

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2018

Volume 44 Issue 2

- 183 *Christine J. Basil & Rachel K. Alexander* Mark Twain's *Joan of Arc: An American Woman?*
- 209 *Alfonso Galindo Hervás* Living Automatically, Living Remotely: On the Contemporary Reduction of Experience and Decision-Making Spaces
- 233 *John C. Koritansky* Natural Justice and the Nature of Justice in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*
- 257 *Alexander Orwin* In Search of the Comprehensive Science: The Way to Philosophy of Alfarabi's Plato
- 277 *Ralph C. Wood* **Review Essay:**  
*Flannery O'Connor: A Political Companion*, edited by Henry T. Edmondson III
- 295 *Marco Andreacchio* **Book Reviews:**  
*Machiavelli's Politics* by Catherine Zuckert
- 303 *Thomas M. J. Bateman* *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* by Bonnie Honig
- 309 *Thomas M. J. Bateman* *Fit for the Presidency?* by Seymour Morris Jr.
- 313 *Jarrett A. Carty* *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, edited by David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati, and Camila Vergara
- 319 *Eric R. Claeys* *The Political Theory of the American Founding: Natural Rights, Public Policy, and the Moral Conditions of Freedom* by Thomas G. West
- 325 *Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman* *An Archaeology of the Political: Regimes of Power from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* by Elías José Palti
- 331 *Paul Ludwig* *Rousseau's Rejuvenation of Political Philosophy: A New Introduction* by Nelson Lund
- 339 *Thomas Merrill* *Heidegger and Politics: The Ontology of Radical Discontent* by Alexander S. Duff
- 345 *Jason Neidleman* *Rousseau on Education, Freedom, and Judgment* by Denise Schaeffer
- 351 *John R. Pottenger* *Founding Acts: Constitutional Origins in a Democratic Age* by Serdar Tekin

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

*Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University

*General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns

*General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)

*Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.  
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth  
W. Thompson

*Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)

*International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier

*Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.  
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey  
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.  
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine  
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert

*Copy Editor* Les Harris

*Designer* Sarah Teutschel

*Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798

*email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

---

Seymour Morris Jr., *Fit for the Presidency? Winners, Losers, What-Ifs, and Also-Rans*. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2017, 387 pp., \$32.95 (cloth).

---

THOMAS M. J. BATEMAN

ST THOMAS UNIVERSITY

*bateman@stu.ca*

Seymour Morris offers a portrait of fifteen recognizable characters in American political history, selected not according to a strict methodological scheme but rather because they represent eclectic examples of presidents, failed presidential candidates, and those who could and should have run for president but did not. It is not made clear why some personalities are included and others omitted. Morris is not a social scientist, but he is interested in drawing general conclusions from an examination of a sample. The book is not a catalog of greats, but an assortment of persons with diverse qualities, in diverse contexts, and with different fates. Included are some outstanding presidents: Washington, Lincoln, and Reagan. Washington is the aristocrat who distinguished himself in the War of Independence and in constitution making. One of his merits was that he had no sons; this reassured those who would otherwise have feared that the presidency would become a hereditary office. (Some wished to refer to him as His Highness, a title he rejected.) Lincoln is the mediocrity who rose to greatness in office. FDR is mentioned only in passing. Whatever one's qualms about the selection of subjects, the reader is entertained by portraits of colorful characters and is often urged to conclude that little is new in our contemporary reflections on leaders.

At first blush, Morris's analytical scheme is annoying. He imagines himself a head hunter for a large organization and examines the candidates' "CVs" and others' opinions of them. Morris disavows the notion that leadership in government is the same as leadership in any complex organization, but the form suggests otherwise.

Some excellent people fail or do not have the opportunity to run for the presidency. George Marshall is the latter-day Washington whom Roosevelt passed over as a running mate in 1944. William McAdoo was highly promising but a near miss for the Democratic nomination in 1920 and 1924. DeWitt Clinton and Wendell Willkie are among the best of the also-rans.

Some win but perform poorly. Hoover is one and his obvious gifts and accomplishments are dimmed by other debilities, not the least of which is an inability to communicate. He was too much the technocrat and too little the politician. Others have fatal flaws mixed with extraordinary traits and accomplishments. Morris puts William Randolph Hearst, Jefferson Davis, and Robert Kennedy in this group.

