

**Moral Leadership**  
**By**  
**Daniel E. White September 19, 2024**

The kerfuffle caused by the Quail Creek POA over Mike Conley's sign indicating his desire for civility called to mind an observation I made over many years to students in courses I taught about American government and history. President Franklin Roosevelt, when asked about the office he occupied, asserted that "the presidency is pre-eminently a position of moral leadership."

Talking in 2016 with a friend about the results of the election, I noted FDR's statement. My friend responded that it was a good thing that the election was not about moral leadership.

I did not know how to answer.

In a discussion sponsored by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Washington in 2019, Professor Michael Blake asked: "The best presidents—including such figures as Abraham Lincoln and George Washington—are celebrated not *only* as good leaders, but as good men. They embody not simply political skill, but personal virtue. Why, though, should anyone expect a president to demonstrate that sort of virtue? If someone is good at the difficult job of political leadership, must they demonstrate exceptional moral character as well?"

Applying Professor Blake's question to Mr. Conley's desire, is there any reason why one should expect a presidential candidate to be "decent, honorable and kind" if one thinks that the candidate has the political skills to be what one considers a good leader?

The Constitution is silent on such matters. Qualifications for office are limited to age and citizenship, and reasons for removal from office are limited to undefined "high crimes and misdemeanors." There is no mention of moral character as a qualification.

The Senate Committee on Watergate in 1974 saw things differently, asserting that "ultimately, the ethical and moral quality of government depends upon the individuals who administer it, especially those who provide its leadership," noted James D. Zinn in the political blog *The Hill* (9/17/24)

Professor Blake noted that the political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli, insisted that "the good leader...is morally right to do what is usually taken as wrong...be cruel, deceptive and often violent," exhibiting a "willingness to demonstrate habits of character that would ordinarily be understood as vices."

A more recent political philosopher, Michael Walzer, noted Professor Blake, reasoned that "if the world is imperfect, and requires a politician to lie, cheat, or otherwise do wrong in the name of doing good, then there is sometimes a moral reason for the politician to do that wrong."

I would like to think that most of the people I know would prefer how Mr. Conley's described civility: decent, honorable, kind. I like to believe that most of the people I know would support the words of President George H.W. Bush: "America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle. It is to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world."

Neither President Roosevelt nor President Bush defined "moral." Neither did Machiavelli nor Walzer. Searching for a common understanding about what is moral could be an important first step toward establishing civility as a norm. Does "might make right" as is implied by the two philosophers? Or is morality more a matter of how we treat each other, individually and collectively?

The America I want is the one envisioned by President Bush. The leadership I want is the one described by President Roosevelt. The rule I want to govern us is the Golden one.

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