

Interpretation

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Daniel Mahoney's latest book on political leadership begins with a vignette of the young Chateaubriand's meeting with George Washington in 1791. The young aristocrat was no stranger to greatness—his own family included many distinguished noblemen, such as his cousin Alexis de Tocqueville; nonetheless, Chateaubriand was struck by Washington's austerity and reserve, and in awe of his natural greatness. Aware of his own lack of distinction, Chateaubriand claims to have seen in Washington's eyes the virtue of a great man. The notion of statesmanship is founded, for Mahoney, on the idea that greatness is a feature of one's soul, and can be developed by witnessing it in the speeches and deeds of such statesmen.

The vignette also allows Mahoney to introduce another theme that is central to his account: the statesman allows us to see greatness and thereby distinguish between the less great or mediocre, and the tyrannical. Without a clear notion of the peak of human excellence, we cannot judge accurately the valleys of corruption but must always distort their stature. Drawing on his experience with Washington, Chateaubriand was able to see, even by 1803, that Napoleon was no Washington, that is, a dignified statesman who was satisfied to have served the common good honorably and who stepped down in favor a constitutional republic. Mahoney is quick to point out that although Napoleon's tyranny was hardly as terrible as those of Hitler and Stalin, Chateaubriand was essentially correct in his judgment. The purpose of studying statesmanship is to learn the features of a noble character, and of

honorable ambition in service of the common good, such that one can appreciate statesmen and recognize tyrants without falling prey to obfuscation.

Finally, the vignette speaks to a third focus of Mahoney's work, which is the fate of the statesman and greatness in general in an era when the drive for equality appears relentless, even providential. Tocqueville remarked about Napoleon that he was as great as one can be without being good. Mahoney wishes to show that greatness cannot be separated from goodness or moral virtue. But this means that students of statesmen must first be able to define and discern the good. Contemporary political and social scientists, to the contrary, prefer to adopt the pose of neutrality regarding such questions. Nor does the popularization of relativism, atheism, and nihilism help matters. In other words, the conditions for identifying and studying statesmen appear to be much curtailed.

Related to this problem is the more general difficulty of recognizing greatness in an era when distinctions between better and worse with respect to characteristics of the soul are frowned upon. This is hardly a new problem, even if it has taken on a special urgency today. The problem with distinguishing between the few and the many is explored in Plato's *Republic*, as the problem of persuading the unwise many to accept the authority of a few wise philosopher-kings. Indeed, Mahoney suggests that the contemporary problem is worse, since it is not just the many who deny the possibility of greatness, but our elites as well. Moreover, our elites go further in rejecting the notion of nature, upon which the excellence of the soul is founded. The prospects of producing a statesman of Washington's stature further decline when we consider that in order to succeed, contemporary democratic statesman must obscure their greatness to appeal to the demos.

Mahoney, a professor emeritus of political science at Assumption College and senior fellow at the Claremont Institute, is well suited to investigate such questions. His books cover the origins of liberalism as well as a wide variety of statesmen and political theorists, including Charles de Gaulle, Raymond Aron, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Mahoney is not only a student of political philosophy, but also a student of revelation and a serious Catholic. However, to borrow Mahoney's own description of Pierre Manent, "he does not take his political bearings from theological categories or from revelation per se. He is first and foremost a political philosopher who takes his bearings from reason, from the natural order of things while being fully attentive to the workings of grace and conscience on the souls and free will of human beings." He "rejects political theology, political deductions

from explicitly theoretical categories or dogmas.”¹ In his previous book, *The Idol of Our Age*, Mahoney analyzed how contemporary modern thought is characterized by doctrinaire egalitarianism and a bogus cosmopolitanism informed by debilitating relativism. He shows that the campaign to deny the human greatness of both heroes and saints—“the culture of repudiation”—is an attempt to deny the notion of permanent possibilities, whether high or low, of the human soul. As Mahoney observed in a recent interview:

It’s one thing to say that great men and women are not necessarily saints. Whenever you write sympathetically about the greatness of a great person, people will say you are engaging in hagiography. That means the lives of the saints. But there really are great people, and there really are the virtues that the ancients spoke about. Courage, temperance, prudence, and justice that are embodied in the lives of flawed, but great human beings. And I would add that even free political communities need the talents and contributions of such statesmen.²

The Statesman as Thinker continues Mahoney’s attempt to recover the notion of greatness and cultivate it in democratic conditions.



