

In Favor of “Leader Proofing”

Anthony King

Abstract: Although it is widely assumed that successful polities require strong leaders, something like the opposite is probably the case. A successful political system may well be one that has no need of strong leaders and may even eschew them. Strong leaders may occasionally be desirable in any polity, but those occasions are – or should be – rare. As often as not (possibly more often than not) strong leaders pose substantial risks. They are liable to do as much damage as good, possibly more. There is a lot to be said for any polity’s political culture and institutions having built into them a fair amount of “leader proofing.”

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Switzerland is undoubtedly one of the world’s most successful countries, probably *the* most successful in Europe. It is also one of the world’s most intriguing countries, because it should probably not exist. Indeed, the most widely read book on the country (apart from guidebooks) is entitled *Why Switzerland?*¹ Historically, the country has been divided in multiple ways: by dauntingly high mountain peaks, by language and by religion. Switzerland boasts no fewer than four national languages, although a large proportion of Swiss can speak only one of them (for most, English is their preferred second language). For many centuries, the religious divide, between Catholics and Protestants, went deep. Early in the sixteenth century, Zwingli preached and practiced his brand of revolutionary Protestantism in predominantly Catholic Zurich. Soon afterward, Geneva became a hotbed of militant Calvinism. Protestants and Catholics fought three civil wars between 1529 and 1847, and a constitutional ban on Jesuit priests living and working in Switzerland was lifted only in 1973.

Yet the Swiss confederation has remained in being for more than seven centuries, its occasional civil wars have been relatively bloodless affairs (certainly as compared with the American Civil War), and for generations past the Swiss have been at peace

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both with their neighbors and with each other. Whatever language they speak, Swiss people think of themselves as Swiss. Class conflict in the country, as well as religious conflict, is muted. Violent crime is virtually unknown. The Swiss are among the best-educated people in the world and enjoy one of the world's most advanced health-care delivery systems. Switzerland is a liberal democracy in the fullest sense of both words. Not least, the people of Switzerland enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world (however measured). Switzerland positively exudes peace and prosperity.

What is intriguing for our purposes, however, is a zone of silence relating to that country. Ask the members of any audience anywhere, however well-informed, to name anyone who is now, or ever has been, a Swiss political leader and the result is invariably an embarrassed silence. No one can think of anybody. The only person anyone can ever think of is William Tell, but Tell – he of the famous crossbow and apple – may never have existed and, even if he did, it was a very long time ago, during Switzerland's earliest days. The Swiss people clearly do not suffer from any form of leader addiction.

Britain's Winston Churchill *was* a leader, in two senses. Formally, he was the leader of the Conservative Party and, on two occasions, he served as his country's prime minister. Less formally, in 1940, when Britain's fortunes in World War II were at their nadir, he emerged as the country's rhetorical and symbolic leader. His speeches, cigars and defiant V-for-victory gesture are still remembered. But in practical military terms he was less a leader than a goad, gadfly and interferer-in-chief. His military leadership was always severely constrained: not merely by circumstances (Britain's weaknesses, the strengths of the enemy, the increasing power of the United States, and so on) but also by his need to carry his military, naval and air force commanders with him. In

his dealings with them, he needed to be circumspect. He could relieve senior officers of their commands only when they had demonstrably proved ineffective. His power was overwhelmingly the power to persuade; and, when he failed to persuade, as he often did, he almost invariably failed to achieve his objectives. Especially toward the end of the war, as Britain's power waned, Churchill had no option but to be collegial, even deferential, in his mode of operations.

The position of John F. Kennedy during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis differed sharply from that of Churchill in 1940. Churchill spoke eloquently and often. Kennedy said almost nothing in public. But, informally as well as formally, all the important decisions taken by the United States government during the crisis were for Kennedy and Kennedy alone to take. As president, *he* was commander-in-chief, with duties he could neither share nor delegate. But Kennedy in 1962 found himself in a situation far outside the orbit of his own personal experience and without precedent in human history. He needed to think long and hard – and knew that he did. He also needed others' help as his ideas developed – and knew that he did.

