

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Selected Works of James MacGregor Burns

James MacGregor Burns. *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1956.

James MacGregor Burns. *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1970.

James MacGregor Burns. *Leadership*. New York: HarperCollins, 1978.

James MacGregor. *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness*. New York: Grove Press, 2003.

Review By: Stephen Randolph

The concepts of “transactional” and “transformative” leadership are fundamental to modern leadership theory, to the extent that we can tend to forget that they were inventions of a certain place, time, and perspective. That intellectual structure was developed by James MacGregor Burns, operating on the borderlands of history, political science, and psychology to analyze the basis and the employment of leadership.

Burns focused on that theme throughout his extraordinarily prolific and prolonged career, extending from the early 1950s until his death in 2014. He spent most of his career as a faculty member at Williams College, in Massachusetts. Formally, he was a political scientist, always interested in the structure of power and the organization of government; but he approached his work through the prism of history, always grounding his analysis on the solid ground of historical fact. Asked once how he reconciled the two disciplines, he responded that “You have to do both, but history is more fun.” (Burns interview, *American Heritage*, p. 3.)

It was a remarkably productive approach, though it called on an almost unbelievable capacity for study and analysis on Burns’ part. In the summaries that follow, we will trace Burns’ approach through four of his most significant works, taken sequentially to evaluate first his historical work, and then his theoretical work on leadership. This

path will take us through his two-volume biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1971, and then the two works in which he developed and presented his theories of leadership: *Leadership*, published in 1978, and *Transforming Leadership*, published in 2003. These volumes were among the twenty-six works he published during his long and prolific career.

Not to bury the lead: all four of these books have distinctive and significant value. The Roosevelt volumes each deal with epic periods in U.S. history--the first volume examining FDR's leadership during the Great Depression, the second providing a close-up account of war leadership and alliance decision making in the most complex and costly war in U.S. history. Based on his immersion in Roosevelt and his contemporaries, Burns followed with his ground-breaking book *Leadership*, setting the basis for our current approach to assessing and executing leadership. His companion volume, *Transforming Leadership*, provided leadership portraits and assessments of leaders across their variations in time and space. There was great conceptual consistency in Burns' work across his half-century of scholarship.

Burns and the Roosevelt Saga

Burns served as a combat photographer with the Army in the Pacific theater in WWII, embarking on his academic career on his return from the war. He began his work on Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1952 and was among the first scholars to have access to Roosevelt's papers.

From the beginning Burns had a specific aim point in mind. He was writing a "political biography," focusing on Roosevelt as political leader: his growth, his decisions, the compromises he made, the ideals he sought, the political structure in which he operated. Burns had an abiding interest in the formal and informal structures of American politics, and there could be no better way to explore those structures than

by examining perhaps the most successful and most adept politician in American history, as he operated through depression, a global war, and the creation of a new international order. It was necessary, as Burns noted, to include Roosevelt's private life, "because a great politician's career remorselessly sucks everything into its vortex—including his family and even his dog." (Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, p.ix) But the focus of Burns' work was consistent, maintaining Roosevelt in the center of attention and aiming at the explanation for his decisions and actions.

Burns titled the first volume of the Roosevelt biography *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, framing his narrative around Nicolo Machiavelli's maxim: "A prince...must imitate the lion and the fox, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves... Therefore, a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist." (Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, epigraph) To translate this into today's environment: in the maelstrom of politics, when should the leader hold out for principles, and when should he lay up power for future use? When do you take the lead, and when do you step back? That dilemma faced Roosevelt through every major issue of his presidency.

The heart of *The Lion and the Fox* lies in Roosevelt's leadership during the Great Depression—his style and strategies, and perhaps most of all, his remarkable growth as he assumed his responsibilities as President. No one familiar with his earlier career could have expected the drive and the energy that Roosevelt demonstrated in his first days in the White House. It is a remarkable history for modern readers: the ad hoc approach to policy making that Roosevelt embraced, his willingness to experiment, the sense that any movement is better than stagnation. As Roosevelt

argued during the 1932 campaign, “The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another.” (Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, p.133)

His administrative strategy remained stable throughout his presidency, and it was one that nobody today would embrace as a model. Given a problem, Roosevelt typically would create two rival power centers within the bureaucracy addressing the issue, ignoring the sort of clean management structure so valued in modern organizations. This strategy was inefficient and often led to rancor and confusion; but it also made sure that Roosevelt kept his options open, that he had the deciding voice in any major decision, and that he would be kept informed—if no other way than through complaints from the warring factions. It was typical of his general approach to power—mediating among the competing interests, and tolerating a great deal of administrative inefficiency, and even rancor, within his inner circle. As Burns summarized, “Roosevelt was less a great creative leader than a skillful manipulator and a brilliant interpreter...He was always a superb tactician, and sometimes a courageous leader, but he failed to achieve that combination of tactical skill and strategic planning that represents the acme of political leadership.” (Burns, *Roosevelt: Soldier of Freedom*, p. 404)

For modern readers, the chapters addressing FDR’s first term from 1933-1937 carry the most power. It was almost a romantic period in American history, at least for the first few years, as partisan politics gave way to a sense of national urgency, with Roosevelt viewing the White House as brokering agreements among the normal economic and political antagonists. The situation Roosevelt encountered when he began his term exactly suited his style and his preference for experimentation, a willingness to experiment

and adapt as might prove necessary. The progress of the New Deal is a fascinating story, filled with fascinating characters.

