Daniel Stid is the program director of U.S. Democracy at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

A Time for Statesmanship

Daniel Stid

The United States faces profound challenges at home and abroad. We need to respond to the economic disruptions communities and workers face due to globalization and automation. We need to rein in technology companies that have come to dominate, often to deleterious effect, our economy and public sphere. We need to reckoning with the demographic shifts transforming our population’s racial, regional, and religious composition. We need to mitigate and adapt to the world’s changing climate and the dislocations occurring as a result. We need to navigate an intensifying geostrategic competition with China’s authoritarian system. And before we can devote sufficient attention to any of these looming challenges, we need to more fully recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Confronting these many obstacles would be daunting in even the best of circumstances—with a united country, robust governing institutions, and strong national leadership. But we are assuredly not in the best of circumstances. The country is deeply polarized, and our institutions are faltering. Rather than seeking to alleviate and resolve these problems for the good of the nation, many of our leaders have exacerbated and exploited them to further their own ambitions.

During the 2020 election, 159 million American citizens—the most ever—cast ballots to elect a new Congress and a new president. What would it take for a critical mass of the men and women sworn into these offices to chart a more principled and practical course forward for the country? How can they work within our governing institutions to make and execute laws and policies that will unite the American people and enable us to meet some of the greatest challenges in our nation’s history?
To put it plainly, this is a time for statesmanship. Unfortunately, this exceptional form of leadership is more elusive than ever.

Nowadays, Americans rarely speak of statesmanship. Many even become uncomfortable when the concept is invoked — it strikes them as a fussy, hopelessly gendered notion from a bygone era. And yet, at least in the reverence many of us still have for American statesmen of the past, the idea lives on in our cultural memory, waiting to be recovered by a new generation of leaders. Such a recovery will be no easy task, and it will necessitate a great deal of preliminary brush clearing. It will require us to re-acquaint ourselves with the notion of statesmanship, to clarify what it is and what it demands, and to honestly acknowledge the factors that have made it increasingly difficult to practice in modern America.

**Defining Statesmanship**

In a recent study, political theorists Patrick Overeem and Femke Bakker examined how Western understandings of statesmanship have evolved, from the initial theorizing of the ancient Greeks through the modern era. They proposed that, across cultures and eras, “[s]tatesmanship can roughly be defined as morally excellent leadership at the polity level.” This definition can serve as a useful starting point in understanding the concept, as it highlights the moral qualities and scope that are the hallmarks of true statesmen.

These qualities, as Overeem and Bakker pointed out, traditionally include the four cardinal virtues identified by Aristotle: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. In addition, magnanimity — the capacity for forbearance and generosity, especially toward one’s opponents within the polity — is another important characteristic of statesmen, for those practicing statesmanship do so on behalf of the entire political community and its enduring principles and interests, not for their party, class, or faction, though they may also have these lower-order affinities as well.

Like most peoples, Americans readily identify and revere statesmen who have exemplified the kind of “morally excellent leadership” that defines statesmanship. Monuments and memorials to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt anchor our nation’s capital. Their visages gaze down upon the millions who visit Mount Rushmore in South Dakota every year. More recently, we have built national memorials to honor Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight
Eisenhower, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Today, speeches of American presidents, members of Congress, and the men and women aspiring to those offices routinely invoke the rhetoric of these esteemed forebears, urging us to proceed “[w]ith malice toward none; with charity for all,” and to remember that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

At the same time, Americans have long been ambivalent about statesmanship. Explicit talk of it in the here and now, especially on the part of its would-be practitioners and their supporters, comes across in the American vernacular as pretentious, something that warrants a dismissive, if not cynical, response. House Speaker Thomas Reed famously captured this ambivalence in a reply to a constituent who asked him for the definition of the term. “A statesman,” he answered, “is a successful politician who is dead.”