Mahoney’s study is a study of modern statesmen, with the goal of showing the continuity between the Ciceronian view of statesmanship and the modern practice of statesmanship—at least as modeled by great modern statesmen such as Burke, Lincoln, Churchill, and de Gaulle. At the same time, the book is itself an act of statesmanship which attempts to use these studies to restore the ancient distinction between the tyrant and the statesman. For Mahoney, the statesman is first and foremost a “thinker, of magnanimity informed by an appreciation of limits and self-restraint” (15). It is important to keep this second goal in mind in order to understand the work as a whole. “Modern political philosophy and modern social science can only explain away such statesmen” (15). The purpose, then, of Mahoney’s work is to restore the idea or the possibility of a statesman. His description of the statesman might also serve as a description of Mahoney’s work: “the noble statesman self-consciously attempts to conjugate thought and action, greatness and moderation, while eschewing power and pleasure as ends in themselves” (15).

¹ Daniel Mahoney, “With Reason Attentive to Grace: Pierre Manent’s Correction of Liberalism and Christian Utopianism,” *Political Science Reviewer* 46, no. 1 (2022): 1. Mahoney discusses hagiography at 138ff.

² See <https://ipa.org.au/ipa-tv/fighting-for-freedom-lessons-from-history>. The phrase “culture of repudiation” is from Roger Scruton (137).

Mahoney's educational goal takes its bearings from the ancient account of Cicero, whose ideal of the statesman remains as valid as it was two thousand years ago: "greatness tethered to measure, action informed by high prudence (as opposed to mere calculation), the moral virtues at the service of the civic common good, action informed by prudent reflection, and a coherent vision of the well-ordered soul" (9–10). The practice of such statesmanship may appear different in the hands of different individuals at different times, but this is largely because "the arts of prudence are applied to sometimes dramatically different circumstances" (10). An essential part of this effort to describe the statesman is deliberation about what constitutes human excellence. Mahoney invites the reader to think through this question by contrasting Aristotle's account of magnanimity with Cicero's more political analysis. Whereas Aristotle's account points toward self-sufficiency and even indifference to the community, Cicero suggests that greatness can best be achieved by participation in the community. The reason for this is not any dependence on recognition but the ability to benefit and enlighten others.

Mahoney soon turns from Cicero to Edmund Burke, from the ancients to the moderns, in order to show the essential continuity of the high-minded concept of statesmanship. Cicero describes statesmanship in terms of the understanding and mastery of the ordering of the soul. The statesman is both a teacher of the citizens and an exemplar of the best public life. By turning immediately to Burke, Mahoney shows the critical role that prudence or practical reason, which Burke calls "the god of this lower world," plays in such statesmanship (40). Readers of *Interpretation* will note the striking resemblance between Mahoney's identification of Cicero and Burke with Leo Strauss's account in *Natural Right and History*: "Among the great theoretical writings of the past, none seems to be nearer in spirit to Burke's statements on the British constitution than Cicero's *Republic*....These contentions of Burke and Cicero are, if taken by themselves, in perfect agreement with the classical principles."³ Mahoney focuses on their broad areas of agreement, and suggests that the principles of virtue are clear and fixed by our nature, even if their particular expression changes with the historical circumstances. As a result, the means to attaining virtue remain necessarily open to question and deliberation. Mahoney's book is focused on the prudential question of the relevance of statesmanship in our time rather than on the theoretical underpinnings of virtue.

³ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 321. It is true that Strauss goes on to suggest that though Burke and Cicero agree on moral and political grounds, Burke ultimately departs from Cicero's understanding of the value and possibility of intellectual virtue.

To apply the Ciceronian understanding of statesmanship to modern democratic republics requires reflection on the threats to liberty and novel opportunities for tyranny that have emerged in modernity. Mahoney uses his chapter on Burke to show that the contemporary varieties of “ideological despotism,” ranging from fascism to communism, are close cousins of the French Revolutionaries’ emphasis on theory and uncompromising metaphysics: “the French Revolutionaries were adherents of a militant secular religion as fanatical as the most fervent or fanatical religious sect. Theirs was not a political revolution in the ordinary sense but rather ‘a Revolution of doctrine and theoretick dogma,’ or as we would say today, an ideological revolution” (47). The reliance on theory distorts political judgment. It makes a relatively mild if ineffectual government like the monarchy of Louis XVI appear to be a monstrous tyranny. It imagines reason to have unlimited authority in political life, even in conquering nature and God. In short, it ends up abandoning all moderation in the name of revolutionary change. In Burke’s words, the revolutionaries “have learnt to talk against monks with the spirit of the monk” (48). For Mahoney, Burke “was the first thinker and statesman to discern the true nature of ideological despotism,” particularly its willingness to destroy all institutions that stand in the way of its revolutionary goals (52). Burke’s prudence teaches us that resisting modern despotism requires the ability to recognize the restraining and salutary influence of customs, habits, and traditions in political life, and to deploy a combination of restraint and moderation to protect against corrosive revolutionary ideologies.

