrained any one individual’s ability to create change, even with great power. Of course, Marx never foreclosed the possibility that leaders could change the world—indeed, the point of Marxist theory is that people can and should bring about revolution that (in his case) overthrows capitalism and changes the course of history. For Marx, the objective is not to imagine a different world but to bring it into being. As he put it, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it.”<sup>14</sup>



NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

Portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli,  
by Galgano Cipriani  
(Incamerastock/Alamy)



Portrait of the young Karl Marx  
(Science History Images/Alamy)

In his book *Machiavelli's Children*, the political scientist Richard Samuels examined this question: What can leaders in power do, given the constraints that they inevitably face?<sup>15</sup> Acknowledging that individual leaders did not operate in a void and faced what he called “great forces,” Samuels nevertheless believes that “constraints may be greater in the historian’s narrative than they are in the real world, where social, political, and economic forces can be tipped into the balance to abet the leader’s scheme.” Significant leaders can do something that he calls “stretching the constraints,” that is, while not completely breaking free from structural factors like social roles, cultural influences, economic systems, and mental paradigms, the leader can still push against and manipulate them enough to make a real difference.

The debate here, then, is between those (like Machiavelli) who believe that leaders make (and overcome) history and those (like Marx) who believe that history makes (and constrains) leaders. Samuels

comes down on the former side. Following Machiavelli's model of the Prince's ability to achieve effective leadership by making the right decisions and imposing his will on the world, Samuels gives some persuasive examples: Churchill, Thatcher, Mao, Gandhi—individual leaders who changed their countries and even the world. But there are many instances in which it is much harder to sustain this argument—and in which Marx's words about the “circumstances” facing the leader seem particularly wise.<sup>16</sup>

One component of leadership is authority: it can be political, or economic, or social, or moral. Sometimes a leader will have authority over people who are following them out of fear, love, loyalty, or appeal. The Machiavellian model probably applies best to leaders who wield superior power, or who have a lot of built-in advantages. If, say, you are a political leader in a functioning democracy and you were elected democratically, you have broad legitimacy. If you are a dictator backed by your country's military and other state institutions, you have strong support and can probably do a lot of “stretching” of “constraints.” If you are the CEO of a large corporation in a country with a political economy designed to serve the interests of large corporations and their CEOs, chances are you will have a lot of choices in how to “lead.”

But how does this confident view of leaders and their ability to shape reality apply to leaders who are in *opposition* to power? Sometimes a leader must operate when he or she *is* the source of the constraint on someone else's, or something else's, leadership—and when we, as observers or citizens, *want* that constraint to overcome the leader. Leaders are sometimes heads of state or captains of industry, but other times they are activists in social movements taking on their country's official leaders, or members of an underground group fighting to overthrow a brutal dictator. Social movements and resistance groups can both be important constraints on a leader in power. But the question of whom we are rooting for (as it were), the leader or the constraint, depends, in each case, on our view of the world, our sense of justice, our political ideals, and our social

temperaments. Kings and princes represent only one rather narrow type of leadership. So the leaders we will look at, the ones who might provide us with the most insight and inspiration, might not have formal power or authority. They might not even be famous. They might be warriors, fighting for a difficult but noble cause. They might be rebels, trying at great risk to overcome an oppressive system. They might be saints, sacrificing themselves for the greater good. They might not succeed, and they might not win. But these warriors, rebels, and saints are the leaders who make a lasting impression on us—and the biggest impact.

## CHAPTER 2

# What Leaders Do We Look for in a Crisis?

EVEN THOSE WHO ARGUE THAT LEADERS MAKE HISTORY, RATHER than the other way around, ought to know that leadership is never created in a vacuum. Nor is it a quality that can be engineered or a formula that can be taught. Whether we are in the biblical world or in Machiavelli's, or in our own, and even if one believes that God or Fortune has a hand in making a leader, any cursory look at history shows that truly important leaders emerge in times of crisis. It is during a crisis that we pay the closest attention to the leaders we have and decide whether those are the leaders we want or if we want others to take their place—or if we, ourselves, will become leaders where previously we would not have dreamed of it.