Notwithstanding its curtness, Reed’s quip gets at a fair bit of what distinguishes most examples of statesmanship in the United States. While it can be hard to recognize statesmanship amid the political fray, after statesmen have passed on, their projects endure from the vantage point of posterity. In fact, one quality that separates statesmen from run-of-the-mill politicians is the former’s lasting, as well as recognizable and worthy, contributions to the nation’s policies and institutions. Reed himself made just such a contribution in 1890 when he established Reed’s Rules, which restored the House of Representatives’ basic functioning following an era of political gridlock and parliamentary disorder. Another implication of Reed’s definition is that statesmanship entails intentionality and foresight. To be successful, statesmen must first formulate purposes and plans that, if realized, could come to be recognized as historic contributions. They then must lead in a way that brings about their intentions.

While recognizing that not all politicians are statesmen, Reed’s epigram presumes that all statesmen are politicians, at least in the United States. As such, statesmen need to ask for and win popular support, and then exercise it constructively toward their chosen ends. They must therefore have the requisite savvy in the realms of democratic politics and governance alike. Many have come to know Reed’s definition of a statesman via Harry Truman, who famously repeated Reed’s line several years after he left the presidency. But Truman’s appropriation of Reed’s quote was part of a defense, rather than a critique, of practical politics and politicians. “I’m proud that I’m a politician,” Truman declared.
“A politician is a man who understands government, and it takes a politician to run a government.”

Truman’s pride in being a politician in a thoroughly democratic polity points to another feature of statesmanship in the United States: It entails an interplay between leaders and followers in which each informs and shapes the other. Our statesmen discern what courses of action are possible, and determine which of those courses will be most productive, based in part on their fathoming of public opinion as it stands at the time and as it could be in the future. They position, conduct, and explain their actions with an eye toward making use of that opinion, affirming those elements that support their designs, and seeking to persuade, or at least disarm, those that do not.

As Werner Dannhauser observed, “[s]tatesmanship is not as rare as statesmen, because on occasion quite ordinary men are capable of the extraordinary deeds we designate as acts of statesmanship.” Deeds that reflect alloys of prudence, justice, courage, moderation; that are designed with posterity in mind; that are successfully undertaken to improve the nation’s policies and institutions; that demonstrate mastery of the levers of politics and governance alike; and that embody a constructive interplay and mutual influence between leaders and followers—these are the fruits of genuine statesmanship.

We may hope in vain for the emergence of another world-historical statesman in this fraught moment in our nation’s history. But a humbler notion of statesmanship reminds us that we still can—and should—expect acts of statesmanship from those we entrust with power.

Obstacles to American Statesmanship

To understand why even these acts of statesmanship appear increasingly rare in American politics, we can turn to an essay written by the great political scientist Herbert Storing in the early years of the Carter administration. In “American Statesmanship: Old and New” (which ended up being his last essay before his untimely death in 1977), Storing identified three categories of obstacles to American statesmanship: an original set that was consciously adopted by America’s founders, as well as two more resulting from the spread of populism and technocracy, respectively.

Storing acknowledged that the constraints the founders imposed on statesmanship represented a historical irony, for even as the founders were statesmen of the highest order, they sought to preclude the need
for future generations to rely on the very art they practiced. As James Madison put it in Federalist 10, “[e]nlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.”

To address this problem, the founders fixed the ends of government in the “securing of individual rights” and the “facilitat[ion of] the peaceful enjoyment of the private life.” They hoped that by doing so, there would no longer be a need for “that kind of statesmanship which had formerly been regarded as its essence: great, ‘way of life’-setting, character-forming political leadership.”

The structural features the founders embedded in the Constitution worked against the necessity of this older form of statesmanship. Chief among them was its dominion over an expansive republic, which Madison believed would dilute the influence of any one faction, and a system of representation that the founders designed to “refine and enlarge the public views.” To shore up these features, the founders established an array of “auxiliary precautions,” including the separation of powers, checks and balances, a bicameral legislature, and federalism. In designing such a complex, decentralized system, the founders hoped to minimize the new republic’s dependence on either great virtue or great statesmen.