In the midst of his analysis of Burke, Mahoney reminds us of Harvey Mansfield’s study of Burke’s statesmanship.⁴ Specifically, Mansfield showed how Burke made an alliance with the gentlemen and nobles in the Whig party and beyond to champion a prudence rooted in a constitutionalism that allowed room for the cultivation of noble manners such as chivalry. These manners offered some measure of protection against the excesses of democratic populism. However, in the long wake of the French Revolution, gentlemen no longer exist and their replacements—technocrats, administrators, and bureaucrats—are woefully inadequate “to defend sound practice against bad or pernicious theory” (65). Courage, the first of Aristotle’s virtues, is ever in short supply and the resources for it as well as for other virtues appear to be disappearing. Mahoney’s project is the resurrection of these virtues, particularly courage, to defend freedom and civilization against

⁴ Mahoney refers to Mansfield’s essay on Burke in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

tyrannical ideologies. His study of statesmanship is a workbook for recognizing and celebrating great-souled individuals.

Here, Mahoney's account of Tocqueville is particularly illuminating because Tocqueville's statesmanship reflects his prudential political judgment in thought as much as deed. Mahoney describes him as "the thinker as statesman' and not the other way around" (80). Moreover, Tocqueville straddled two worlds, the end of aristocracy and the birth of democracy. This allowed him to see that "the dying world of aristocracy" contained elements of greatness that were not "simply reducible to aristocratic convention" (83). Tocqueville sought to preserve such elements and to counter the leveling effects of egalitarianism and the resistance to distinctions of all kinds, for example, between higher and lower, between God and man, between man and animals. He wished to foster a "political order consistent with liberty and human dignity, doing justice to both the equality of human beings and the 'greatness' of man, which transcended the horizon of democratic equality" (90–91). The second volume of *Democracy of America* addresses this tendency to confuse the noble desire for equality—the desire to raise everyone by means of liberty—with the passion of leveling, which seeks a conformity of all to mediocre tastes and goals. This tendency toward leveling and toward dogmatic egalitarianism opens up a new and dangerous political avenue: in the case of the people, the passions drive them on to unending revolutionary violence; in the case of the tyrant, the passions offer a novel basis for power by gratifying the low but common desires of the people. Equality without freedom or dignity is the new face of tyranny that Tocqueville came to recognize in the passion for leveling. The antidotes to such tyranny include freedom as well as openness to greatness. Tocqueville sought to elevate and moderate democracy from within by teaching a notion of greatness and dignity that is not reducible to democratic and egalitarian categories.

As a friend (but not flatterer) of democracy, Tocqueville realized the need to create a new rhetoric, "carefully calibrated to the great task of defending human liberty and dignity," in order to "ennoble democracy" (91, 80; cf. 86). Burke similarly realized that democracy had given rise to a new, abstract language that undermined prudential judgment, urging upon us ever more radical and uncompromising positions. Both men recognized that modern politics is entwined with modern philosophy, particularly in a reductive understanding of science and of morality in terms of self-interest and self-preservation. The problem, as Burke observed, is that modern political thought creates an ersatz religion which is even more prone to fanaticism

than is superstitious belief. Much of Mahoney's book explores the statesmen who pioneered this new ennobling rhetoric in an effort to enlarge the spiritual horizons of democracy and strengthen our love of moderation, liberty, and civilization.