When times are smooth, when there is peace and economic prosperity (but without drastic economic inequality), leaders can do well, but their main role is one of *management*—making sure things stay stable and that no major mistakes are made. It is when a crisis hits that those leaders are tested; when they are, we find out that some leaders are meant to be in their positions in times of peace and stability but not in times of crisis, while some leaders do not stand out

or impress in times of stability but reveal their strengths when crisis comes.

It is during a true crisis that we must determine who among existing or potential leaders will help us and who will abuse our trust, who will address our problems and sufferings and who will exploit them, who will channel public rage for public good and who for personal gain. The Great Depression of the 1930s, which was probably the worst economic crisis the modern capitalist world has ever experienced, is a unique opportunity to find out what leaders we look for in a crisis. It shows us whom people turn to—and whom they reject—when chaos and instability arrive. It has a lot to teach us about what it takes for a leader facing a crisis to be successful, both for the public at large *and* for the leader herself.

For most Americans, the crisis began in late 1929 with the Wall Street crash—the collapse of the New York Stock Market. During the 1920s, millions of Americans had been encouraged to pour their savings into the stock market, which they were propagandized into believing would make them wealthy. But it was a barely regulated equivalent of a giant Ponzi scheme. This collapse led to a series of bank failures that ruined millions more American families, pretty much instantaneously.<sup>1</sup> It was disastrous for the working class and destroyed farmers. It affected nearly the entire global community, revealing in the starkest (and to many, the most horrifying) way how intimately national economies had become connected, and how the well-being of hundreds of millions of people depended on whether unintelligible finances in Lower Manhattan went up or down. Vulnerable people suffered the most and were the least protected from harm. There is a stereotype about the 1920s, that it was the “Jazz Age,” years of bathtub gin and flappers, but it was also a time of severe inequality, and the poorest members of society struggled to survive with few social protections in a jungle-like market economy. For all these people, the Great Depression made things even worse; for the African American poor it was particularly devastating.

At the height (or depth) of the Great Depression, the United States recorded 25 percent *official* unemployment. Other countries had it even worse: Canada had 27 percent official unemployment; Australia 29 percent; Germany roughly 30 percent, meaning nearly one-third of its workforce. The global political impact was immeasurable—the economic collapse and runaway inflation in Weimar Germany were the direct lead-in to the rise of Adolf Hitler. In Latin American countries, whose economies were intimately linked to the United States, the effects of the Depression were especially harsh and profound. The Japanese economy shrank by over 10 percent in one year; later, over the course of the 1930s, Japan recovered the same way the Germans (and later, the Americans) would—through massive military buildup and a bid for global dominion. The consequences of *that* we will see later. The Great Depression completely changed the face of politics in the United States and around the world.

In the Depression's country of origin, the United States, there was massive ruination, even starvation. There was social dislocation and dissolution—including the breakup of families. Men often left the home, if there was a home, in search of work. But there was no work. And so they moved farther and farther away, eventually becoming drifters, never seeing their families again (and millions of young men and women did not get a chance to have a family). In this situation—when families are destroyed, when children go hungry, when adults cannot provide, when poor people who previously lived with only basic necessities fall into destitution and become dependent on charity, and when all these things happen for reasons that the worst-off victims cannot understand, having to do with the machinations of distant elites who then escape accountability and even continue to thrive—people grow desperate. They become angry. They demand drastic solutions. And they will seek out leaders who promise to lead them to a better place and punish those they blame for their suffering. They will take a close look at the leaders they

have; after that, they might look for leaders elsewhere. Sometimes they will come up with fanciful, or inspired, or grotesque alternatives.

WHEN THE DEPRESSION HIT the American people, their president was the Republican Herbert Hoover, who had started his presidency as a highly regarded figure, with a record as a brilliant engineer and manager with a lot of economic knowledge. Hoover was considered a humanitarian and entrepreneur who had figured out how to bring food to disaster areas in Europe after World War I during his tenure as head of the Food Administration. Although he had never been elected to public office, he easily won the 1928 election.

