

Washington Isn't Olympus

Citizens Certain To Be Disappointed If They Expect Political Leaders To Be Gods

By Michael A. Weinstein

The large and often inconclusive dramas of national and international politics often seem to be bigger than life, played out at several removes from our everyday round of activities. But we should never forget that the actors on the public stage are not very different from the rest of us.

They were once subject to all of the familiar childhood hopes and fears; they had to sit in classrooms under the teacher's thumb, and they struggled to gain a foothold in the rugged competition to secure a place in society. They carry the scars of the past within them, as we all do, and they are limited by the compromises that they inevitably made along the way.

As we approach the Labor Day breather from the point-counterpoint of usual politics, we might do well, as citizens, to reflect on what we ought to expect from our political leaders and from prominent figures in other social institutions such as business, finance, education, science and medicine. The attitudes of Americans toward leadership are now badly confused and contradictory, betraying an unhealthy alternation of fantasy and cynicism. We should try to put ourselves on a more even and realistic keel.

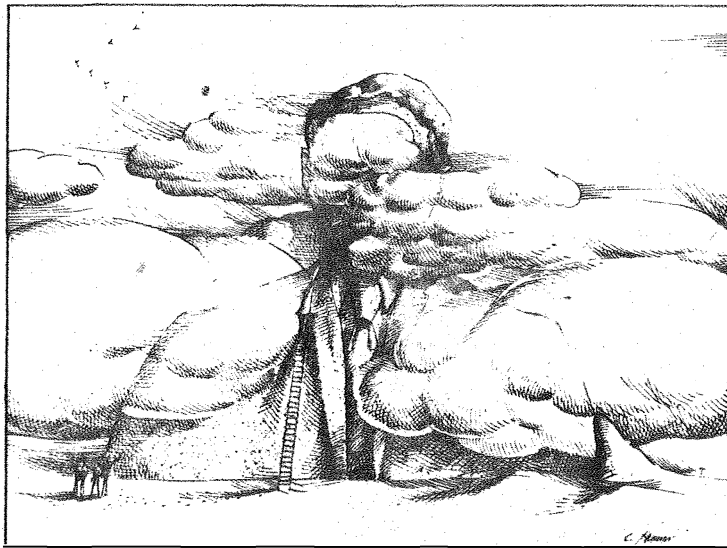
For all of the rhetoric surrounding the celebration of the Constitution in its bicentennial year and the sermonizing on our political institutions growing out of the Iran-Contra hearings, remarkably little has been said about the deeper wisdom of the Founding Fathers concerning human nature. The American form of constitutional democracy is not only a mechanical design of checks and balances among interdependent branches of government, but more importantly a special vision of moral virtue and its limits.

The framers of the Constitution lived in a period of history prior to the industrial revolution, which made them far more realistic about the capabilities of human beings than we are. They la-

bored in a brief and favored moment in which the mythologies of feudal society had been eroded and the unrestrained dream of technological progress had yet to appear. We might even say that they had the privilege of an unillusioned insight into human nature.

What basic truth did they grasp about us? In the pregnant phrase of their great contemporary, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, they understood that we are in the exquisitely irritating predicament of being "unsociable social beings."

Sharing in the worldly wisdom of the Enlightenment, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson knew that while "men are not angels"



they are also drawn toward each other to make a common life. We are unable to abide each other — we are willful, flawed and even selfish — and yet we are dependent on one another's help to survive and prosper. Acknowledging this inherent doubleness, the Founding Fathers contrived a system of limits that would both restrain ambition and allow for collaboration.

The framers were under no apprehension that leaders were any different from the common run of humanity. Indeed, they erected such a complicated and cumbersome network of checks and balances because they believed that those who chose a political career were probably less reliable than people who were not attracted by positions of pow-

er. Their aim was to restrain abuses, not to eliminate them. They created a government of laws, but they knew that fallible people would make, execute and adjudicate those laws.

Living in a far more dangerous world than the framers did and bedazzled by the fantasy of technological fixes, we have lost sight of the vision of human nature that lies behind our system of government. Indeed, many in the United States have come to believe in the pernicious myth that we should "feel good about ourselves" and that our leaders should flatter our vanity. And so they do, feeding our fantasies and inflating our expectations of them until we lose ourselves in a mania of enthusiasm.

But sooner or later the truth will out; the veil of illusion is lifted, and we see the warts starkly. Then cynicism sets in until we get carried away by the next enthusiastic binge.

Wild promising and promiscuous flattery have become such staples of our political rhetoric that we have gotten hooked on the idea that our leaders should be better and more capable than we are, at the same time that we reserve the right to demean them whenever they seem to be unworthy of our high opinion of ourselves. We insist that our leaders be saints and "real people," an impossible combination; but

we refuse to exercise any forbearance toward their weaknesses.

This unseemly set of attitudes has been responsible for the denigration of a line of presidents, beginning with Lyndon Johnson. They cannot be excused for flattering us and peddling false hopes, but we bear responsibility for our eagerness to be seduced.

The bicentennial year is a good time to start swearing off the drug of narcissism. As the framers understood, crises of authority would abate if people nurtured realistic expectations for themselves and for their leaders.

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