Yet as Storing noted, these structural remedies pose a peculiar challenge to the cultivation of statesmanship and the virtues that undergird it. If a system is designed to operate with minimal dependence on statesmen, it becomes difficult to identify what incentives and structures will remain in place to create them for the moments of crisis when they are needed. In such a system, it is easy to imagine that the people would come to take the machinery of government for granted and lose sight of the virtues of leadership upon which even the most well-designed governments ultimately depend. In Storing’s estimation, by developing a system of government that so limited the need for statesmen, the America’s founders created a polity that would likely fail to understand, appreciate, or generate them.

This original challenge to American statesmanship has been compounded by the rise of populism in the centuries since the founding era. Storing noted that, contrary to the standard critique from progressives, the founders sought to establish a popular government based on the principle of majority rule. But they also recognized the danger inherent to such democratic systems — which they called “majority foolishness
or tyranny” — and sought to mitigate it through constitutional arrangements that would foster large yet unstable majorities. “Democratic statesmanship,” Storing argued, “must be understood, above all, in the light of that great danger, which implies its great task” — namely, refining and enlarging and, if need be, standing against public views that run counter to the rights of some or the long-term interests of all.

Two generations of leaders, beginning with the founders, reinforced the system’s nuances with aristocratic tendencies in their outlooks, comportment, and rhetoric. Yet as these generations passed and Americans spilled pell-mell over the frontier, American democracy lost much of its aristocratic character. This shift was arguably complete when, in 1828, Andrew Jackson — or “King Mob,” as some referred to him — took the mantle of national leadership from John Quincy Adams. Jackson’s victory over Adams was a sign that the leadership class derived from the elites of Virginia and Massachusetts, who bore the cultural imprint of England’s aristocracy, had given way to a politics fueled by unabashed populism and a democratic political class thirsty for influence, power, and popularity.

These forces steadily changed the nature of leadership in our national government. “It became increasingly difficult as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries wore on,” Storing observed, “for American statesmen to see themselves politically as anything more than mouthpieces of popular opinion.” This left them hard-pressed to educate the public on the virtues of the constitutional system or the responsibilities of self-government.

In addition to the descent into populism, Storing identified the rise of technocracy as a force that undermined American statesmanship. Though Storing argued that the origins of this approach to governance can be traced to the founding era, and especially to Alexander Hamilton, it only became a dominant way of thinking about politics in response to Jacksonian populism in the mid-19th century. Following the Jacksonians’ rank embrace of the so-called “spoils system” — by which administration offices are awarded to the supporters of election winners, rather than based on merit — subsequent generations of reformers became ardent proponents of meritocracy, efficiency, and “sound administration.” One result of this development was an eventual push for civil-service reform in the latter part of the 19th century, spearheaded by a new generation of Hamiltonians seeking to save government from populists by professionalizing it.
These efforts gained momentum during the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, when the government began to undertake more daunting tasks in regulating society and the economy. As government swelled in size, politicians increasingly looked to technical experts to understand how best to achieve their desired results. The ideal of scientific management as the standard for government decision-making has been predominant in America—and in our governing class, in particular—ever since.

Writing in the 1970s, amid simultaneous waves of regulation and deregulation in federal policy driven by this worldview, Storing lamented that “what scientific management has been moving toward is not statesmanship, and not even administration or management, but rather economizing.” He warned that the notion (per efficiency expert Frederick Taylor) that there is always one best way to solve a problem, and that it can be identified through research, analysis, and optimization uncoupled from moral considerations, would ultimately lead administrators down a blind alley. Though a statesman should take empirical data and research into account, Storing understood that true statesmanship hinges on the moral dimension of decision-making—on the statesman’s capacity to grasp the ends of government and to balance competing moral values in his pursuit of those ends.

The combined effects of these two arcs of decline, Storing argued, was “to resolve the role of the public official into two simple elements: populism…and scientific management.” Storing saw this problematic resolution embodied in the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who had won his party’s nomination through the recently democratized primary system. A nuclear engineer by trade, Carter vowed to re-organize, streamline, and fix government to deliver what the people wanted more efficiently.

