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Statecraft, Strategy, and Ethics: A Noetic Trinity

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State: *n.*, a sovereign political power or community

Craft: *n.*, skill or ability, esp. in handiwork

In his classic 1832 treatise, *On War*, Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz described war as “a remarkable trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.” He then linked this remarkable (or “fascinating” or “paradoxical”) trinity – emotion, chance, rationality – to an associated social trinity of actors: “The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.”

War – this trinity of forces and actors – was, to Clausewitz, not an end in itself but an instrumentality, a “continuation of politics by other means.” As it was, so it is and always shall be: in matters of state, everything is a continuation of politics by various means – including what we rightly should call statecraft. But though statecraft may be an extension of politics, it isn’t politics. Statecraft stands apart as a more elevated undertaking than politics and therefore is the starting point for the recognition that statecraft is fundamentally a strategic enterprise, while strategy in turn is, in central measure, an ethical enterprise. All are interrelated and converge intellectually, thus constituting another trinity – a noetic trinity – of greater importance even than that proffered by Clausewitz.

Statecraft vs. Politics

“There is nothing that is not political,” said Thomas Mann. How blindingly obvious. How insultingly perceptive. Everything in life is politics. Everything human is political. That includes statecraft – the conduct of the affairs of state. But statecraft is what we should rightly consider high politics – the realm of national and international aims, interests, priorities, wherewithal. All else is low politics – intensely self-interested, partisan, ideological posturing, centered largely on the aim of gaining and holding public office, and with it, personal prerogative and privilege. That is the politics that dominates human affairs, that is most familiar to most of us, that therefore deserves the pejorative sobriquet of “politics.” Think cronyism. Think patronage. Think pork-barrel spending. Think pandering and rhetorical obfuscation.

Think preening and theatricality not unlike acting. Journalist Ambrose Bierce, in his satirically pointed turn-of-the-20th-century masterwork, *The Devil's Dictionary*, defined politics as “a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles.” Henry Adams called it “the systematic organization of hatreds.” Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said it “consists in directing rationally the irrationalities of men.” All of these characterizations – self-interested strife, systematic hatred, endemic irrationality – not only suggest something especially revealing about what politics is but also what statecraft, by contrast, might be, at least in part – rational, rule-based, principled, ordered.

Politics just is. It is the *norm* of human behavior and interaction. It is what politicians do. It is, at heart, a tactical enterprise, and politicians are tacticians and technicians for whom nothing, however intrinsically big or grand, however complex, cannot be made smaller, simpler (or more simplistic), more minutiae-laden.

Statecraft is what ought to be. It is *normative*. But in its very oughtness, it thereby oftentimes ends up being more an ideal (unattainable, but nonetheless worth pursuing) than an achievable objective to be pursued. It is what statesmen do – tradecraft by and for statesmen. It is an inherently strategic enterprise, and statesmen, its practitioners, must necessarily be strategically minded and strategically oriented.

To be sure, politics and statecraft share some common conceptual and practical terrain. They both concern themselves with purpose – accomplishing something, getting something done, achieving aims. In the case of politics, cynical though it may sound, *purposiveness* – serving or effecting a useful function, though not as a result of planning or design – is typically at play; while in the case of statecraft, *purposefulness* – having or tending to fulfill a conscious purpose or design – is the name of the game. Politics focuses on proximate aims; statecraft, on ultimate (or penultimate) ones.

Both politics and statecraft involve interaction with other parties or stakeholders – states and non-states, domestic and international, cooperative and competitive, friendly and adversarial.

Both seek to acquire and preserve advantage over these other parties – momentary or lasting, tangible or intangible, real or perceived.

Both involve and depend on resources and resourcing – the acquisition, preservation, allocation, application, and replenishment of resources (human, natural, technological, informational, financial). Thus the title of Harold Lasswell's seminal 1935 book: *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*.

Politics and statecraft differ, however, in two critically important respects: in their temporal orientation and in their motive. Temporally, politics focuses almost exclusively on the here and now – or, at most, the immediate future, invariably with election cycles and opinion polls in mind. Consider this near-sightedness or short-sightedness. Statecraft focuses on the long-term, the long view. Such far-sightedness or “fore-sightedness” calls to mind the old English proverb: “The difference between a statesman and a politician is that the former looks to the next generation and the latter to the next election.”

