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POWER

I pointed out earlier that leadership and power are not the same thing. But they interweave at many points. Power is the capacity to ensure the outcomes one wishes and to prevent those one does not wish.

In this country—and in most other democracies—power has such a bad name that many good people persuade themselves they want nothing to do with it. The ethical and spiritual apprehensions are understandable. But one cannot abjure power.

Power as we are now speaking of it—power in the social dimension—is simply the capacity to bring about certain intended consequences in the behavior of others. Parents have power. So do teachers, police officers, supervisors, middle-level executives, all by virtue of their position. Others have power by virtue of intrinsic qualities such as persuasiveness, beauty or leadership gifts.

Generalized power is virtually nonexistent in our pluralistic society. To say that someone “has power” is an incomplete description. Power to do what? Even the most powerful person has power only to accomplish certain specific things. A union leader may have the power to force decisions within an industry, but not the power to prevent an increase in the property tax. The political operators who want to increase the property tax may have power sufficient to that end, but not the power to block an increase in oil prices. There are corporate leaders in our cities whose power reaches to the farthest points on the globe, but who cannot get better refuse collection on the streets where they live. To some

extent, this stems from our intention to prevent too much concentration of power in one person, but it is also due to the specialization and complexity of modern life.

Part of the story of power in any society is the reality that many are relatively powerless. Also part of the story are efforts toward empowerment such as the struggles for racial justice and women's rights. Strictly speaking, there should be no citizen who is utterly powerless in our society. Everyone should have a stake in the system.

Leadership and Power

It is necessary to distinguish between leaders and power holders. By definition, leaders always have a measure of power. But many power holders have no trace of leadership. The air traffic controller, the tax assessor, the cop on the beat, the loan officer in a bank, the headwaiter—each has power in some degree, but not necessarily the qualities of leadership. Some power holders—for example, very generous contributors to political campaigns—may be able to run leaders around by the nose, yet themselves have no capacity for leadership.

Although leadership and the exercise of power are distinguishable activities, they overlap and interweave in important ways. Consider a corporate chief executive officer who has the gift for inspiring and motivating people, who has vision, who lifts the spirits of employees with a resulting rise in productivity and quality of product, and a drop in turnover and absenteeism. That is leadership.

But evidence emerges that the company is falling behind in the technology race. One day with the stroke of a pen the CEO increases the funds available to the research division. That is the exercise of power. The stroke of a pen could have been made by an executive with none of the qualities one associates with leadership.

Leaders who hold high rank in organized systems have power stemming from their institutional position, and they do not hesitate to use that power to further their purposes. They may be very persuasive, but they do not live by persuasion alone—rather by persuasion interwoven with the exercise of power. Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy were downright charismatic in the capacity to influence followers; but they also had power and used it regularly.

Leaders differ markedly among themselves in how they use their power. Some employ it to create a climate of coercion and intimidation;

others employ it simply as a useful supplement to their persuasive gifts, and foster a climate of cooperation and willing effort.

The Necessary Exercise of Power

In our democratic society, we make grants of power to people for specified purposes. If for ideological or temperamental reasons they refuse to exercise the power granted, we must turn to others. If you are elected to chair a meeting, and the meeting goes badly because you do not exercise your power as chair, you are a nuisance. The same may be said of mayors, judges, district attorneys and others who do not use the power of their offices appropriately.

When, as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, I was working daily with allies in Congress, I was at first surprised by the enormous differences in their readiness and skill in using what power they had. When I first worked with the chairman of the subcommittee that handled our departmental appropriations I was pessimistic about the future of the relationship. The chairman was Representative John Fogarty of Rhode Island, an able, hard-hitting Irishman who brooked no nonsense from Cabinet members. But I discovered that when I succeeded in persuading that tough-minded politician of the merit of a legislative proposal, I could rest easy. It might fail in the full committee or on the floor of the House, but never for lack of skill on his part. Fogarty used his power effectively in behalf of the measures he believed in. I remember the chairman of another committee who was exceptionally kind and agreeable, a joy to deal with—but he could not or would not wield the power of his chairmanship effectively in behalf of the things he wanted to achieve. I never had an easy moment when my legislation was in his friendly hands.