Despite Carter’s determination to govern as both a populist and a technocrat, he had to make judgments and take actions on matters for which the will of the people was not clear, and for which there were real questions about not only the best means but also the proper ends of policy. Carter needed to practice statesmanship, but he and others could not understand or describe his leadership as such. For his part, Storing doubted “the feasibility, at least on any significant scale or over any considerable period of time, of a statesmanship in which there is such a sharp difference between style and substance.”
The end of statesmanship?

The declines in statesmanship Storing traced from the founding through the Jacksonian and Progressive eras and into the post-war period have only accelerated in the ensuing decades. Indeed, compared to the depths to which we have now descended, the 1970s looks like an age of innocence and ease. At the time, the contradictions between the reduction of government to democratic populism on the one hand and administration by scientific management on the other were not yet fully apparent; Carter could plausibly endeavor to be at once a populist and a technocrat. His successors, meanwhile, have increasingly felt the need to pick one substitute for statesmanship or the other, only to create more problems for themselves and the country as they have done so.

The nation’s troubled response to the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the fundamental flaws in these substitutes. President Trump tried to lead during the pandemic the only way he knew how—as a populist. Initially, he told the American people—or rather, his supporters—what they wanted to hear: that the virus was another liberal hoax bent on undermining his presidency, and that it would all be over soon. When this illusion became untenable, he focused on blaming China for the pandemic. All the while, he pointedly refused to follow the public-health measures and behaviors that scientists and even officials in his own administration advocated.

In contrast to Trump, many political leaders at the state and local levels—primarily but not exclusively in areas governed by Democrats—fully subscribed to public-health guidelines and sought to respond to the Covid-19 crisis accordingly. But “following the science” brought a host of problems of its own. Bureaucrats at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration bungled the rapid development and rollout of testing for the virus. State and local shutdowns of businesses, schools, religious institutions, and civil-society activities, followed by open-ended extensions of those shutdowns, struck many citizens as untethered from other relevant considerations. That the shutdowns disproportionately harmed Americans who were not in a position to maintain their livelihoods via Zoom calls—roughly two out of three U.S. jobs cannot be performed remotely—underscored the need to weigh competing priorities and justify trade-offs to the people forced to bear the brunt of them. But
this kind of judgment and leadership is the work of statesmanship, not scientific management.

The United States ended up with the worst of both worlds, suffering profound economic and social disruptions from which it will take years to recover while also enduring some of the highest infection and mortality rates among our peer nations in the developed world. Although the scientific prowess evident in the speedy design and distribution of vaccines has helped the nation turn the corner, there’s no doubt that we suffered more than was necessary because our leaders failed to rise to the challenge. At the very moment we needed statesmanship, we witnessed a profound lack of it.

This void was not merely a result of irresponsible populism on the part of the president and his supporters in government, nor of scientific management that often became uncoupled from practical judgment, moderation, and moral leadership. In addition to the issues Storing identified in the 1970s, the past four decades have witnessed two additional trends that magnify the challenges posed by these two substitutes for statesmanship. The first is our descent into hyper-partisanship and tribalism. The second is the bifurcation and disintegration of our public sphere. These intertwined developments have sharpened the need for statesmanship, even as they have made it increasingly hard to come by.

Our intense political polarization originated in deep-seated historical forces. The re-alignment initiated by the civil-rights movement’s success left the Democratic Party more uniformly liberal and the GOP more conservative. This re-sorting was intensified by the ideological conflict that began in response to the expansions of the federal government’s size and scope during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, with the left generally approving and the right strongly disapproving. As the parties’ respective bases calcified around these positions, treating one’s opposition as anything less than the enemy came to be viewed unfavorably by primary voters and party activists. As a result, it has become close to impossible to engage in the kinds of political but nonetheless principled compromise that is essential to the work of democratic statesmanship.

