



## Everyday Ethics

Radio Commentary on KUFM, Montana Public Radio  
*Wednesday, June 28, 2006*

### Leadership and Prudence

Over the last year people in high leadership positions have taken some hard falls due to ethics violations. Perhaps the one who fell the hardest is Tom Delay, brought down by the weight of numerous accusations that he violated standards of professional conduct and culminating in charges of illegal activities.

These kinds of ethics violations are the dominant context for public discussions about the ethics of our leaders. As a result, we talk about ethics only when our leaders fail to live up to minimum standards. But while it's obvious that we should hold leaders to such standards, it's not adequate. By the time we're talking about ethics it's too late. We have a scandal, a big mess and many unfortunate, even tragic, consequences. For deeper judgments of moral character we need to discuss more than ethics violations.

A vocabulary for deeper discussions about ethics and leadership exists; but unfortunately these terms have largely slipped from our moral vocabulary. The key concept that needs to be revived is prudence. This is not a term that generates much excitement and I'm sure some of you are reaching for the dial. But that might be imprudent?

In earlier time—much earlier—one would not be called virtuous (a person of high moral character) if one lacked prudence. But, as one philosopher puts it, “in the minds of contemporary people, the concept of goodness is excluded rather than included in the concept of prudence (Josef Pieper).” Another writes that, “for modern day thinkers, prudence falls more within the domain of psychology and calculation than morality and duty (Andre Comte-Sponville).” We think of prudence, if at all, in non-moral terms, as merely the careful- or expedient--management of one's affairs.

In contrast, there is an old Latin phrase that translates, “all virtue is necessarily prudent.” Some things philosophers have said over the centuries about prudence are: Immanuel Kant asserted: “Prudence advises, morality commands.” Augustine wrote: “Prudence is love that chooses with sagacity.” Finally, a contemporary philosopher says that, “morality is not sufficient for virtue; virtue also requires intelligence and lucidity.... It is imprudent to heed morality alone, and it is immoral to be imprudent (Andre Comte-Sponville).”

These insights are familiar to most of us. Love unguided by intelligence can be oppressive and miss its mark. Temperance without practical judgment becomes dry and rigid. Faith without wisdom can slide into dangerous fanaticism. Prudence makes heroes; in its absence there are merely hotheads (Andre Comte-Sponville). We can probably all think of at least one pain-in-the-neck-moralist whose sincere morality lacks the guidance of intelligence. In short, “morality without prudence is either futile, [irritating or] dangerous (Andre Comte-Sponville).”

The central idea behind prudence is the ability to select morally worthy goals and discern the right and effective means to make those goals a reality. In terms of political leadership, a prudent leader has the vision to see good political objectives and the know-how to reach those objectives through just and effective policies.

So obviously we desire prudent leaders. However, there are obstacles to this desire. It was Machiavelli who observed that a truly virtuous leader would be thwarted by the many who are not virtuous. His advice was, if leaders want to stay in power they must learn vice. There is present day truth to this political realism. Some leaders rise to office not because they are wise, but are because they are clever at getting elected. Being a clever political strategist is different than being a wise or prudent leader. On the one hand, cleverness is merely being efficient at achieving whatever end by whatever means. On the other, practical wisdom identifies good ends and the good means needed to achieve them.

Ultimately, the answer to Machiavelli's political cynicism is Us. Our leaders are not rulers and we are not subjects. It's our responsibility as citizens to separate the prudent leader from the merely clever politician.

We have the moral responsibility of evaluating the goals and policies of our leaders, to judge where the elected captains of the ship of state are taking us. We expect our leaders to have a moral vision, to set a course toward worthy goals and just policies. For this reason leaders have a greater moral responsibility than the rest of us. They were elected because they argued that they have the vision, skills and judgment needed to steer the ship of state. However, if one takes the wheel, one takes on the responsibility for all those on board.

So the character issue concerns more than infidelity, dishonesty, and living-up to minimum standards of professional conduct. Poor judgment in steering the ship of state is a moral failure. The lack of foresight, insight, accurate assessments of the realities of a situation, and letting ideology override good judgment indicates a deficient character. Ill advised foreign and domestic policies demonstrate an absence of virtue, particularly the most important virtue of ethical leadership, prudence.

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