For Burns, though, the second term from 1937-1941 carried the greater interest. It was in that period that Roosevelt sought to change the structure of the U.S. government, the Democratic party, and the national alignment of political power. Despite all his energy and experimentation, Roosevelt found himself stymied by the structure of government, unable to take measures urgently needed to sustain the economic recovery. As has occurred in other eras, the Supreme Court was profoundly conservative, closely bound to tradition and to limiting the role of government. Likewise, the Senate proved to be an obstacle to Roosevelt’s attempt to re-create the relationship between management and labor in the economy.

Even his own party, notionally under his leadership, was unsatisfactory in this time of crisis. Many Democratic leaders were lackluster in their support for his programs, and the party as a whole was feeble and unorganized. Throughout his second term Roosevelt attempted to alter these power relationships, beginning with his attempt to pack the Supreme Court, and ending with a half-hearted effort to reform and energize his party. There were some common elements in these attempts: they were all poorly planned, and they all failed. As Burns pointed out, it was a good example both of Roosevelt’s keen ability to define a problem, and of his usual unwillingness to commit to a specific plan to address the problem. He was a gifted improviser, and had a powerful moral compass, but invariably showed little patience or skill in long-range planning.

That period saw the rise of Hitler and the militarization of Japan. Gradually Roosevelt was forced to extend his attention from the domestic issues of recovery and face the complexities of an increasingly hazardous international scene—which were reflected

in the conflicting demands of the isolationists and the interventionists on the home front. As always, Roosevelt oscillated between the role of the fox, avoiding confrontation with the isolationists, and the lion, calling on the nation's power, first with aid to Great Britain, then increasingly broadening America's role in the conflict. From the beginning, for Roosevelt this conflict was more than simply a struggle for power—it was a moral crusade, a cause outlined by the Atlantic Charter months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Burns' second volume on Roosevelt, *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom*, picks up the story at that point. It is an extraordinary account, maintaining its elegance and power fifty years after its publication. Burns' account of the problems facing the world's leaders as war approached is vivid and complete. There is no better account of the evolving strategic situation as the war progressed or of the complexity of war leadership. Given his interest in leadership, Burns was especially effective in measuring and presenting the summits in which Roosevelt encountered his peers—Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin.

It is of great interest to read Burns' description of the American people at war. His portrait of the nation does not present the idyllic scenes of memory; bitter political conflict continued, and the general populace was slow to orient toward the conflict. But Roosevelt proved himself a great war leader, able to mobilize the nation in the great cause of victory. In doing so, he seized the opportunity to achieve more in social programs than he had during the depths of the Depression.

Burns and Leadership Theory and Practice

Burns published his classic study *Leadership* in 1978, seven years after winning the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Roosevelt at war. It was his lifetime goal to develop a unified theory of leadership, applicable

in all cultures and organizations. He had set the foundation for his study of leadership in ten earlier works, all aimed in one way or another at leadership in the American political context. In the course of those works he had studied political leaders, the legislative process, and America's political structure. He used every corner of this great intellectual storehouse in constructing *Leadership*.

His protracted and deep immersion into leadership explains the most remarkable characteristic of this work: its scope and comprehensiveness. Normally with this sort of challenge to long-standing doctrine, the initial responses are limited in scope, chipping away at questionable aspects of the prevailing doctrine. That was emphatically not the case with Professor Burns. Coming right out of the chute, he presented his newly derived conceptual structure and his core definitions and typology of leadership, with case studies to support his analysis. He examined leadership in its political, social, and psychological aspects, and he worked out his theory in a closely argued and carefully structured book. He was not one to leave any questions open; his construction of his thesis and the evidence is thorough and systematic.

The essence of Burns' theory was his belief that traditional definitions and assessments of leadership had focused only on the leaders as primary actors. That focus had eliminated from view a second major player: the followers. He conceived of leader-follower relationships as ideally active and mutual, based on the values and motivations and goals of both leaders and followers, and enabling both leaders and followers to meet their needs in a common enterprise. This perspective raised the followers from passive participants, to active members of a common enterprise. More important, it pointed to leadership as a means of lifting both the leader and those led to achieve their greater self.