Perhaps no single figure captures this new rhetoric more fully than Abraham Lincoln. Mahoney's short chapter on Lincoln is, fittingly, the most rhetorically impassioned chapter in the book. Lincoln came from a simple background, but as Lord Charnwood observed, he had the soul of a natural aristocrat, which made him well suited to dealing with democracy in crisis. In a passage replete with contemporary overtones, Mahoney describes the democratic soul in crisis at the beginning of the chapter: "Democratic peoples are prone to impatience and ingratitude in the best circumstances. But in a highly ideologized climate marked by collective self-loathing and an unremitting desire to repudiate the inheritance of the past, ingratitude becomes inseparable from a vulgar and destructive nihilism" (109). The moral crisis of slavery led all sides to eschew prudence, "succumbing either to unprincipled pragmatism or moral preening and virtue signaling" (113). Lincoln alone managed to navigate a moderate course between these and other perils and, even more miraculously, as Mahoney shows, to craft a rhetoric to check moralistic rage and revolutionary passion.

In Lincoln's speeches, we see the statesman as educator. He continually reminds Americans of the founding principles of freedom and natural right, that is, "of a free people governing itself under humanizing limits marked by natural right and divine justice" (119). Lincoln's central teaching was identical with the Declaration of Independence's proposition that "all men are created equal," but Lincoln found a new way to teach this "profound truth" in a language that speaks directly to democratic citizens. We are equal in our right to keep what we have earned "by the sweat of (our) brow" (113, 123). His language reminded us of the "higher" basis of our union in "natural rights and indubitable truths" and thereby avoided "a heavy-handed or dogmatic 'democratic ideology'" (118, 119). True patriotism, as Lincoln taught, involves loving one's country and also loving the truth. It is easy to distort Lincoln's teaching as a "mere Lockeanism" or a re-founding of the country on new principles (cf. 117–18). Mahoney rejects these distortions and identifies an even more serious threat: "the cancelers have come for Lincoln too. His statues have been toppled, and his character has been slandered by those who specialize in slogans, half-truths, and tiresome ideological clichés." Mahoney wishes to free

us from the dogmatic egalitarianism that blinds us to Lincoln's greatness and to restore the guidance of our "most philosophically minded" president (111).

Mahoney ends his study with portraits of Churchill and de Gaulle, who vie for the title of "most impressive statesman-thinker of the twentieth century," and a study of Czech president Václav Havel, whom he describes as "the closest thing to a philosopher-king that the late modern world has experienced" (171, 201). These portraits follow the same analysis of statesmanship, that is, "noble and humane 'greatness of spirit' informed by practical wisdom and true moderation" (154). They also confirm the virtues of Mahoney's study, particularly his willingness to follow the facts wherever they lead. One notable example of this is his account of the statesman's piety. One might expect that, as a serious Catholic, Mahoney would wish to connect political greatness to piety, but again and again, his account surprises us. Churchill, he writes, was "above all a pagan in the noblest classical sense"; in fact, none of the statesmen he examines can be said to be pious in any traditional way (162). Nonetheless, they all learned to respect religion as a means to encouraging moderation and ennobling democracy (cf. 164). In addition to this willingness to follow the facts where they lead, the other feature on display is Mahoney's deep erudition. Each chapter provides a running commentary on sources and scholarship such that the reader can see a variety of interpretations and find them in the literature. Further, Mahoney cites important works that have been overlooked or neglected. In the case of Churchill, for example, he cites his well-known speeches, his great memoir *The Second World War*, and his popular *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. But Mahoney also analyzes *The River War*, Churchill's account of "the reconquest of the Soudan," a text that proves to be important for protecting Churchill from accusations of Islamophobia and colonial racism.



Mahoney challenges the traditional view that philosophy and statesmanship are quite different enterprises.⁵ According to this view, the goal of statesmanship is the right ordering of souls on behalf of the right ordering of a regime; the goal of philosophy is wisdom. Wisdom and prudence, for Aristotle, have different relations to moral virtue: prudence depends on the acquisition of moral virtue, while wisdom views moral virtue as at best instrumental and secondary to intellectual virtue (*EN X.7*).⁶ For Mahoney,

⁵ See, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, at 1145a6 and 1141a21.

⁶ "The philosopher," Strauss observes, "asserts the superiority of contemplation as such to action as

however, the Ciceronian model of statesmanship shows that the thinking statesman not only brings the wisdom of philosophy to bear upon practical life but expands the horizons of (political) philosophy itself. In *The Statesman as Thinker*, he argues that, in order for civilization to be sustained, statesmanship informed by political philosophy has a most crucial role to play in defending sound practice against pernicious theory in all its forms.

such: from the philosopher's point of view, goodness of character and goodness of action is essentially not more than a means toward, or a by-product of, the life of contemplation." Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: Free Press, 1952), 114.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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