This trend toward hyper-polarization hastened, and in turn was strengthened by, the disintegration and bifurcation of our media environment. Starting in the 1980s, the proliferation of nationally syndicated talk-radio programs and cable-news networks expanded the media options available to politically activated citizens, allowing them to obtain
their news information exclusively from organizations that share their values, interests, and biases. The rise of social-media platforms like Facebook and Twitter in the 2000s intermingled social and political networks, pulling Americans even further into the echo chambers and information bubbles that confirm their worldviews. These developments have distorted the public sphere in ways that reinforce our worst political instincts, expose us to egregious manipulation, and incentivize demagoguery, flattery, and political theater over the complex, grueling, and often unseen work of statesmanship.

Together, the intensification of partisanship and the disintegration of America’s public forum have contributed to a truly unsustainable level of divisiveness and vitriol. Under such conditions, we can no longer depend on the structures of the American government—nor, indeed, on direct democracy or scientific management—to deliver us from the madness of mobocracy, demagoguery, and division. Rather, we must look to leaders who are capable of transcending our basest political instincts and inspire the American people to do the same. Though recovering this kind of statesmanship will be no easy task, the alternative—resigning ourselves to tyranny and mob rule—is unacceptable.

The Modern Statesman

As elusive as statesmanship has become in the modern era of American politics, it is not beyond reach. Though it may be unreasonable to expect our leaders to live out the virtue of Washington or Lincoln, there is no reason to doubt that a great many of our leaders are still capable of acting with enough statesmanship to see America through the challenges of our time. For those interested in leading America to meet those challenges, there are several discrete actions they can take to correct some of the mistakes of the recent past and restore some measure of statesmanship to American politics. Specifically, there are five principles that could guide our political leaders—in Congress and in the executive branch, and from both political parties—toward a renewed American statesmanship.

First, America’s would-be statesmen must do more to keep Americans grounded in reality. Insofar as statesmanship rests on a shared set of facts and common principles, those seeking to practice it have a vested interest in repairing our broken public discourse. To play their part, leaders must not only avoid trafficking in lies and conspiracy theories, but also actively debunk them and help citizens see through them. In
short, rather than parrot their constituents or rationalize their supporters’ rhetoric, American politicians must occasionally reason with them. As Storing observed:

Precisely because the American government is so transparent, relatively speaking, so little reliant on lords, kings, and priests, American statesmen must keep alive its basic rationale. At the least this means not playing the easy game of populist rhetoric, which cannot but undermine, in the long run, the capacity of the system to act well. At the most it means finding ways of reinforcing and deepening the people’s common-sense understanding that government, even popular government, is more than a matter of registering and implementing dominant opinion.

As Storing understood, statesmanship entails a two-way interplay: Leaders listen and discern, but from time to time, they must also inform and educate. This may involve clearing up pernicious falsehoods or conspiracy theories that take root and spread in the echo chambers of social media. It may also include helping citizens see why some problems need to be prioritized over others, how these problems need to be tackled, and what is reasonable to expect the government to accomplish in a given instance. This is what it means to “refine and enlarge the public views.” In recent years, we have seen how performative populism unmoored from responsible considerations of governing can transform broad swaths of public opinion. If statesmen cannot pay citizens the respect of reasoning with them in addition to listening to them, popular government may not survive.

Second, American politicians must do more to defend our political system. One way to do so is by upholding the range of competing viewpoints as a feature, not a bug, of our democracy. The diversity of views that will inevitably characterize an extended republic like ours, combined with the complexity of our governing arrangements for separating, checking, balancing, and decentralizing power, mean that we must resolve our differences through deliberation, negotiation, and compromise within our political institutions, not by running the electoral table and forcing the other side into submission. The former is the work of statesmen, and leaders seeking to practice it must defend this approach to politics and government.
Statesmen must also come to the defense of the beleaguered institutions central to healthy politics in the United States. Above all, this means ensuring that our electoral processes are readily accessible to all eligible voters, secure from outside interference, competently administered, amply funded, and appropriately trusted. Our elections are the wellsprings of our politics. If their waters are poisoned or diverted, nothing good will happen downstream.

