

Seeking a Good (and Great) Man

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Review: *The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation*, by Daniel J. Mahoney. New York: Encounter Books, 2022. Pp. 243. Paperback, \$30.99.

Our age furnishes us with few examples of true statesmen. In fact, the typical American is hard pressed to distinguish between a statesman and a mere politician, since he has witnessed so few of the former and so many of the latter. Moreover, if one defines a statesman as does Daniel J. Mahoney—someone who exhibits moral and intellectual virtues along with prudential leadership in exigent circumstances—then many, especially young, people must admit that they have not encountered a single one in their lifetimes. To be clear, we lack not the crises but the (states)men. In this veritable winter of statesmanship, we now have, thanks to Mahoney’s recent book, compelling vignettes of human excellence at its historical testing points. This book aims to equip readers with the ability to distinguish between a certain kind of self-aggrandizing greatness and a genuine political greatness that redounds to the people—in short, the ability to distinguish between a Napoleon and a Washington.

What distinguishes the two men proves to be a fascinating question, for both can rightly be called “great” in a certain sense. For Mahoney, and Chateaubriand before him, the difference is not one of physical characteristics or personality but of *soul*: Washington’s soul had the virtues of courage *and* moderation, whereas Napoleon’s had only the former. “Napoleon,” Mahoney says, “is ‘an object lesson in what happens when grandeur is separated from moderation’ (viii). One might wonder how moderation and courage fit together, given that they pull in somewhat different directions, but a moment’s reflection teaches that moderation has always required courage—*utmost* courage in an age of extremes like our own (One here thinks of Aurelian Craiutu’s striking phrase: “Moderation, a virtue for courageous minds”).¹ Yet, it is not merely moderation, but the whole of the cardinal

¹ Aurelian Craiutu, “Isaiah Berlin on Marx and Marxism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 115.

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virtues—courage, prudence, justice, and temperance—which Mahoney seeks among his pantheon of greats. These virtues, and not power politics, are “the core of authentic political greatness” (ix).

Mahoney’s book rests on an important claim: politics is not reducible to power, nor is character reducible to charisma. There is a forgotten sphere of human action—call it “practical reason” or “applied political philosophy”—to which belong the noblest actions of the human person. Ideas and ideals matter, for they set the horizon of possibility (221). Yet, we live in an age of lowerings, and nothing has been more humiliated than the status of ideals. There are few idealists yet among us, and even our residual “realism” has made true politics all but impossible, for it holds (in Raymond Aron’s words) that “ideas are merely weapons, methods of combat used by men engaged in the battle; but in battle the only goal is to win” (4). Worse still, our “doctrinaire egalitarianism” leads us to believe that human greatness is itself a fiction; for, finding no suitable models around us, we naturally assume that greatness is a myth (2, 18, 24, 119). This book is about the hopeful possibility that there is an entire realm of human action left to rediscover.

Towards that rediscovery, Mahoney employs a refreshing methodology, which he calls “empirical political philosophy” or “political sociology” (x, 5). In this regard, Mahoney is following in the august footsteps of Aristotle, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Aron. Quantitative political science, with its sterile reductionism, will not do here, for the simple fact that one cannot quantify the soul. And yet the soul—that seat of human action and longing—is where the great drama of human life occurs, and it is in the soul where our problems now reside. Part of Mahoney’s goal is therefore to study the “philosophically minded statesman” (ix). This is not Plato’s philosopher-king, but rather a public figure who unites political acumen and deep moral reasoning—a high, but achievable, ideal.

Readers of *Pietas* will no doubt be familiar with Mahoney’s cast of characters, which include Burke, Tocqueville, Lincoln, Churchill, De Gaulle, and Havel. Each of these figures shared a commitment to excellence, the fullest development of the mind, and the possibility of civic fraternity. They acknowledged, moreover, the limitations of human nature and the importance of moral restraint. Finally, they realized that “turning the other cheek” may be good individual moral conduct, but it is rather inadequate as a policy prescription for whole

nations. In short, these figures brought the best of classical and Christian statecraft into their own epochs.