Politics is motivated by egoism – pure (dare one say, raw) self-interest. The Self comes first, always, though never admittedly; then The Other (society, then – if ever – humanity). Statecraft is motivated by altruism: first The Other, then The Self. An altruist of the 1st order, an Idealist, would place humanity before society. An altruist of the 2nd order, a Realist, would place society before humanity. In any event, we are reminded of the statement Georges Pompidou once made while still president of the French Republic: “A statesman is a politician who places himself at the service of the nation. A politician is a statesman who places the nation at his service.”

Statecraft is more than diplomacy – what British statesman Edmund Burke defined as “skill or address in

the conduct of international intercourse and negotiations” – though diplomacy is clearly an integral component of statecraft. Statecraft also is more than governing – what Abraham Lincoln famously considered “do[ing] for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but can not do *at all*, or can not, *so well do*, for themselves in their separate, and individual capacities” – though effective governing too is at the heart of statecraft.

Statecraft manifests itself primarily through statesmen – more often than not during times of crisis. This in itself presents an interesting paradox. It is typically during crisis – high-stakes situations, largely unforeseen or unanticipated, where things of value are at stake, uncertainty and turbulence are prevalent, the symptoms of the moment predominate, and the situation is largely in control – where politicians either rise to the occasion and show themselves to be statesmen or they flounder and fail, exhibiting the desultory mediocrity of their political class. But crisis is largely antithetical to truly effective statecraft. Where crisis occurs, strategy and strategic thinking have largely failed. At the same time, we do well to recognize that true statesmanship may not be recognizable during times of non-crisis – where, ironically, the absence of crisis, or more precisely its prevention, would represent sound strategic thinking. Perhaps this has something to do with the statement Harry Truman made some years after he had left office: “A statesman is a politician who’s been dead 10 or 15 years.”

We might say, in seeking to come to grips with its essence, that statecraft is the craft – skill, competence, expertise – of managing and leading the state in the effective conduct of its affairs – both domestic and international. There is of course a long-standing tendency to characterize both politics and statecraft as either art or science. To Bismarck we attribute the conjoined observations that “Politics is the art of the possible,” “not an exact science.” Franklin D. Roosevelt, a politician become statesman of perhaps the first order, offered a countervailing perspective by referring to “the science of politics” as being “in large part the science of the adjustment of conflicting group interests.” A practitioner (and writer) of more recent vintage, Charles W. Freeman, Jr., a career diplomat who served as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia under President George H.W. Bush, defines statecraft as an artistic endeavor: “the art – consisting of doctrines, dispositions, policies, processes and operations – which promotes the governance, security and survival of a polity”; and “the art of advancing the interests of one’s state and its people against those of others by either violent or non-violent means.”

But we profit relatively little by considering statecraft or politics as art or science. To consider either an art is to suggest perhaps too little – the domain of a gifted few, whose talents (perhaps endowed rather than acquired) are inaccessible to the many. “Art,” said Kahlil Gibran, “is a step from what is obvious and well-known toward what is arcane and concealed.” Yet to consider either science, on the other hand, is to suggest perhaps too much – too systematic, rigorous, replicable, empirical, predictable to capture the exploratory experimental nature of the real world, even if being more scientific suggests more accessibility, even practice-ability, by the many.

What Statesmanship Requires

If neither art nor science, or both art and science, is statecraft – or statesmanship – a profession? Robert Louis Stevenson observed, cynically but with wounding accuracy, that “Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary.” That isn’t entirely true, of course; but it’s close. There is also business. Anybody, regardless of credentials, preparatory education and training, or capability, can get into business or politics, and survive and prosper in the process. Consider some of the best-known politicians – viz. Bill Clinton – and wealthiest business people – viz. Donald Trump – in our midst. But is politics – low politics or high politics – a profession? If by that, we mean simply an identifiable career field with practitioners – lifelong practitioners even – the answer is yes. But if we think of a profession as a field of specialized expertise, requiring specialized training and education, with its

own professional standards, licensing, procedures, and self-policing mechanisms, the answer is no. But throw in the attitudinal component that differentiates a mere profession from a professional who demonstrates professionalism, and the answer is a guarded yes – especially where the high politics of statecraft is concerned.

Let us return then to the proposition that statecraft is the craft – skill, competence, expertise – of managing and leading the state in the effective conduct of its affairs – both domestic and international.