Given this, it is amazing—and dismaying—to think of Hoover’s overall political trajectory. There have been many American presidents who have seen ups and downs in their popularity, but it is hard to think of a public fall as dramatic as Hoover’s, from entering the White House as a widely admired figure to leaving it just a few short years later, after one term, completely discredited, as the least popular president in modern American history (until that record was broken, in November 2008, by outgoing two-term president George W. Bush). Hoover’s 1932 loss to Franklin D. Roosevelt was the biggest landslide in American electoral history (though Roosevelt would break that record in the next election, in 1936). The Republican Party was unable to recapture the presidency for twenty years, and when it did return to power it did so in a very different form—and in a totally different context.

It is important to note that while we now call this period “the Great Depression,” many Americans at the time called it “the Hoover Depression.” People directly associated their suffering and desperation with the president himself. People who had to live in squalid encampments and shantytowns called them “Hoovervilles” and held up placards that exhorted passersby to help because “hard times are HOOVERING over us.”

There are lively debates among historians over how fair such criticism of Hoover was, given that he didn’t personally bring about

the Wall Street crash and couldn't alone fix the deep problems within the economic system that caused the Depression. But there is little doubt that Hoover failed to address, or even fully take account of, the suffering of the American people. His response to the Depression suggested that he never quite seemed to grasp what had happened or what it meant. The crisis seemed to paralyze him. Any analysis of leadership, and anyone trying to understand what makes political leaders succeed or fail in times of crisis, needs to account for the failure—and it *was* clearly a failure—of this seemingly talented, capable man.

Hoover had his qualities as an executive, but when it came to dealing with the Great Depression, he was the wrong man at the wrong time for the wrong job. It didn't help, for example, that Hoover was thoroughly inflexible. Dogmatism is not necessarily a bad thing; it depends on the dogma! This was not the case with Hoover, who refused to even entertain the possibility that the severity of the Depression might have had something to do with the economic system in the United States, or practices on Wall Street, or his own government's policies, or the behavior of the business community. Unable or unwilling to recognize or acknowledge the economy's structural problems, Hoover's response to the crisis was a combination of dismissiveness and glibness, and he did not have the political skills or personal charisma to pull this off. His administration certainly *did* things, mostly in favor of the banks, and he was not an entirely inactive president, but what he and his administration did was not enough and did not go far and deep enough, because he did not realize how far and deep the government needed to go. He insisted that the inability to exit the Depression was the result of a "crisis of confidence," meaning that everyone from large companies to ordinary citizens remained confused and afraid to invest their money, and he defined this as "fear and apprehension." Trying to minimize the Depression, he made optimistic statements, such as "prosperity is just around the corner." But his optimism was never convincing. Instead, it came off as callous and detached.<sup>2</sup>

Unable to see the flaws in the American economic system, Hoover was convinced that the crisis had everything to do with the international financial system, and he felt vindicated when European economies collapsed in 1931. He was not completely wrong about that, but it was of no help to struggling Americans that people in Europe or Latin America had it bad, too. The Europeans could not protect themselves because they had attached their economies, like the rest of the capitalist world, to Wall Street.<sup>3</sup>

Hoover saw little of this and understood even less. For him, the role of a president in such a crisis was to “aid the economy,” but not to become a full actor in it. In this sense, he was a conventional political figure of his era. A typical conservative, he believed that maintaining a balanced budget was the foundation of a healthy economy and a matter of “public confidence,” and he refused to budge from this principle. But it was the wrong principle to cling to. One does not need to be a Keynesian economist to understand that the US federal government at the time was too small to provide the help and intervention that the economy desperately needed.