To say a leader is preoccupied with power is like saying that a tennis player is preoccupied with making shots an opponent cannot return. Of course leaders are preoccupied with power! The significant questions are: What means do they use to gain it? How do they exercise it? To what ends do they exercise it?

When Jane Addams founded Hull House to serve the immigrant poor in the Chicago slums, she created for herself a position of power, but the means and the ends were so admirable that she was universally admired. In contrast, Hitler used treachery and intimidation to achieve power to the end that he might enslave the German people, exterminate Jews, and crush the nations of Europe.

For some power holders, there is no end other than power itself. The sheer pleasure of dominating is the object of the exercise. We have learned neither to admire nor trust such people.

Costs and Benefits

It is possible to think of the exercise of power as a kind of exchange. You want something from me and you have the power to produce in return certain outcomes that I want—or want to avoid. You can give me an A or flunk me. You can promote me to supervisor or reduce me to clerk. You can raise my salary or lower it. You can give or withhold love.

In bureaus where people go to get their licenses renewed or passports issued or Social Security claims validated, everyone has experienced the aggravation of dealing with the minor functionary who savors power.

Power does not need to be exercised to have its effect—as any armed robber can tell you. When I was a Cabinet member, I would listen spellbound as one or another powerful legislator subtly assisted me to the realization that the good will he had shown me in the past and could show me in the future hung precariously on my granting his present request.

The exchange model reminds us that the exercise of power generally involves some cost. I recall an incident in which a well-known senator was fighting and winning a legislative battle of great importance to my associates and myself. At the same time, he was fiercely opposed to a departmental regulation we were about to issue on a quite unrelated matter. He said, in effect, “Quash the regulation or I won’t continue fighting your legislative battle.” We had no doubt that both of our purposes were worthy, but we could only accomplish one of them. We had the power to issue the regulation—but the cost had become dreadfully high. To achieve one worthy goal we would have to jeopardize another worthy goal, a common experience in the world of action.

In his lively autobiography, *Man of the House*, Tip O’Neill tells of his worries that former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara would close the Boston Navy Yard. “To get the President’s attention, I walked out of a meeting of the Rules Committee just before a vote on a bill . . . the Administration cared about.” When he saw Lyndon Johnson a few days later, the president demanded to know why he left the meeting: “What’s going on?”

“Mr. President,” I said, “I’m spending a lot of my time trying to save the Boston Navy Yard. . . . McNamara keeps threatening to close it.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” said the president. “That Navy Yard will be around as long as I’m in the White House.”¹ End of transaction!

Throughout most of human history, leaders have experienced more constraints in the exercise of power than is popularly supposed. Old-style monarchs experienced constraints from the nobility, from the church, from the army, or from the resistant web of custom. Most leaders today are hedged around by constraints—the realities of the external situation, tradition, constitutional limitations, rights and privileges of followers, requirements of teamwork, and the inexorable demands of large-scale organization.

Sources of Power

The sources of power are infinitely varied. Property, position, personal attractiveness, expertness, reason, persuasive gifts, the capacity to motivate—all these and innumerable other sources of power come into play in any normal day of community living. Listen to Heather Lamb, long-distance telephone operator: “There’s a real sense of power. I can tell you when you have to stop talking. You have to pay me money.”² Whatever I control that you want or want to avoid may be a source of power.

The command of one source of power may give access to other sources. Money can buy access to a senator.

Proximity to power is a source of power. With every new administration that settles into Washington comes a new crop of young White House aides who try bravely and gravely to bear up under their new importance. Some prove remarkably able; some do not. But each has the power that derives from proximity to power. As a stable hand carries the scent of the barnyard, the young aide carries the scent of power. Lobbyists, politicians and hostesses sniff the air appreciatively.

Strength

Probably the oldest source of power is the capacity to accomplish physical coercion. It is a source available to the military and to the huskiest kid in the third grade. Mao Tse-tung expressed his appreciation of this source when he said in his little red book, “Every Communist must grasp the truth: political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”³ The application of force has been an element in the creation of most modern nations.