Statecraft requires immense – surpassing – skill; it is craftsmanship worthy of a master craftsman. Four skills in particular seem to distinguish statesmen from non-statesmen – politicians, in other words. The first and singularly most important of these is *intellectual skill*. Such intellectual proficiency manifests itself in one respect as the ability to think well (strategically), but no less as the ability to think big (by demonstrating comfort with, and ideally the capacity to generate, big ideas). This stands in stark contrast to the politician – even the policy-wonk politician hiding behind the mythology of being an intellect – who thrives on being immersed in tactical, technical, programmatic detail, who prefers crawling in the weeds of thoughtless minutiae rather than reaching for the sky of thoughtfulness. Ambrose Bierce defined the politician, sarcastically, as “an eel in the fundamental mud upon which the superstructure of organized society is reared.”

In another respect, the intellectual proficiency statesmanship calls for manifests itself as vision – not just insight and foresight (the ability to see what others can’t or won’t see due to unrecognized cultural, bureaucratic, and ideological blinding), but also initiative and courage (the willingness to venture forth and step outside convention and conditioning in the face of criticism, censure, and ostracization). In yet another respect, the intellectual proficiency of the statesman calls for an ability and an inclination to shape, to impose oneself on, not to be captive of and victimized by, the governing environment. As R.H.S. Crossman, former British Labour party politician once observed: “The distinction between a statesman and a politician is that the former imposes his will and his ideas on his environment while the latter adapts himself to it.”

The statesman of today must be the contemporary equivalent of a *philosophe*, an enlightened public intellectual – heir to the intellectual legacy of 18th-century French and revolutionary American enlightenment thinkers – who effectively marries the world of ideas and reflection (the contemplative life) with the world of action (the active life) to influence and shape public conditions and events. The resultant *praxis*, as Hannah Arendt observed, is the highest and most important level of the active life (in which those who conduct the affairs of state are immersed). That capacity – to act thoughtfully, to think with action in mind – is what distinguishes humans from other living species (though the suppression of this capacity to the point of suffocation by politics has virtually robbed us of this unique advantage). The politician is an actor – in both senses of the term: one who takes (or fails to take) action, and one who plays a role or plays pretend. The philosopher is a thinker. The statesman must be both.

That the idea of the philosopher-king has been so repeatedly disparaged, if not discredited, should not blind us to the concomitant dearth – the absence, in fact – of bona fide statesmen in our midst today. Try naming one. Where are the Washingtons and Franklins, the Disraelis and Gladstones, the Lincolns and FDRs, the Schumans and DeGaulles, the Bismarcks and Adenauers, the Gandhis and Martin Luther Kings, the Wallenbergs and Mandelas, the Ralph Bunches and Dag Hammarskjolds of today? They are nowhere to be found. Politicians – political beasts who prey on those at the lower reaches of the human food chain – roam the earth.

Beyond intellectual prowess, statecraft also requires emotional skill. Call it emotional intelligence. It is, in the first instance, a call for an empathetic sense that enables one to see (or try to see) things through the

eyes of others, to feel (or try to feel) things through the emotions of others – other individuals, other cultures, other institutions, other nationalities – so as to avoid mirror-imaging and misunderstanding. This empathetic sense, consciously or not, is a bow to the ethics of reciprocity – the Golden Rule – in the affairs of state: dealing with others not simply in insensate behaviorist terms of reward and punishment but on the basis of reciprocal motive and consequence. Statesmen, if they are to be statesmanlike and get inside the head (or heart or soul) of The Other, do well to be guided by the words enshrined in the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization: “Ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war.”

The emotional skill required of the statesman calls not only for this empathetic sense of Other-savviness, but also for the possession and demonstration of those qualities of character that endow one with the standing and stature necessary to elicit trust, confidence, respect (not fear, but respect), and willing (not forced or even begrudging, but willing) deference from others:

- Courage – the unflinching, unconditional willingness to face and incur risk to career and reputation, to “boldly go where no [political] man has gone before.”
- Integrity – non-hypocritical, non-expedient totalness of commitment to right conduct in all facets of one’s behavior, regardless of circumstance or contingency.
- Honesty – dependable, predictable forthrightness that provides a counterpoise and antidote to the practice ascribed (seriously and facetiously) to diplomats sent abroad for the purpose of lying for their country.
- Gravitas – the intangible and indefinable, yet indispensable, aura of worthiness, weight, and exemplariness a charismatic few somehow project just by their presence.

Most importantly, this is where competence comes into play as a quality of defining importance to the statesman. As an objective measure of performance, competence is an ethical imperative for all who serve in government. It is analogous to Machiavelli’s conception of virtù – mastery, proficiency, coping capacity in maintaining the state and achieving its potential – though with an underpinning of virtue that Machiavelli would have considered nicety rather than necessity.