Hoover, for all his expertise, lacked a basic understanding of the way the modern economy worked. For comparative perspective, when the more recent financial crisis of 2008–2009 occurred, policymakers and experts had the experience of the Great Depression to build on, and the economics profession—the people who are handsomely paid to predict these things and explain afterward why they happened—had come a long way. Yet even with all this experience and precedent, our most famous and sophisticated economists, including the ones who had the ears of our politicians, failed to predict the crisis, and afterward they doubled down on their dogmas. Our political leaders made poor decisions before, during, and after the collapse.<sup>4</sup> Leaders in the early 1930s did not have any such equivalent experience to go by, so the bar in their case must be set lower. There had been several crises in the past—panics, slowdowns, and bank failures, notably in 1873, when the boom of railway construction turned into a bust, sparking a financial collapse—but nothing like what transpired in

the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Leaders had to imagine a way out of the crisis, driven by their instincts, values, and ambitions.

In a crisis, what matters most is the leader's substantive response. There are real problems to deal with and they demand concrete actions. But public perceptions also matter for good leadership. In this regard, too, Hoover's case is instructive. He had a good managerial style. It was what got him elected in the first place. As a politician, he was presentable and dignified, but in retrospect there were warning signs. He seemed a cold man in public. He never liked crowds or superficial contacts or other politicians. A dull public speaker, he rarely smiled, and when he did, it was not a smile that lit up a room.

Some of these things are innate and out of the leader's control; others can be worked on. But Hoover had a limited conception of the connection between personality and public, at a time when that was growing more important, with the rise of mass politics and mass media. And perhaps worst of all, at a time of immense suffering, and as society itself seemed to crater, he appeared to be insensitive to people's suffering. Hoover was painfully unable to display empathy, even to fake it. He didn't just have a tin ear; it was rusty from lack of use.

There was no better example of Hoover's limitations as a leader, and no worse omen for his future, than his handling (or mishandling) of the "Bonus Army March" in mid-1932. About 43,000 military veterans who had fought in World War I fifteen years prior, many of whom were now homeless and unemployed, gathered in Washington, DC. Then as now, veterans were often neglected, rhetorically celebrated in wartime but then left to suffer the physical and psychological scars of battle on their own and fend for themselves while the rest of society moved on. In 1932 their situation was especially grim. Desperate and out of work, their hungry families in tow, the veterans demanded from the federal government a payout of a bonus that was scheduled for 1945, thirteen years in the future. Their point was clear: We don't need that money in thirteen years. We need it *now*.

Hoover was against their demand, and he was supported by the Senate. From a purely economic standpoint, the decision made sense: veterans' benefits already took up about 25 percent of the 1932 federal budget, and awarding them an early payout would have meant that they would be jumping the queue, ahead of other suffering Americans who deserved no less help. Hoover's stance was "logical." But these were not logical times.

After the negative Senate vote, most of the veterans, accepting their fate, went home or continued wandering the country. But about 10,000 people remained, living in a sort of shantytown and in abandoned government buildings. Hoover ordered that they be provided cots, blankets, and basic supplies (though few people knew about this). Yet their constant presence just steps away from the White House was an embarrassment to the president, a source of shame for the nation and for a government that was unable to provide for its citizens who had sacrificed the most and were the victims of a crisis that was not their fault.

Finally, on July 28, things took a dark turn. The local police were ordered to clear the shantytown instead of waiting for the veterans to leave at their own pace. When some of the veterans moved back into the camp, police shot at them, killing two men—William Hushka and Eric Carlson. Hushka was an immigrant from Lithuania and had been twenty-two years old in 1917 when he sold his butcher shop in St. Louis to join the army and fight to "make the world safe for democracy." Carlson, a family man from Oakland, California, had barely survived the brutal warfare of the trenches in northern France. These were the sorts of men who had been desperate enough in 1932 to make the trip to the nation's capital to ask their leaders for help, only to be shot dead by those who were supposed to protect them.