Most Americans want the exercise of physical power held firmly

within the constraints of law and custom. For example, a mother intercepting her three-year-old as he chases his ball into heavy traffic uses gross physical force with the approval of all. But it is no longer permissible, as it once was in the United States, for a husband to beat his wife to bring about compliance.

Custom

The word *custom* does not evoke visions of power. Yet many monarchs and many modern dictators have found their freedom to rule seriously hampered when they sought to move against the grain of tradition.

Custom cannot stand up to machine guns but, as I pointed out earlier, it can raise the cost to the leader of every move that violates its tenets. Most leaders, even well-armed and ruthless ones, tend to accommodate more often than one might expect, and come to see custom as a source of power that they themselves can exploit. I shall have more to say on this subject later.

Organizations and Institutions

Humans create relatively stable patterns of social interaction—communities, states, corporations, armies, churches, universities—to accomplish one or another set of shared purposes. And these human systems are able to confer power on those occupying key roles. The mayor of a city exercises power stemming from organizational position. So do the chief of police and the cop on the beat. Organizational position is probably the most common source of power in the modern world.

During the Russian Revolution and the early days of the USSR, while Lenin and Trotsky were giving spectacular leadership in ideology and revolutionary fervor, Stalin was quietly making himself master of the revolution's organizational base. And that proved to be the decisive source of power. As Khrushchev said, when he was rising in the party hierarchy, "When Stalin says 'Dance,' a wise man dances."⁴

People who have to deal with organizations sometimes come to grief because they fail to understand the way power is distributed throughout the organization. The titular head has one kind of power; heads of operating divisions exercise quite another kind of power; and the lower ranks exercise still another kind. The efforts in the 1960s to reform high school curricula came to naught because of a failure to enlist the conviction and motivation of rank-and-file teachers. They had the power to withhold support.

The most far-flung set of organizational arrangements in any modern society is government. In a democratic society the sovereignty of the people gives power an innocent face, but the reality is there. Every government grant program generates power: favors to give, favors to withhold. Every government licensing procedure generates power in the capacity to grant, deny or delay. Every contracting office generates power. Our federal government is the biggest carrot-and-stick warehouse in the world. No wonder the power junkies gather.

Beliefs

Humans are believing animals. They have religious beliefs. They hold to one or another political doctrine. They have beliefs that supply meaning in their lives, beliefs that tell them how to conduct themselves, beliefs that console. The leader who understands those beliefs and acts in terms of that understanding has tapped a source of power. If the system of ideas is deeply embedded in the culture, it can play a significant role in legitimizing leaders and in validating their acts.

Individuals holding power or seeking it invariably associate themselves with one or another belief system. In Europe for a thousand years monarchs routinely declared their allegiance to the Pope. In Iran Ayatollah Khomeini took power as the spokesman of Allah. Soviet leaders associate themselves with communism, American leaders with democracy.

The alliance between power and beliefs has never been a wholly comfortable one. Those in power are inclined to use the belief system as a convenience, appealing to it when they need it, violating it when they choose. But those who see themselves as custodians of the beliefs are not docile, and the belief system generally ends up being a partial constraint on the exercise of power.

Our constitutional system is based on a set of secular beliefs designed to function as constraints on power. When Franklin D. Roosevelt, seeing his legislative program undermined by Supreme Court decisions, set out to reorganize the Court, he ran head-on into the power of the belief system.

Public Opinion

So much nonsense has been uttered concerning the voice of the people that one approaches the subject cautiously. Even so, it is evident that in our society public opinion is a notable source of power. If leaders have the support of public opinion, their freedom of action is enhanced

and obstacles become surmountable. When the support of public opinion is sharply withdrawn, public figures topple, laws become unenforceable and bastions of economic power tremble.

Of course, in matters of governance we want public opinion to be a critically important source of power, and it often is. David Mathews and his associates are engaged in an important effort to ensure that it be a source of wisdom as well as power.⁵ They have organized well over one thousand National Issues Forums across the country in which citizens discuss in depth the critical questions of the day.

I have a friend whose favorite political aphorism is "Apathy is rampant, but who cares!" In truth, though, the public is rarely apathetic. Generally speaking, what the critic means by public apathy is a failure on the part of the public to get excited about the critic's issues on the critic's time schedule.