As a subjective phenomenon, which it more truly is, competence is a reflection of the perceptions and judgments – reasoned or merely impressionistic – of others. As such, it is a strategic imperative. In the age in which we now live, strategy – and being strategic – is very much about the effective management of perceptions; and being perceived as competent – able to achieve one’s aims, to do what needs to be done – is absolutely essential to one’s credibility and legitimacy. Strategy today also has much to do, as it always has, with the effective exercise of power – to get one’s way, to get what one wants, to bend others to one’s will, to elicit deference from others. As a product of the capabilities at one’s disposal and the will or resolve to employ such capabilities, power is critically dependent on the trust and confidence the public invest in those who govern them, an outgrowth of the perceived competence of the latter and, in turn, a necessary precondition for national will and national unity.

Statecraft requires interpersonal skill as well – the ability to interact with others confidently but not arrogantly, firmly but not antagonistically, reassuringly but not to the point of being taken for granted, in order to build confidence, maximize cooperation, and enhance the prospects of compliance. This of course is the essence of diplomacy – jaw-jawing being always preferable to war-warring, Churchill reminded us – and is closely tied to intellectual prowess. The more fully developed the intellect – a progression that takes

one from ignorance to awareness to knowledge (possessing truth) to understanding (deep knowledge) to wisdom (broad understanding) – the more socially competent one is equipped to be as one progresses from intolerance to tolerance to empathy to concern to respect to acceptance, thence possibly even to emulation, of The Other.

In an age such as ours, characterized to a disturbing degree by ill-mannered intemperance, discourtesy, intolerance, and divisiveness – especially among those in power, who pretend to lead – this perspective on diplomatic tact from the mid-19th century *Le Guide diplomatique* of Prussian diplomat Charles de Martens is an instructive guide for distinguishing the cool statesman from the histrionic politician:

What is of paramount necessity for a diplomat is tact. Tact requires the respect for form that a mediocre mind alone despises. The more society is civilized, the more form is respected as a wholesome barrier to the inevitable antagonisms to which incompatibility of character and birth give rise. Politeness is not an untruth. It merely reminds us of the justice and inner moderation which ought to guide us. It is only in bad company that we have to scream to make ourselves heard.

Statecraft, finally, requires communicative skill. While it is perhaps too much to expect the statesman to be truly eloquent, it isn't too much to expect him (or her) to be articulate, capable of elevated, inspiring rhetoric, able and inclined to exploit the bully pulpit to its fullest, and fully attuned to the importance – the strategic importance – of imagery and the practice of (non-contrived, non-superficial) image-making.

Some Statesmanlike Rhetoric

“We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

“We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and these interests it is our duty to follow.”

“Four score and seven years ago. . . . We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

“My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.”

“I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

“When we let freedom ring . . . we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children . . . will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.’”

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

Statesmanlike rhetoric, hard to define, impossible for the novice many to appropriate from the master few, is nonetheless clearly recognizable when it is heard, as distinguishable from desultory political palaver as eloquence is from mere talk. “Talking and eloquence are not the same,” said early 19th-century essayist

Heinrich Heine. “To speak and to speak well are two things. A fool may talk but a wise man speaks.”
Politicians talk – endlessly, vapidly. Statesmen speak.

Consider the typical politician today, whose words (and thoughts) are prepared for him, whose presence abandons him when he is deprived of script or teleprompter, whose syntax when transcribed verbatim is, with disturbing regularity, a hodgepodge of verbal and intellectual indiscipline, if not incoherence.

The statesman, by contrast, has full command of language and the ability to convey ideas – big ideas – powerfully, profoundly, persuasively. All rhetoricians are not statesmen, but all statesmen must be rhetoricians, who fully understand the power of words to control reality, but also recognize that empty words – the lingua franca of politics – convey their own reality – one of contrivance, of duplicity, even of incompetence: “I have returned from Germany with peace for our time.” “Mission accomplished.” “The United States of America does not torture.”

The Statesman’s Expertise: Strategic Leadership

If statecraft, as mastery of the affairs of state, is born of skill, competence, and expertise, and we know what those skills are and how they call forth the ethical and strategic imperative for competence, what then is the expertise the expert practitioner of statecraft must possess and demonstrate? The statesman’s expertise, his singular know-how, is strategic leadership. He grasps, first, the qualitative distinctiveness of true leadership, an exercise in inspiring others – not coercing or persuading them – to give their willing deference out of respect – not fear or desire – to another whose moral authority derives from principled example – walking the talk, practicing what one preaches. True leadership is intrinsically exemplary precisely because it is leadership by example.