President Kennedy, someone as grown-up as Churchill could be child-like, dealt with his problem by convening what he called the Executive Committee. However, it was scarcely a committee and certainly not an executive. Its membership fluctuated, and the president continually conducted smaller meetings, with varying personnel. Kennedy's central concern was to keep America's options open for as long as possible and to ensure that all of his advisers felt free to speak their minds. Toward the latter end, he encouraged his advisers to talk among themselves in his absence. The president's brother, Robert Kennedy, subsequently wrote: "This was wise. Personalities change when the Presi-

dent is present, and frequently even strong men make recommendations on the basis of what they believe the President wishes to hear."² Kennedy continues:

During all these deliberations we all spoke as equals. There was no rank, and, in fact, we did not even have a chairman. . . . As a result . . . the conversations were completely uninhibited and unrestricted. Everyone had an equal opportunity to express himself and to be heard directly. It was a tremendously advantageous procedure.³

It was out of these informal and semiformal discussions that the idea of imposing a naval "quarantine" on Cuba – rather than launching air strikes to destroy the Soviets' missile sites on the island – arose. The ultimate responsibility and the final decisions were, of necessity, the president's, but throughout, his chosen style was collegial.

An implicit commentary on the functioning of any institution is provided by what happens whenever the nominal head of that institution is unavailable for any reason. How does the institution function under those circumstances?

In late June 1953, during his second term as prime minister, Churchill suffered a stroke which left him partially paralyzed down his left side. Initially, it was thought he would have to resign, but he retreated to his country home, Chartwell, to recuperate and quite quickly – within about eight weeks – he recovered. Although the prime minister was largely incapacitated, the consequences for the conduct of government were minimal. One of his senior colleagues, R. A. Butler, "took charge of the Cabinet with tact and competence," and departmental ministers went calmly about their business.⁴ Business as usual also characterized Churchill's last few months in office. The old man, now eighty, was increasingly lethargic and absent-minded, but few outside his inner circle were aware of the extent of his deterioration and the govern-

ment continued to function normally. It seemed not to matter much that during these months 10 Downing Street was effectively unoccupied.

One of Winston Churchill's former companions-in-arms was similarly ill and in office during the same decade. President Dwight D. Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in September 1955 and then a stroke in November 1957. The heart attack kept him out of action for approximately a month and a half, and he actually recovered more quickly from the stroke, although his speech was impaired for a time and, like Churchill, he briefly contemplated resignation. Potentially, Eisenhower's illnesses placed a greater strain on America's president-centered – and therefore individual-centered – governing arrangements than Churchill's did on Britain's more loose-textured arrangements. In Britain, ministers simply assumed, rightly, that they would carry on as usual, with central direction, if needed, being provided collectively by the Cabinet. In the United States, however, it was far from clear what was supposed to happen.

Fortunately, in Eisenhower's case three separate factors eased the strain. One was that on both occasions the president was only briefly unable to communicate and take decisions. Even after the stroke, his mental faculties seem to have been unimpaired. The second was that, by coincidence, no difficult decisions needed to be taken during either of the president's two short periods of convalescence. In particular, no major foreign-affairs crises supervened. The third was that Eisenhower, by outlook and temperament and despite the fact that he had formerly occupied positions of high military command, was a firm believer in cabinet government and "sought to establish in the executive branch a bureaucratic structure that minimized disruption caused by the absence of the chief executive."⁵ While he was recovering from his heart attack, Sherman Adams, his chief of

staff, stayed with him in Denver and relayed back to Washington any presidential decisions that had to be taken, while Richard Nixon, the vice president, presided over Cabinet meetings and meetings of the National Security Council. An informal coordinating committee began to meet regularly to oversee the government's operations as a whole.⁶ Although the outward forms differed, these arrangements resembled quite closely the ones that evolved at the top of British government following Churchill's stroke.

The aftermath of the attempt on Ronald Reagan's life in 1981 was a good deal messier, even though in the meantime a new amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, had been ratified to provide for situations in which the president was "unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office." Having been shot and seriously wounded, Reagan for several hours underwent massive surgery and was clearly incapable of discharging the duties of his office. He remained poorly and unable to do a full day's work for another two months. His White House physician, Daniel Ruge, believed that, during the hour or so before his life-saving operation and while he was still conscious and in full possession of his faculties, Reagan should have been asked, under the terms of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, to sign a declaration transferring his powers temporarily to the vice president, who would thereupon serve as acting president. But no such suggestion was ever made. All this occurred when Reagan had been in office for only sixty days. The new administration had scarcely begun to bed in, and nothing in the way of contingency planning had been done. "[E]normous tension and uncertainty permeated the government."⁷ Reagan had already proved himself to be a wholesale delegator, but most of his delegations were to individuals. Nothing resembling Eisenhower's committee system existed.

Instead, what seems to have happened is that, with Reagan's tacit approval, effective control of the government was taken in hand by three members of his White House staff: Edwin Meese, James Baker and Michael Deaver. This trio of aides became, in effect, the president's surrogates, more than merely his aides. It was an arrangement that emerged immediately following the assassination attempt but then lasted for most of the rest of Reagan's first term. Neither Churchill nor Eisenhower would have tolerated any such arrangement, but Reagan seems to have been comfortable with it.⁸ The original trio later became a quartet, with the addition of Nancy Reagan, the first lady. As we shall see later, when that collegial arrangement eventually broke down, the American system of government itself nearly broke down.