The public speaks every time a pollster asks a question, every time a direct-mail house drops a million letters and gets a 3 percent response (or a .3 percent response), every time a budding politician gets a standing ovation or catcalls, every time a legislator gets bundles of mail on an issue or no mail at all.

Beyond that day-to-day background role, every so often the people act with volcanic force, casting down whole systems of power and raising up new leaders.

The capacity to be persuasive with the public has always been a source of power in democratic societies, but in large contemporary societies it must be linked with the capacity to get one's persuasiveness widely disseminated. So one of the most valid forms of power is the capacity to command the channels of communication.

One still encounters people in powerful positions who take the view that what the public thinks is not one of the hard realities of life. Thus President Nixon, in dealing with Vietnam, was quite realistic about the hard facts of troop strength, weapons, logistics and so on, but unrealistic about the equally hard fact of public rejection of the war. Yet that latter fact determined the outcome. Similarly, in their early clashes with Ralph Nader, the executives of General Motors consistently underestimated the role of public opinion, and paid heavily for their miscalculation.

Such people are becoming a relic of the past. More commonly, people in power today set out to manipulate the flow of information and to shape public opinion in countless cunning ways. The effort to manage the flow of information is not a recent phenomenon. Both Aristotle and Herodotus tell the story of the successful effort by the powerful Athenian Alcmaeonid family to bribe the Delphic Oracle.⁶ The episode has a

wonderful air of antiquity about it, but the intent to manipulate the flow of information is as modern as today's press release. Some of our contemporary image managers might appropriately burn incense at the shrine of the Alcmaeonidae.

Fifty years ago farsighted people were proposing that every high school offer a course in how to detect all varieties of propaganda. It was much too explosive an idea to be widely adopted, but it's fun to think about.

Symbols

There is a power that derives from custodianship of potent symbols. Presidents vary in their other sources of power, but all presidents have benefited from the power inherent in the symbols of office. Every public relations person serving a president is aware of the symbolic value of the White House, the Oval Office, Air Force One, the presidential seal and the title of commander-in-chief.

Information

Closely related to but not identical with the power of public opinion is the power derived from knowledge, from information. The military services understand this and spend vast amounts of money on intelligence activities. Political candidates understand it and hire their own pollsters. Corporations spend huge sums for research, for information services, for consultants. Science and technology are sources of power.

Lyndon Johnson once said to me, "When the press talks about my successes as Senate majority leader they always emphasize my capacity to persuade, to wheel and deal. Hardly anyone ever mentions that I usually had more and better information than my colleagues." And so he did.

Economic Power

Economic strength is so well understood as a source of power that it requires little discussion here. The rise of Japan to the first rank of world powers on the basis of economic performance is a significant example.

In the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, those who had economic power had almost complete freedom to wield that power—to produce or not produce; to control the purchase, sale and delivery of goods; to render or withhold services; to accumulate and invest capital; and to set prices and wages. But it became apparent that the power inherent in the control of such activities was capable of producing not only great benefits

but also great misery—extremes of wealth and poverty, prosperity and starvation, material progress and child labor, technological gains and industrial accidents.

Little by little governments set limits on the capacity of economic power to produce bad consequences. In some nations—the Soviet Union, for one—government took complete control, with disastrous consequences for economic vitality. In the non-Communist industrial countries today, economic and political power are interwoven. In the United States, for example, government controls some of the key levers of economic power and engages in activities that have immense economic impact. At the same time, those who hold economic power in the private sector exert great influence on government.

A familiar feature of economic power is that it is readily translated into other forms of power. The wealthy person can buy symbols of status or can influence public opinion. Money can buy political outcomes.