The statesman understands further that strategic leadership is itself qualitatively distinct from the garden-variety leadership practiced at other levels, in other contexts. It is a fundamentally intellectual enterprise, more learned than innate, that involves motivating equals with minds of their own, not directing – or commanding – dutiful subordinates.

The statesman realizes – in fact he embodies the realization – that strategic leadership has everything to do with being strategic, with focusing on the long-term future; taking the holistic bigger picture always into account; attending to underlying causes, not just momentary symptoms; considering the residual and hidden consequences of action or inaction; being proactive – anticipatory, preventive, catalytic – rather than passively reactive; and being ethical. Yes, being ethical. Just as, in the purest sense, there is no true leadership that is not ethical, there also is nothing truly strategic that is not ethical. (This is an assertion that should be disproved before it has to be proved, notwithstanding the superficial “evidence” the likes of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Hitler, Stalin, and other assorted evildoers, madmen, maniacs, and harebrains would seem to offer.)

The statesman recognizes full well why being strategic is so centrally important to the affairs of state – not simply because it is at the heart of strategic leadership, but because it is inoculation against unwanted, unanticipated crisis; it is the basis for sustainable consensus – national unity, national will – that can transcend ideological division and regime change; it enhances the civilian control of the military so essential to functioning democracy; and, most importantly, it is a moral obligation – the overriding moral obligation – of government.

The statesman appreciates not only that, in the cosmic international pecking order by which all states – even some non-states – constantly judge one another to determine who stands where, great powers are defined by their possessions, their status in international fora, and their ability to project and sustain power in various forms; but that what makes a great power great – worthy of esteem – is normative behavior and

the reputation it confers.

The statesman accordingly accepts – tacitly at least – the proposition once expressed by aphorist and theologian William Alger to the effect that statesmanship is “the act of changing a nation [a state] from what it is to what it ought to be.” In such manner might an arrogant, hypocritical bully (who shall remain nameless) become, through the actions of the statesman, a shining “city upon a hill.”

If Only We Could

There was a time when statecraft was a word with meaningful meaning to practitioners and students of governance and international affairs. No longer. There was a time when it was a concept that enriched the thinking of those associated with the affairs of state. No longer. There was a time when it was a practice that governors and governed alike accepted and expected as the norm. No longer.

Where once there was statecraft, practiced by statesmen, today there is only politics – low politics – perpetrated by politicians. Were it otherwise, we arguably would not be embroiled in perpetual war; nor destined to endure the growing incapacity of governments everywhere to govern effectively; nor faced with the widespread breakdown of public trust and confidence in those who profess and pretend to govern.

When statecraft reigned, great events – World Wars I and II, the Depression, The Holocaust – produced great men by summoning forth otherwise ordinary individuals whose job it became, by chance and of necessity, to measure up to the moment and overcome seemingly insurmountable circumstances in the interest of human survival. Contemporary great events, because they now are so inherently ambiguous and so seemingly lacking in immediacy and saliency, go largely unnoticed by other than the most discerning observers. Thus, rather than calling forth great men to solve them, events and conditions today must be made great by those who would assume the mantle of greatness spontaneously, unprompted. The end of the Cold War, 9-11, global warming, world hunger – these are but examples that have lamentably neither produced nor benefited from great men.

The greatness we need and should seek is a direct outgrowth of the statecraft – the statesmanship – we no longer have but must strive to resuscitate and reinvigorate. We do well to acknowledge that statecraft, like Clausewitz’s conception of war, is a trinity of forces and actors. The actors remain essentially the same as always. They are life’s eternal stakeholders: government, the people, government’s institutional instrumentalities – political, diplomatic, economic, technological, military, sociocultural, informational, psychological, moral, legal, ideational – and associated parties who affect and are affected by the interactions of the others.

The forces involved, more physical than not in Clausewitz’s day, are singularly intellectual today; thus the idea that the trinity of concern to us now is a noetic trinity that binds statecraft, strategy, and ethics together and holds the key to resurrecting statecraft as a noble calling, one capable of attracting and producing great men and women who seek nothing so much as the intrinsic reward of upping their game to the level of excellence in the service of the public. In this way might statecraft reach its apotheosis as the essential 21st century antithesis of 19th century Clausewitzian war – not as a mere “continuation of politics by other means,” but as “the transcendence of politics by superior means.” Perhaps two centuries for such a transmutation to take root, however counterintuitive and self-exculpatory it may seem, isn’t too long to finally get it right. If only we could.

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