How do episodes and observations such as these speak to questions of political leadership in general and strong political leadership in particular? Before answering that question, it would be a good idea to engage in a somewhat more systematic enquiry, one relating only to liberal democracies. There is no need to labor that last point here. It is well known that political leaders in autocratic and authoritarian regimes tend to be megalomaniacs, monsters, murderers, liars and crooks.

Archie Brown, in *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, suggests that although the term "strong leader" is open to more than one interpretation, it is generally taken to mean "a leader who concentrates a lot of power in his or her hands, dominates both a wide swath of public policy and the political party to which he or she belongs, and takes the big decisions."⁹ A strong leader on that definition may or may not be successful in his or her own terms or in the judgment of others. Equally, a man or woman may be successful in his or her own terms and yet may not be adjudged by himself, herself or

anybody else to have been a strong leader. Strength and success are not the same thing, and to infer strength from success is, as Daniel Kahneman and others have pointed out, a common but primitive type of logical fallacy.¹⁰ Luck may be the key variable. Alternatively, personal qualities other than strength may well in practice count for more than strength.

By way of illustration, let us consider briefly the careers in office of the thirty men and one woman who held office as either American president or British prime minister during the eighty years between 1935 and 2015.

Given the constraints imposed on the power and authority of every American president by America's constitutional structure, Franklin Delano Roosevelt has to be accounted both strong and successful, his strengths contributing to his success. He failed in his attempt to pack the U.S. Supreme Court, and only the outbreak of World War II brought the Great Depression to an end; but much of the legacy of his New Deal lives on, and his handling of America's noninvolvement then involvement in World War II was masterly. His successor, Harry Truman, did not aspire to follow in FDR's gigantic footsteps and never tried; as president, he was neither a strong leader nor pretended to be one. But it was on his watch that the United States launched the Marshall Plan, played a leading role in creating NATO and resisted Soviet-sponsored aggression in Korea. His successor, Eisenhower, a thoroughgoing conservative, resembled Truman in having no great desire to exalt the presidential office – and he did not do so. His style was collegial, his lasting accomplishments few. Eisenhower regarded his steady-as-she-goes presidency as a success. In its own terms, it was. His more glamorous successor, John F. Kennedy, was more ambitious for his time in office, but in the event he served for fewer than three years, and, but

for his glamor, his astute handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the horrific circumstances of his death, he would probably be little remembered. Through no fault of his own, the ratio of promise to performance in his case was high.

That Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy, was a strong president – in Archie Brown's terms or anyone else's – cannot be doubted. The big Texan was also a big president. In terms of success, his performance, however, was Janus-faced: on one side, his ambitious domestic Great Society programs (including the War on Poverty and radical civil-rights legislation); on the other, the ill-advised escalation of American involvement in the war in Vietnam. Johnson withdrew from the race for the presidency in 1968. Richard Nixon, the man who subsequently won that election, certainly aspired to be a strong president and took steps to extend his and his allies' sway across the entire executive branch. Had Nixon retired on the eve of the 1972 election, historians today would probably account him a success. He began to wind down American involvement in Vietnam, normalized U.S. relations with China, initiated détente with the Soviet Union and instituted a wide range of domestic reforms. Unfortunately for him and his reputation, his vanity and mendacity during the Watergate scandal forced him from office. Nixon's successor, his vice president, Gerald Ford, remained in office for only eighteen months. He attempted to accomplish little and succeeded in doing just that.

The next two presidencies – those of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan – were among the strangest of modern times. Carter, a complete novice to the ways of Washington, sought to be a strong president, not in the sense of being constantly in control, but in the sense of advancing a bold agenda. Apparently failing to recognize that, in Bismarck's memorable phrase, "politics is the art of the possible," he never sought to per-

fect and practice that art. His boldness did bring him some successes: civil-service reform, the return of the Panama Canal Zone to Panama and the signing of the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel. But his political clumsiness ensured that many of his legislative proposals were blocked in Congress, and he signally failed to persuade either congressional majorities or the American people that the energy crisis of the late 1970s really was “the moral equivalent of war” and needed to be confronted as such.