Good leadership seems to be like good porridge: neither too hot nor too cold but just right. Some sort of golden mean applies to the successful presidents. Of Lincoln it was said, "Just the right thing, at the right time, and in the right place." Good presidents have ample experience, but an unsavory past can be a burden. Patience is critical to leadership, but vacillation is a killer. Presidents should be active, but not rash. Leadership at times requires the drawing of lines in the sand, but compromise is often necessary and bull-headedness is often a vice. A judicious mix of the love of ideas and of people is better than a fixation on the "science" of public administration. Some leaders reflect too much and others not enough. Morris reaches for an account of leadership that places most stock on judgment and on the reading of people, on context, on issues, and on timing.

On the matter of judgment, more reflection by the author would have made the book a more informative read. What is the nature of judgment? In what does it consist? How does one acquire it? Can it be learned, or is it a gift of some kind? This ground has been well plowed by ancients like Aristotle and moderns like Isaiah Berlin. Berlin, for example, refuses to accept that there is a science of politics derived from natural laws, or that a theoretical knowledge of political life can be directly applied by politicians. The claim that it can be, Berlin argues, is commonly made by totalitarian movements and has repeatedly ended in disaster. Berlin prefers the language of gift or instinct; political leadership, he writes, requires "considerable personal experience and natural aptitude."<sup>1</sup> "In the realm of political action, laws are far and few indeed; skills are everything." Statesmen "grasp the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation—this and no

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "On Political Judgment," *New York Review of Books*, October 3, 1996, 26–30.

other.” Political judgment requires a direct acquaintance with particular facts and a sense of what is relevant and what is not, what fits with what, and what consequences flow from what acts. Bismarck is high on Berlin’s list of leaders with excellent political judgment. So are Lincoln and FDR. The former is discussed in Morris’s book, the latter not. But Morris is correct to say that the best qualification for the presidency is experience. Lack of qualifications is not a qualification.

Instead of an account of presidential leadership based on the nature of judgment, Morris gives us a version associated with the rhetorical presidency,<sup>2</sup> the image of the president as a talker, soother, consoler, encourager, inspirer. This is not the Founders’ vision. In fact, the idea of president as a national moral figure was for many Founders the beginning of tyranny. The president was originally imagined to be a more modest figure who would overshadow neither Congress nor the states. Morris sees the beginning of the ascendant president in the person of William Harrison, winner of the 1840 election and in office for only a brief period before his untimely death. He was the man of the mythical log cabin, though in fact he was born an aristocratic Virginian. He loved the West and was the “common man’s” president.

The fitful rise of the rhetorical presidency became the staple account of good leadership in the twentieth century, hastened by the development of radio and television. Morris accepts the idea of the rhetorical president uncritically, criticizing candidates for their lack of the common touch and inability to inspire. Here Hoover get a failing grade, while Reagan passes with flying colors. The rhetorical president threatens to outgrow the constitutional limits of the office and alter the delicate balances that have safeguarded limited democratic government in the United States. But one cannot gainsay the need for the common touch in a democracy. This is among the lessons of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and *Henry V*. At the same time, the presidency requires much more than this ability to “connect.”

Morris emphasizes the value of independence in presidents and presidential aspirants. Wealthy presidents are prized precisely because they do not need the money they could accumulate from corrupt uses of the office. So the land-owning Washington and the successful Tilden earn Morris’s praises. Yet Wendell Willkie and George Marshall were not wealthy men, but were incorruptible nonetheless. So not wealth but character is decisively

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

important. Morris leaves out of his study shiftier personalities like John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton, whose conduct diminished the office.

We live in a moment of intense interest in the presidency and the institutional context in which it operates. The 2016 election was among the most disruptive in memory and the victor has smashed many of the norms associated with good presidential leadership. But books like Morris's confirm that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Like Donald Trump, William Randolph Hearst was wealthy and showed little knowledge of or interest in the processes of politics. Also Like Trump, Jefferson Davis had a poor grasp of history, Wendell Willkie quickly switched from Democrat to Republican (making enemies in both camps), Henry Wallace was very much a loose cannon, Robert F. Kennedy lied and exaggerated, and psychiatrists pronounced Barry Goldwater unfit for the presidency. None became president, while President Trump embodies in his person so many faults and weaknesses distributed among these many others.

Morris has high regard for Ronald Reagan, the Great Communicator, whose policy smarts and sense of timing exceeded all expectations. Two things about Reagan stand out. He worked members of Congress frequently and effectively. And he lived by his Eleventh Commandment: never speak ill of a Republican. The current president does not read books. Should he begin to do so, he could do worse than go directly to the chapter on Reagan in Morris's volume.