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[Review of the Book *Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters and Democrats*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] *Icons of Democracy* is a welcome change from the rather arid, often quantified analyses of political leadership so prevalent in academic writing. Well read in both primary and secondary sources, Miroff has deeply grounded his ideas in the rich historical context. In addition, he carefully chose his subjects and drew from their experiences central themes which, in divergent fashion, they also held in common. The resulting collective biography engages and challenges the reader. While partial to leaders in the dissenting tradition (they are "our true subversives and at times our truest democrats"), Miroff consistently points to the complexity of all his subjects and equally firmly resists the temptation to romanticize the democratic masses. A balanced and serious work, *Icons of Democracy* is a valuable contribution to the literature and perhaps to a broader public discussion on the nature of contemporary leadership in our democratic society.

Keywords

leadership, politics, presidency, dissent, aristocracy, political history

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Political History | United States History

Comments

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Focal Heroes

Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters and Democrats, Bruce Miroff, New York: Basic Books, 1993, 421 pp., \$25.

Despite its self-professed democratic ethos, popular political culture in twentieth-century America has long stressed the value of strong presidential leadership. In 1960, when he announced his candidacy for the presidency, John Fitzgerald Kennedy gave expression to a widely-held perception concerning the relationship among historical memory, democratic values, and elite leadership: "The history of this nation — its brightest and its bleakest pages," he stated, "has been written largely in terms of the different views our Presidents have had of the Presidency itself." Four decades later, despite the effort of two generations of social historians to explore the contributions of more common people to the creation of our past, popular historical memory has not evolved far beyond Kennedy's formulations.

Critics of mass popular culture have accounted for this tendency in numerous ways. Some, pointing to the debasement of political debate itself, stress technological explanations, chief among them, of course, the baleful effects of television. Others, following the late Warren Sussman's innovative lead, note the broader cultural transition from a nineteenth-century America that largely emphasized individual qualities of character and responsibility to a twentieth-century society obsessed with personality traits,

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an obsession that ultimately rewards imaginative packaging over substantive content. It is in this context that Bruce Miroff's *Icons of Democracy* makes a useful and important contribution.

Miroff, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at Albany, argues that in our democratic society competing models of leadership have struggled for prominence since the country's founding. In a gracefully written collective biography of nine representative leaders, he discerns four major approaches to leadership in a democracy. In the examples of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams he finds the core of an aristocratic tradition. Suspicious of popular participation and committed to a strong executive, these leaders rejected the goal of broad political participation. Advocating the model of an "energetic" chief executive, Hamilton provided an essential component to the emergence of a centralized, capitalist economy. Adams, whose major concern was with politics and not economic development, could be as caustic as Hamilton in his estimation of popular American democratic impulses. "There never was a democracy yet," Adams wrote John Taylor, "that did not commit suicide."

Seemingly different from this aristocratic tradition, but actually derivative from it, heroic leadership comprises the second type in Miroff's analysis. Exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt and John Kennedy, leaders in this mode adapted the aristocratic qualities of Hamilton and Adams to a more democratic and, in the case of Kennedy especially, a more sophisticated technological era. Robust and manly in their images, leaders in this vein were quick to perceive insults and challenges to their authority, and responded quickly and forcefully. As destructive as their leadership could be to fostering democratic values, Miroff argues that

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both Roosevelt and Kennedy nonetheless made significant contributions to a more democratic society. Roosevelt's concern with restructuring the relationship between property rights and the public welfare and Kennedy's delayed, pressured, but ultimately welcome support of civil rights contributed to the furtherance of democratic values, even though both leaders continued to adhere to an elite mode of leadership.

In Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Bruce Miroff finds the best models of democratic leadership in the American tradition. Each harnessed a keen ambition to democratic goals and understood that democratic leadership demanded more than a crafty public presence or a strong manipulative will. Both Lincoln and FDR grasped the teaching and nurturing aspects of such leadership, and they could thus allow their deep compassion for the aspirations of the citizenry to inform their actions. Miroff perceives them as bridging and, in their best moments, transcending culturally defined male and female attributes. Yet each had his individual limitations. Lincoln's disregard of democratic principles during the Civil War and his persistent ambivalence concerning the position of African Americans in the nation's life stand in sharp contrast with his democratic vision. Roosevelt's penchant for the political compromise and his uncritical embrace of an expanded presidency undercut his democratic impulse, with consequences that have made democratic leadership from the White House more difficult for his successors.

Finally Miroff turns to a fourth leadership type, that of dissenting democrats. In Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Eugene Victor Debs, and Martin Luther King, Jr., he finds leaders committed to democratic values who did not accept the narrowness of existing social relations. In demanding

the fulfillment of America's democratic promise with the inclusion of women, working people, and African Americans as full partners, these dissenting leaders combined a searing moral vision with a compassion for the excluded that drew strength from and gave direction to the nation's democratic ethos. Teachers, nurturers, educators, prophets, and critics, leaders in this dissenting mode made major contributions to democracy in America, yet they too were not without fault.

Stanton's racism and nativism in the post-Civil War years undermined her leadership potential. Debs' persistent denial of the reality of leadership and the need for committed democrats to assume such positions precisely because they were sensitive to the contradictions sharply limited his effectiveness. While

King sought the "always precarious balance" between the moral and political dimensions of dissenting leadership, sometimes erring, Miroff attributes to him two lasting contributions. More than any other leader, King "staked out a common rhetorical ground of democratic and Christian symbols that united the values and aspirations of both blacks and whites." Equally important, when he confronted the limitations of effective dissent, particularly when he shifted the civil rights campaign to Chicago and expanded its moral charge to encompass economic justice, King maintained that "common rhetorical ground" in the face of profound disappointment, demands for black power, and a seemingly intractable northern racism.

Icons of Democracy is a welcome change from the rather arid, often quan-

tified analyses of political leadership so prevalent in academic writing. Well read in both primary and secondary sources, Miroff has deeply grounded his ideas in the rich historical context. In addition, he carefully chose his subjects and drew from their experiences central themes which, in divergent fashion, they also held in common. The resulting collective biography engages and challenges the reader. While partial to leaders in the dissenting tradition (they are "our true subversives and at times our truest democrats"), Miroff consistently points to the complexity of all his subjects and equally firmly resists the temptation to romanticize the democratic masses. A balanced and serious work, *Icons of Democracy* is a valuable contribution to the literature and perhaps to a broader public discussion on the nature of contemporary leadership in our democratic society. ■