If we accept Brown’s definition of strong leadership, then Ronald Reagan, Carter’s successor in the White House, was one of the weakest presidents of recent decades. He did not concentrate a lot of power in his own hands. He did not dominate a wide swath of public policy. And he did not take, except in a purely formal sense, most of the big decisions. As we noted earlier, from the time of the failed attempt on the president’s life, only two months into his presidency, until toward the end of his first term in office, most of the domestic policy decisions that emanated from the Oval Office, while signed off by the president, were in fact the work of Meese, Baker and Deaver, possibly with inputs from Nancy Reagan. The members of this troika did not operate in isolation from the rest of the government, but the president himself largely did. Following Reagan’s reelection in 1984, the original members of the troika dispersed, and the troika imploded into the person of a single individual: Donald Regan, the new White House chief of staff. He, too, positioned himself between the president and the rest of his administration; but whereas the three members of the troika had been subtle, emollient and protective of the president, Regan lacked both political feel and any instinct for protecting Reagan’s interests. He was deeply implicated in the Iran-contra affair and did not prevent Reagan himself from be-

coming implicated. Throughout his time in the White House, Reagan relied heavily on his support staff, whatever there was of it. When that staff failed him, he failed – or did not even try.

However, there was one front on which Reagan was anything but weak. On that one front, he held strong views, held onto them tenaciously and acted upon them. That was America’s relationship with the Soviet Union. Reagan’s views were often misunderstood and to the outside world could easily appear contradictory. On the one hand, he believed that the Soviet Union really did constitute an “evil empire” and that the United States, in all its dealings with the Soviet Union, should therefore do so from a position of strength. And so he promoted massive increases in U.S. defense spending. But, on the other hand, he was terrified by the possibility that someday someone, or something, would trigger an all-out nuclear war. He feared that sooner or later – absent some kind of Soviet-American rapprochement – the triggering of such a war would prove all but inevitable. He therefore went out of his way to seek a rapprochement with the USSR; and, as luck would have it, early in his second term he found someone, Mikhail Gorbachev, with whom he felt he could do business. On this issue, Reagan got stuck in: not in the sense of mastering detail (he never did that) but in the sense of taking a close continuing interest in America’s relations with Russia. Between them, Reagan and Gorbachev effectively negotiated the beginning of the end of the Cold War. President Reagan proved capable of strength when, in his own eyes, strength was needed.

Neither of Reagan’s successors in the Oval Office – George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton – was an especially strong president, though Clinton’s charm and larger-than-life personality sometimes concealed the fact. The elder George Bush, like Eisenhower and Ford before him, did not have an

exalted conception of either himself or the presidential office. He had held many lower-level positions in government and, when he arrived in the White House, was content to do the top job to the best of his (considerable) ability. He was not remotely a presidential imperialist. However, few doubted his basic competence, especially in foreign affairs. He guided skillfully American policy during the reunification of Germany and the disintegration of the USSR itself, and his was the victory over Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the First Gulf War. Although it cost him dearly politically, he was strong enough in 1990 to break his own election pledge – "Read my lips: no new taxes" – in the interests of scaling back the U.S. government's burgeoning budget deficit. Had Bush senior won reelection in 1992, and had he then carried on much as before, history today would almost certainly account him a modest, Eisenhower-like success. Even as it is, he can hardly be accounted a failure.

Bill Clinton was more ambitious, for both himself and his presidency. He evidently saw himself as his generation's FDR or JFK; in other words, as an archetypal strong leader. Unfortunately for him, his personal limitations, together with the rampant polarization of contemporary American politics, resulted in an eight-year tenure of office that was more memorable (sometimes for the wrong reasons) than effective. He lacked any real sense of direction, and the men and women he appointed to his administration, many of them exceedingly able, were unable either to provide him with such a sense or even to persuade him that he needed one. Clinton sought to paint a big picture but could never find the right canvas and colors to fit the frame. Especially in its early days, the administration's modus operandi often resembled an unfocused conversation at an academic conference more than a meeting of a tough-minded advisory board. Eisenhower would have been horrified.

Predictably, given Clinton's personal style, his capacity for dithering and the fact that the Republicans controlled Congress during six of his eight years in office, Clinton's record as president was a thing of shreds and patches. He persuaded Congress to ratify the North American Free Trade Agreement, outfaced Newt Gingrich and the Republicans over the 1996 budget and helped broker the Dayton Accords, which brought peace, of a sort, to Bosnia. On his watch, the enormous budget deficits accumulated by his profligate Republican predecessors, Reagan and Bush, were eliminated. But, against all that, Clinton and his wife badly botched their vain effort to introduce a universal health care regime in the United States, Clinton in 1996 felt forced to sign Republican-inspired welfare legislation which he abhorred, few of his own legislative proposals found their way onto the statute book, and he never developed a coherent conception of what America's role in a rapidly changing world should be. It did not help that Clinton had to devote much of his second term to dealing with the fall-out from his bizarre relationship with Monica Lewinsky. As Fred I. Greenstein has put it, Clinton is likely to be remembered "as a politically talented underachiever."¹¹