Defending politics also means supporting Congress as the place where the different viewpoints and agendas in our society are represented and negotiated, if not always reconciled, in a democratically accountable fashion. This is how the founders intended for the nation to make its laws and oversee their administration. The practice of American statesmanship, therefore, requires building up and working through Congress, not tearing it down or working around it.

Third, our national leaders must lead and govern on behalf of the entire American people. Whether they serve in Congress or the executive branch, all federal officeholders first swear an oath of allegiance to the Constitution, and to carry out the duties of their office in a salutary and responsible manner. They are thus primarily obliged to lead and work on behalf of the nation constituted by that document, not the party, place, or political leader they might also happen to support. To be sure, affiliation with a political party is not entirely a bad thing; political parties enable statesmen to build up and coordinate majorities in a popular government. But it is nevertheless imperative for federal officeholders to recognize, first and foremost, that they are working on behalf of, and helping to govern, the American people as a whole.

Understanding and upholding the Constitution is one litmus test for whether those aspiring to statesmanship are leading in such a fashion. Another is ensuring the party or leader they may support has a program that encompasses all people and regions of the country, as opposed to privileging some and dismissing others. When parties or leaders do not have an inclusive vision for the nation, it is the job of statesmen to expand it.

Fourth, America’s leaders must do more to clearly situate the work of politics and governing in American principles and history. Our country faces myriad challenges, and we are overwhelmed by waves of information about them. Leaders seeking to practice statesmanship need to help the American people regain a sense of the way these challenges, as well
as their responses, are positioned within the broader American story. Where have we come from as a country on a particular issue? What have been the principles that animated our response to it in the past? How do they apply—or need to be adapted—to meet the circumstances we face at present? What would success look like—in other words, where are we trying to go? Finally, how will we get from where we are now to where we want to be? These are simple questions, but providing clear, straightforward answers can go a long way toward anchoring the American people in their common history and unifying them in their sense of a shared national destiny.

Fifth, and finally, American politicians must begin practicing statesmanship as craftsmanship. There is, as we have just noted, a performative component to statesmanship. Leaders need to offer compelling explanations for what they are trying to bring about, why they are trying to do so, and how they plan to do it. But in the parlance of Washington, D.C., the practitioners of statesmanship cannot simply be showhorses; they must also be workhorses. In other words, they must have gained the institutional savvy and built the relationships necessary to shepherd their preferred solutions through our complex governing arrangements and see them implemented as national policy.

Throughout it all, aspiring statesmen must cultivate and secure the political coalitions needed to sustain policymaking and policy implementation. “I hope to have God on my side,” Lincoln is reported to have said at the outset of the Civil War, “but I must have Kentucky.” Knowing who or what is the “Kentucky” one must bring over to one’s side, and what it will take to do so, in order to realize one’s plans is the knack of statesmanship that eludes purely performative showhorses. But for leaders willing to devote themselves to mastering politics and governance alike, to the point where they can harness them to constructive use in tandem, statesmanship is possible.

**UNDERSTANDING THE STAKES**

In five years, we will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This grand milestone is an opportunity to look back in time, yet it also bids us to look forward to what posterity holds in store for us. What will our country be like in another 50 years, at America’s tricentennial? How will Americans then, with the benefit of a half-century of hindsight, look back on our time, the 2020s?
My surmise is that our next decade will stand out as a turning point in our nation’s history. In the coming years, our democracy will either rise to the occasion, or slip faster toward something that no longer resembles democracy—at least not as Americans have inherited, practiced, or improved upon it from Jefferson’s day to our own. What will determine the outcome will not be the policies and reforms we adopt (or fail to adopt) in response to the challenges we face, but whether a new generation of leaders can manage to recover and renew the practice of American statesmanship. If they succeed, we can take on a range of challenges. If they fail, all bets are off.