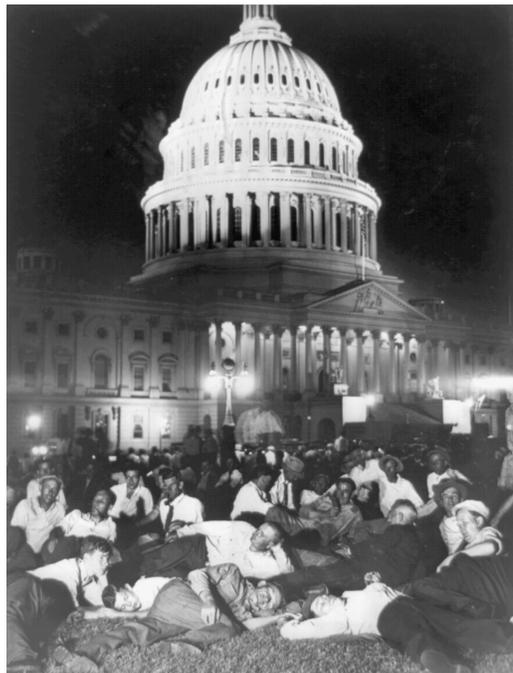
After the shooting, the police panicked and asked the White House for federal assistance. Instead of reacting with calm, Hoover lost his bearings. He had convinced himself that criminality and communist agitation played a role in the Bonus Army protest (in reality, while communist activists tried to involve themselves, the

veterans overwhelmingly rejected them). He saw the event as a sign of potential anarchy. He called in General Douglas MacArthur, who quickly assembled an army led by Generals George S. Patton and Dwight D. Eisenhower. These three future decorated World War II commanders turned their sights, and their weaponry, on the hungry veterans and their families.

That evening, commanded by MacArthur, the 12th Infantry Regiment and the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, along with five tanks commanded by Patton, formed in Pennsylvania Avenue. Thousands of federal employees lined the street to watch, thinking it was a patriotic display. The Bonus Marchers cheered the military, believing that the soldiers were there to honor them as veterans. Instead, MacArthur ordered the cavalry to charge them. After that, the infantry entered the camps, tearing down the makeshift shelters. The veterans fled across the Anacostia River to their largest camp, and only then did Hoover order the assault to stop, an order MacArthur ignored. In the violence and chaos, fifty-five veterans were injured.

Bonus Army veterans  
on the Capitol lawn,  
Washington, DC,  
July 13, 1932

*(Niday Picture Library/  
Alamy Stock Photo)*





Bonus Army camp on fire after army attack, Washington, DC, July 28, 1932. The Capitol building is in the background.

*(Signal Corps/National Archives)*

One pregnant woman miscarried. A twelve-week-old baby boy named Bernard Myers died, a victim of the army's tear gas attack. The troops burned the camp to the ground, and the images were captured for perennial notoriety.

Much of the country was furious. Even if the events weren't all directly Hoover's fault, his cold, technocratic instincts had led him to see the Bonus Army as troublemakers and subversives instead of as what they really were: victims, who would rather not have been there in the first place. Hoover did nothing afterward to punish the generals for their violence toward American citizens and army veterans, even though General MacArthur had blatantly defied his orders. The Bonus Army debacle wasn't the only thing that eroded what little was left of Hoover's public support, but it was a good symbol of his reactionary and unsympathetic leadership in the face of crisis. He left office as despised as he had been admired just a few years before.

THERE IS AN AMUSING drawing (by Peter Arno) that was supposed to appear on the cover of the *New Yorker's* March 4, 1933, issue, but never did. It depicts the inaugural procession to the Capitol of newly elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and shows Roosevelt and Hoover riding together in top hats. This nineteenth-century tradition, a perennial favorite of the media, forces the victor and loser of the presidential election to share an awkward open-car ride to the swearing-in ceremony in Washington, DC, in a pompous display of "bipartisanship." In Arno's illustration, as in reality, Hoover looks on glumly. Roosevelt, his head turned toward the crowd, has an absurd, cartoonish smile.

Arno's illustration was meant to lightly mock both men, in the *New Yorker's* typically snobbish way. Yet it also captures how the two leaders were widely seen at the time. Hoover's expression is basically the dismal essence of his approach to the Great Depression. As for Roosevelt, his overenthusiastic demeanor was a nod to the assumption that a man of his background would be even less effective at dealing with the Depression than Hoover was.

Peter Arno's illustration of FDR and Herbert Hoover riding to FDR's inauguration, March 1933

(Granger Historical Picture Archive/  
Alamy Stock Photo)