George W. Bush, Bush senior's son, is unlikely to be remembered as an achiever of any kind. He is more likely to be remembered as one of the most inept occupants of the White House since that elegant building was first occupied in 1801. His handling of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated much of New Orleans, was both chaotic and insensitive. Under him the era of escalating federal budget deficits returned. His administration's response to the September 11 terrorist attacks succeeded in dislodging the Taliban from their control of most of Afghanistan, but failed to either capture Osama bin Laden or destroy al Qaeda. Subsequently, Amer-

ican troops in Afghanistan waged war for more than a decade against Islamist and anti-Western insurgents. That war was America's longest-ever. It was never won. Two years after 9/11, in March 2003, Bush extended his administration's self-declared "War on Terror" to Iraq, although there was no evidence to suggest that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, however unpleasant, had anything to do with either al Qaeda or terrorism. In the Iraq case, military victory was quickly achieved and Saddam Hussein toppled; but – partly in response to the administration's mismanagement of post-Saddam Iraq – what amounted to a civil war ensued, one in which American forces were involved for seven more years. Needless to say, terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere has not been eliminated. On the contrary, since 2003, it has spread, becoming ever more brutal. The terrorists have scored greater successes than President George W. Bush ever did.

One feature of Bush's deportment in office stands out. Bush aspired to be a strong leader; and, indubitably, he was a strong leader, at least during his first term. He made it abundantly clear to everyone who would listen that that was his aim (adding on occasion that he had God's backing). Following the intervention in Afghanistan, he told the well-connected journalist Bob Woodward: "I rely on my instincts. I just knew that at some point in time [immediately after 9/11] the American people were going to say, Where is he? ... Where's your leadership?"¹² The American people wanted action; Bush was intent on providing it. The same went for Iraq. He wanted Saddam Hussein ousted from power. That would be made to happen. To quote Greenstein again: "George W. Bush had no lack of policy vision. He took it as an article of faith that if he failed to set his administration's policy agenda, others would set it for him."¹³ He never allowed them to. Unfortunately, Bush's vision did nothing

to promote, but instead badly damaged, *Anthony King* America's interests.

Mirrors can magnify as well as accurately reflect, and Bush allowed his vision to be both mirrored and magnified by his chosen circles of advisers. Over both Afghanistan and Iraq, he listened almost exclusively to those who already agreed with him, the so-called neocons: notably, Dick Cheney, his influential vice president, Donald Rumsfeld, his forceful defense secretary, and Paul Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld's deputy. Those who expressed doubts or entered caveats – Colin Powell, the secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, and a substantial proportion of the military – were sidelined. Bush's approach to decision-making was thus the opposite of Kennedy's during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The same approach to decision-making, coupled with Bush's "vision thing," that of a low-tax, lightly regulated economy, also played its part in the great financial collapse of 2008.¹⁴

Bush's successor, Barack Obama, could hardly have come into office at a worse time. Bush's legacy was dire: a domestic economy in deep recession and large numbers of American soldiers still being killed in the ruinous and arguably useless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, by the time Obama took over, American politics was even more polarized than it had been in Bill Clinton's time. Although Obama disappointed liberal Democrats and outraged a large proportion of Republicans, some of whom positively hated him, he will leave the White House in early 2017 having led America out of recession (far more successfully than any European leader), wound down American involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and succeeded, where both Truman and Clinton failed, in introducing a state-sponsored universal health care delivery system. History will almost certainly judge Obama, not to have been a barn-storm-

ing or triumphalist president, but to have been a dignified, pragmatic and broadly successful one. He may not have been a strong leader – in the face of Republican and interest-group opposition he often appeared weak – but more often than not he got his way.

One of the most confident and balanced of modern presidents, Obama was far more Kennedy-like than Bush-like in his willingness to appoint advisers with strong views, not necessarily his own. As he said on the eve of his inauguration:

I think that's how the best decisions are made. One of the dangers in a White House, based on my reading of history, is that you get wrapped up in groupthink and everybody agrees with everything and there's no discussion and there are no dissenting views. So I'm going to be welcoming a vigorous debate inside the White House. But understand, I will be setting policy as president. I will be responsible for the vision that this team carries out, and I expect them to implement that vision once decisions are made.¹⁵

Once in office, he was true to both parts of that utterance.