One would like to see a bit more discussion of whether the specifically Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity—to say nothing of humility—can truly be reconciled with political greatness. Churchill and De Gaulle, Mahoney notes, seemed to think not. Perhaps the solution here can be found in Rick Warren’s famous claim that “humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”² In this sense, Washington was both great *and* humble, sacrificing his own interests for the good of his fellow citizens. He earned glory for himself and his fellow citizens by means of the same noble actions. It is one thing to desire the esteem of the people, but it is a far better and nobler thing to deserve it.

Of course, history shows the good man is rarely great and the great man is even less frequently good; however, there are blessed moments wherein the two coincide, and it is worth serious study of those points of convergence (for one cannot truly call them “coincidences”). One waits, as it were, upon divine providence that such stars might align once more. Mahoney’s book is therefore fortuitous, as it does what is unfashionable today: it praises excellence and lauds greatness. First among the loves of any true conservative should be the love of excellence: we look not to the past merely for its own sake, but because we can retrieve from it sterling examples of human potential. Whatever the conservative movement looks like in the future, it needs to place a love of and commitment to excellence at its conceptual core. Mahoney is, for this reason, a welcome guide, and his book is essentially a chronicle of moral and political excellence, of great men in great and trying times. Ultimately, Mahoney’s book is deeply Aristotelian, as its central aim is to restore the dignity of political life and to identify something like the golden mean of politics—of greatness and moderation, of nationalism and liberality, of classical honor and Christian humility. There, in the tension, one finds the true heart of politics.

After reading the lives of such eminent men, one may be tempted to despair that there are no statesmen within our own compass. In fact, Mahoney admits that his book required “nothing less than an act of intellectual and moral recovery”—so far have we come from the days of true statesmen (217). Are we merely to look back and exclaim, “There were giants

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 149.

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on the earth in those days”? Perhaps there can be moral and political giants in our day as well. To that end, it is good to remember that giants such as David, Solomon, and Samson succeeded them—to say nothing of Moses himself. Of course, moral and political excellence come in different forms as demanded by different contexts, and one hopes and prays that we will be sent legislators like Moses, rulers like David, builders like Solomon ... and not yet destroyers like Samson. In the end, statesmen emerge when the moment requires, according to a providential logic, and the best we can do is till the earth to make it hospitable to such types. There is perhaps some benefit from each of us knowing, and demanding, such moral and intellectual virtues among our leaders. Seeking a good (and great) man is perhaps not so futile as the cynic, Diogenes, thought.

We can each, in our own small ways, “repudiate the repudiation,” and fight to preserve the small sliver of civilization we have each inherited. We may face new contexts and unprecedented hardships; however, the fundamental challenge remains the same as it did for Mahoney’s statesmen: we must defend our civilizational inheritance from perverse ideologies and self-aggrandizing individuals. “The gospel of envy” that Churchill saw after World War II is alive and well today, as is the “culture of repudiation” perceived by Roger Scruton (17, xi). Mahoney’s call to moderation “has nothing to do with slow-motion accommodation to cultural rot or moral nihilism or doctrinaire egalitarianism” but of utilizing “all the powers of the soul and the full range of the intellectual and moral virtues ... [in] the service of commanding practical reason and of civilization itself” (18).

Perhaps the first step towards regaining statesmanship is to realize, contrary to our democratic tendencies, that greatness is indeed possible. And, while greatness is no formulaic thing, we are fortunate now to be able to look back upon eminent figures to see how they wisely navigated their times and circumstances. We learn from Cicero that republican peace requires readiness for war; from Churchill and De Gaulle that intrepid nihilism must be met with audacious resistance; from Burke that prudence and moral clarity alone can distinguish between ordered liberty and pernicious license; from Lincoln that great and noble deeds can be achieved within, and not without, a constitutional framework; and from Tocqueville that the eyes and indeed souls of democratic peoples must repeatedly be turned upward and outward.

PIETAS

Fortunately, we Americans have a system which can survive long winters of statesmanship—those moments in which enlightened leaders are not at the helm—however, we hope and pray that such statesmen do not tarry long.