The Exercise of Power

The unpleasant aura surrounding the idea of power is, of course, well-earned. Woodrow Wilson, a professor of government long before he governed, said,

“The great stream of freedom . . . is not a clear mountain current such as the fastidious men of chastened thought like to drink from: it is polluted with not a few of the coarse elements of the gross world on its banks; it is heavy with the drainage of a very material universe.”⁷

In my high school English classroom there hung at the front of the room a large print of Sir Galahad, and beneath his likeness were inscribed the lines by Tennyson: “My strength is as the strength of ten/Because my heart is pure.” Anyone who enters the arena of power armed with integrity alone discovers that the couplet leaves important things unsaid. When Robert LaFollette was seeking the nomination for governor of Wisconsin in 1896, he learned the night before the balloting that the opposition was literally buying delegates away from him with substantial cash offers. He wrote in his autobiography:

Shortly after midnight Charles F. Pfister came to my headquarters. . . . “LaFollette” he said, “we’ve got you skinned. We’ve got enough of your delegates away from you to defeat you.” I

told Mr. Pfister that I was able to take care of myself. . . . When the balloting came on the next day, I was beaten.⁸

Eventually, LaFollette became extremely effective in combating such power plays, not by descending to the level of his opponents but by drawing on the power of his devoted constituency, the power of public opinion, and other weapons. He learned, as so many individuals of high purpose have learned, that he had to know his opponents and their sources of power, know when to do battle, and how to make the battleground one of his own choosing. And he learned to use his own power unflinchingly.

It has been my experience that people of lofty motivation are quite capable of learning the hard lessons of action. Saint Teresa of Avila, one of the greatest of Christian mystics, was the founder of the Reformed Carmelite Order, and in that capacity had a highly practical task of institution building to do. As a mystic she lived in a world of visions which she described with unforgettable eloquence. But as a builder of the order she was down to earth, shrewd, diplomatic and purposeful. She had a firm grasp of the political realities of the church. She said, "I'm a great negotiator," and in fact she was.

The leaders of the civil rights movement would never have achieved the historic gains of the 1950s and 60s had they not learned to draw skillfully and tough-mindedly on every source of power available to them—the courts, the legislative process, public opinion, citizens' movements, the media, and so on.

In some environments leadership may depend on an encyclopedic grasp of the complexities and technicalities of procedure. Every veteran remembers a top sergeant who had such total mastery of the "regs" that no fresh-faced lieutenant could possibly cope with him. The skill in itself is not evidence of leadership, but when linked with leadership gifts, it is potent.

A familiar failing of visionaries and of people who live in the realm of ideas and issues is that they are not inclined to soil their hands with the nuts and bolts of organizational functioning. Often there is a snobbish element involved. Some are inclined to believe that the people who work in the subbasements of power and understand the organizational machinery are lesser people. Good leaders do not ignore the machinery. Every leader needs some grasp of how to work the system.

The best work on individual impulses to power has been done by David McClelland and associates.⁹ McClelland points out that our young people absorb such a negative view of power that they shy away from

leadership roles. I would add that though they may flee the image of power as exemplified by leadership roles, particularly political, many of them become connoisseurs and *aficionados* of power in professional and business fields. But I agree with McClelland, and applaud his conviction that if we are to attract more young people to leadership roles, we must show them the positive aspects of the leader's task.

Perhaps the most familiar aphorism concerning power is Lord Acton's assertion that "power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." (A mischievous professor has asserted that in the case of university presidents the assertion should be revised to "Power tends to corrupt; the *illusion* of power corrupts absolutely.")

Given the widely shared views concerning the wickedness of power, one is not surprised that Lord Acton's saying is generally quoted without the "tends to," and becomes the flat assertion "Power corrupts." But our society has developed safeguards diminishing the likelihood that power will corrupt except for some individuals some of the time. These latter individuals deserve our sustained attention. The ancient Greeks were not wrong about hubris. And it is no doubt true that some individuals are drawn to power as a moth to the flame. In Washington, D.C., where I lived for many years, the flame burns brightly and singed wings are as common as toothaches.

Even veteran observers are bemused by the overreaching of some who exercise power. It is a source of constant wonder that such an ancient and dreary vice can spring up so freshly. As one who has watched the beginnings of a good many national administrations, I can testify that in the case of some individuals, it takes only a moment for the intoxication of power to take hold. Some famous falls from power have been traceable to overreaching. Senator Joseph McCarthy comes to mind. General MacArthur, after a splendid career in the service of his country, finally overreached. The air traffic controllers overreached.

Power is ethically neutral. It can be used for good purposes or bad. So it is necessary to address ourselves to the moral framework that permits us to judge some purposes as good and others as bad.