It would seem that, of the thirteen U.S. presidents who have held office since the late 1930s, only four – Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and George W. Bush – have been strong leaders in anything approaching Brown's sense. Only those four – plus, arguably, Kennedy and Carter – have sought to concentrate an unusual amount of power in their own hands and to dominate the formation and implementation of a wide range of government policies. It is noteworthy, to say the least of it, that two of the four strongest leaders listed above – Nixon and George W. Bush – have been among the least satisfactory of modern presidents, with the Vietnam War meaning that Lyndon Johnson's record in office was also, to put it charitably, mixed. Strong presidents have not con-

sistently been admired or admirable. At the same time, many perfectly satisfactory presidents – and, happily, most modern American presidents have been at least satisfactory – have not sought to function and have not functioned in any kind of "strong leader" mode. Thus, the correlation between strength and success is low and, depending on one's own personal judgments, may even be negative.

Our survey of British prime ministers during the same eighty-year period can be shorter, for one simple reason. It has never occurred to the great majority of British prime ministers to try to function as strong leaders. They have not been directly elected and are not ceremonial heads of state as well as heads of government. They owe their position to the fact that they are the leader, for the time being, of the currently victorious political party, and they well know that they can be ousted from that particular position at any time (without the electorate's having any say in the matter). Most of them have forceful and able colleagues who are also their rivals. Given the essentially collegial nature of British government, most prime ministers see their primary tasks as promoting their party's agreed-to policies, maintaining the unity of their government and party and coping ad hoc with crises. Notions of strong leadership seldom come into it.

Sixteen individuals have held office as British prime minister since 1935, two of them (Winston Churchill and Harold Wilson) on two separate occasions. The great majority of them, like the great majority of American presidents, have been competent, sometimes more than competent, but most of them – too many to list here – have not sought to direct and dominate their administrations. They have functioned as executive chairmen rather than chief executive officers. One outstanding exception has already been mentioned:

Winston Churchill during World War II, especially during its early phases. But during his second, postwar premiership, even Churchill in no way dominated, or sought to dominate, his government. His successor, Anthony Eden, was more forceful and developed a reputation, similar to Jimmy Carter's, for paying overmuch attention to detail and attempting to micro-manage his administration. Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan, functioned for the most part as a conventional premier, though he was more given than most to taking personal initiatives, including trying to take the United Kingdom into the European Common Market. Harold Wilson towered above his colleagues politically during the first phase of his first administration, but within a few years his authority had all but vanished, and during his second term he was an almost entirely passive figure. The present occupant of 10 Downing Street, David Cameron, is a more typical British premier: more a light-touch chairman of the board and public-relations chief than an actual head of government. He is certainly not in any conceivable sense a strong leader.

Apart from the wartime Churchill, only four post-1935 British prime ministers have sought to play the role of strong leader: Neville Chamberlain (though his inclusion in this list will probably come as a surprise to most readers), Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. A word about each of them is in order.

Neville Chamberlain, although considerably more intelligent than George W. Bush and with far greater governmental experience, functioned as prime minister in a manner not unlike Bush's. Like Bush, he was determined – in contrast to his immediate predecessor, Stanley Baldwin – to be a strong leader. On becoming prime minister in 1937, he expressed in a letter to a friend “some relief at being able to carry out my own ideas without having to con-

vert someone else first.” He freely admitted his determination to “leave my mark behind me as P.M.”¹⁶

Chamberlain had a clear sense of direction. He was determined upon “the appeasement of Europe” and Hitler in particular. Toward that end, although Britain's cabinet system required him to listen to those who disagreed with him, he appeared to hear only those who applauded him. Just as President Bush, over Afghanistan and Iraq, heard only Cheney and the other neocons, so Chamberlain in his dealings with Hitler increasingly relied on the views of a close aide, Sir Horace Wilson, and a small “group of trusted advisers who all passionately shared his vision and priorities.”¹⁷ Bush sidelined the State Department, headed by Colin Powell. Chamberlain sidelined the Foreign Office, headed by an official who doubted whether a man like Hitler could possibly be appeased. It goes without saying that Chamberlain's leadership, while undoubtedly strong, was not exactly successful.¹⁸

Edward Heath succeeded Harold Wilson as prime minister in 1970. Heath's style was certainly more collegial than Chamberlain's had been. Unlike Chamberlain, he was a good if sometimes impatient listener, and he readily talked to people he thought worth listening to, even if they questioned his views. Nevertheless, by force of intellect and personality, he dominated his government – and dominated it across the board – to an extent that few of his predecessors had. That said, his strength in office manifested itself in one curious way. Heath always had a clear sense of direction, but he frequently changed direction, sometimes abruptly. His government's policy U-turns, well advertised and much mocked at the time, played a part in the government's defeat in an election forced upon him when he had been in office for less than four years. In the event, almost every one of the Heath government's policy initiatives, whatever

their direction, failed to survive his government. His government's only substantial achievement – and it was a substantial one – was to negotiate Britain's entry into what is now the European Union. More than four decades on, even that achievement was being called in question.

Margaret Thatcher was an even stronger leader than Heath and an infinitely more successful one. She probably conformed more than any other modern head of government on either side of the Atlantic to Brown's template of the strong political leader. A highly intelligent workaholic with few if any interests outside politics, she managed to combine, almost uniquely, a strong sense of strategic direction with an ability and a willingness to attend to the minutest details. "The Old Testament prophets," she once said, "did not say, 'Brothers, I want a consensus.' They said: 'This is my faith, this is what I passionately believe.'"¹⁹ She believed in free markets and private enterprise and from the outset was determined to be prime minister of a government whose members spoke with one voice in promoting both: "I've got to have togetherness. There must be a dedication to a purpose, agreement about direction... [My government] must be a conviction government... As Prime Minister, I could not waste time having any internal arguments."²⁰ She silenced doubt and criticism among the ranks of her ministers by the simple expedient of firing the doubters and critics. As well as being the Churchill of the 1982 Falklands War, she and her loyal colleagues virtually destroyed the power of Britain's trade unions and launched the world's first large-scale program of privatization. Only in the last few years of her premiership did she suffer from the hubris and mental self-isolation that led to her fall, coordinated by her fellow Conservatives.

The case of Tony Blair is a strange one. On the one hand, there can be no doubt

that he aspired to be a Thatcher-like leader and probably had the capacity to be one; prior to the election that brought him to power in 1997, one of his closest advisers actually suggested that the British system of government should become less feudal and more Napoleonic.²¹ On the other hand, Blair was far less clear than Thatcher had been about exactly what he wanted to achieve in government, and he had a powerful colleague, Gordon Brown, his chancellor of the exchequer, whom he could neither control nor dismiss. Brown, who coveted Blair's job and eventually seized it, found every opportunity he could think of – and there were many – to either bounce Blair or thwart him; but his standing in the financial markets as chancellor and among the Labour Party's rank and file, to whom he continually appealed, was such that the political price to be paid for dismissing him was likely to be exorbitant. As Lyndon Johnson would have put it, it was better to have Brown inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in. The so-called Blair government was thus in reality a quarrelsome Blair/Brown duopoly, with two would-be strong leaders constantly struggling for supremacy – as though the United States had two rival presidents at the same time. That said, it was Blair rather than Brown who ensured that the United Kingdom joined the United States in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The most momentous decision of the Blair premiership, with Blair casting himself in the role of strong leader, was also the most disastrous, including to Blair's reputation.

As in the case of the United States, it would seem that the relationship in Britain between strong leadership and successful leadership is tenuous and may even, possibly, be negative. Among the acknowledged strong leaders, the wartime Winston Churchill and later Margaret Thatcher were undoubted successes; but Neville Chamberlain and Edward Heath were

both failures as prime minister – Chamberlain in the grand manner – and history will probably remember Tony Blair more for his enthusiastic participation in the American-led invasion of Iraq than for any of his other initiatives as prime minister. Conversely, for example, Clement Attlee, not so far mentioned in this essay, was one of the most successful and respected prime ministers of the modern era; but he laid no claim to being a strong leader. He was merely shrewd, calm, sensible and, when occasion required, stubborn. He was also, famously, someone who never used one word when none would do. As in the United States, few modern British prime ministers have been hopelessly inept, though Neville Chamberlain and one or two others – including Anthony Eden, the principal author of Britain’s part in the aborted Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956, and Gordon Brown, once he succeeded in displacing Blair in 2007 – have come close.

What inferences should we draw from the above? The following half-dozen propositions – set out in terse summary form – are at least worth contemplating. Some are personal judgments, some are empirical hypotheses, and some are a mixture of the two.

1) Many of the best-governed liberal democracies in the world – notably but not only Switzerland – owe their good government in large part to the fact that their political institutions and political culture obviate the need for strong leaders.

2) Strong leaders may on occasion be desirable, even essential, as in the case of the United States during the Great Depression or Britain in 1940. But strong leaders should be allowed to emerge only on special occasions. A country constantly in need of strong leaders is a country in trouble.

3) Strong leaders are high-risk individuals. They may do good, but even in liberal democracies they are likely to do more

harm than good, quite possibly a lot more harm.

4) A successful liberal democracy is liable to be one that is effectively “leader proofed,” one in which it is not made absolutely impossible, but is made difficult, for a strong leader to acquire and wield power and in which the government does not rely on strong leaders for its long-term success.

5) Leaders who rely on the advice only of those whose advice they find congenial should be viewed with suspicion, especially, but not only, if the group of acceptable advice-givers is small and tightly knit, operating to the exclusion of others. Collegiality, in fact as well as form, makes for better government than individuality, provided individuals are permitted, indeed required, to make their views known.

6) Given that leaders, strong as well as weak, are liable to illnesses, mental as well as physical, prudence suggests that arrangements should be made in advance either to dispose of such leaders (as can easily be done in the case of British prime ministers) or to have their functions performed by some other person or persons.

We began with Switzerland and can usefully end there. In 2015, a high-flying Swiss banker (than whom few bankers fly higher) was asked at a private gathering to name the current Swiss prime minister. He confessed that he could not remember. He thought it was a woman (it was), but even of that he could not be sure. Switzerland must be one of the most thoroughly leader-proofed countries on the planet. Being leader-proofed does not seem to have done Switzerland any harm.

- ¹ Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a more detailed account of the workings of the Swiss political system, see Wolf Linder, *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ² Robert F. Kennedy, *13 Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 37. It is not clear whether Kennedy deliberately absented himself from meetings of the actual Executive Committee. For the view that he did not go that far, see Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myth versus Reality* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012), 156.
- ³ Kennedy, *13 Days*, 49.
- ⁴ For the quotation, see John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939 – 1955* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 669. Colville was one of Churchill’s private secretaries and the one personally closest to him. Anthony Eden, Churchill’s heir apparent, was out of the country at the time. Otherwise he would almost certainly have played – well or badly – the role played by Butler.
- ⁵ Robert E. Gilbert, *The Mortal Presidency: Illness and Anguish in the White House* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 119.
- ⁶ See the quite detailed account in *ibid.*, 120 – 122, of how the Eisenhower administration functioned before, as well as during, the president’s illness. Gilbert quotes Nixon as saying that Eisenhower had “set up the Administration in such a way that . . . it can go ahead despite the temporary absence of anyone.” It could, of course, be argued – and has been – that Eisenhower’s style of government diminished his own decision-making capacity. See Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: John Wiley, 1960), 158 – 160.
- ⁷ Gilbert, *The Mortal Presidency*, 190.
- ⁸ While Reagan was recuperating in the hospital, the White House trio spoke with him every day and sought to give the impression that, despite his physical condition, he was fully in charge. However, a pair of well-informed journalists claimed later that one of the trio admitted subsequently that “the hospital visits had been window dressing. In reality, the troika paid only brief visits to the ailing President, spending the rest of the time in the hospital cafeteria, quietly keeping the government going for him.” See Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus, *Landslide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 26.
- ⁹ Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 1.
- ¹⁰ Daniel Kahneman comments mordantly: “The CEO of a successful company is likely to be called flexible, methodical, and decisive. Imagine that a year has passed and things have gone sour. The same executive is now described as confused, rigid, and authoritarian.” See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2011), 206.
- ¹¹ Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 188.
- ¹² Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 168.
- ¹³ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 204.
- ¹⁴ On the economy, Bush listened to those who shared his determination to cut taxes even at the cost of vastly increasing the U.S. government’s indebtedness, and mostly closed his ears to those, including Alan Greenspan, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, who inclined toward greater caution. See Graham K. Wilson, “President Bush and the Economy” in *Assessing the George W. Bush Presidency: A Tale of Two Terms*, ed. Andrew Wroe and Jon Herbert (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 160 – 161.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 216 – 217.

- ¹⁶ Quoted in Robert Self, *Neville Chamberlain: A Biography* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 261. Chamberlain despised his predecessor, Baldwin. He wrote “I can’t do all the things that S.B. did, as well as the things he didn’t do, and I consider that at present at any rate the latter are more important” (quoted in *ibid.*, 262). *Anthony King*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.
- ¹⁸ At least George W. Bush was – and still is – widely regarded as being a generous and good-hearted person. Chamberlain’s most recent biographer admits to concluding finally that Chamberlain was “an unpleasant man” and “a nasty piece of work.” See Nick Smart, *Neville Chamberlain* (London: Routledge, 2010), xiv.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Anthony King, “The Outsider as Political Leader: The Case of Margaret Thatcher,” *British Journal of Political Science* 32 (2002): 445.
- ²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 447.
- ²¹ The adviser, Jonathan Powell, explains himself in *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (London: Bodley Head, 2010), 78.