Burns identified two general structures of leadership: “transactional” leadership, based on the politics of exchange—comparatively low-risk and low-gain—and “transforming” leadership, in which the interaction between leaders and followers raises both to a higher level of achievement and morality. Over time, “transformational” has replaced “transforming” in the terminology of leadership study, but this construct remains basic to the study of leadership. Five decades since its publication, *Leadership* still stands as the conceptual foundation for the study of leadership.

Burns emphasized that leadership matters at all levels, from the family and community to the heights of political power, but his focus and interest is overwhelmingly on political leaders and their followers. It is at that level that leadership acts for the benefit or the disadvantage of whole nations, and that is Burns’ dominant interest. He had a strong bias in favor of transformative leadership and focused most of his attention and analysis on that model of leadership.

The work was enthusiastically welcomed on its publication. There was a well-justified sense of a global failure of leadership in that time of the late 1970s, and Burns’ book arrived with the right theme and timing to gain a highly favorable reception. Reviewers were generally delighted with the book, and with the possibilities it opened up for further development. All considered the work an important advance, but all had suggestions for further work. The most significant comments focused on the bias toward transformational leadership that was such a centerpiece of Burns’ work. His selection of Mao and Mahatma Gandhi as his models for transformational leadership both came into question. But the more serious discussions addressed the relationship between the two models of leadership that Burns had proposed.

Most of those reading this review will agree that in the course of most lives, transactional leadership

is by a vast distance the most common leadership experience, far more common than transformational opportunities. That is generally the routine leadership style in bureaucracies, usually demanding competence but not genius to succeed. This is a less risky leadership strategy than transformational leadership, but it has its own demands and risks that deserved more attention in this overview of leadership.

Moreover, there is in Burns’ view a deep divide between the two modes of leadership that in practice may not exist. In nearly all cases, a leader will have some aspects of transformation ongoing, as needed for the organization; but transactional negotiations are a perennial aspect of leadership in modern organizations. As Lt Cmdr J.P. Morse commented in the *Naval War College Review* in 1979, “The gulf between the transactional and transforming leader is too great. There seems to be no middle ground. Few people in positions of leadership can remain in these transactional or transforming molds forever...The gray areas in between, ‘contingency leadership’ if you will, is where I believe most leaders spend most of their time, with frequent migrations to both extremes.” (Morse, *Naval War College Review*, March-April 1979)

Franklin Roosevelt’s experience as President bears out that conclusion. There were times when his passion and the environment aroused him to heights of moral and political power, truly acting the part of the lion. But even in those times, his ability to gain support for his policies demanded exhaustive and frustrating transactional negotiations—with Congress, with his inner circle, with the government, with his allies. It was his tactical facility in working through the politics of these moments that secured FDR’s position at the height of the American pantheon.

It is odd but true that Burns did not use any of the vast experience of the U.S. military to examine the role and strategies of leadership, especially given his own

combat experience during WWII. He had certainly seen enough of the military to understand the core emphasis that institution places on leadership, and the wide divergence in leadership styles that can be found among the military establishment.

These criticisms notwithstanding, at this moment there are leaders all around us conducting transformational leadership, demanded in these unprecedented times. Medical professionals across the country and the world have risen above their former routine to address the needs of their patients and their nations. Teachers have grappled with the complexities of digital instruction. Families have recast themselves to withstand the rigors of the time. These inspirational individuals might never consider themselves as transformational leaders, but they meet that definition and will carry this experience through their lives.

Twenty-five years after his game-changing publication of *Leadership*, Burns published a follow-on volume, *Transforming Leadership*. It was an opportunity for him to reflect back on his achievement in *Leadership*, and to note where the field had advanced and where it had stagnated. It has the feel of a conversation between people who have known each other a long time, who have exchanged all their stories again and again, enjoying them every time. But Burns took the opportunity to extend his earlier work conceptually, explicitly tying leadership to values and continuing to work toward his lifetime goal of creating a unified theory of leadership. Looking back at his work on Roosevelt in that period, Burns acknowledged that he might have graded Roosevelt too harshly in his biographies—for example, failing to note Roosevelt's transformational leadership during the New Deal, and again during his failed attempt to reconstruct the U.S. political system during his second term.

The four books outlined above represent only a small portion of Burns' massive production over a long career. Burns was wise enough to understand that there

would probably never be a single theory of leadership that would cover all uses in all environments. It was that same wisdom, though, that enabled him to reshape our perspectives on leadership, and that makes his work still worth study, decades after its publication. No reader will agree with him on all counts. But all will encounter new ways of thinking about leadership, new connections in considering leadership, and an endless series of perspectives and examples through which to view this critical aspect of modern life.

Questions for Further Thought:

- How far does the choice of leadership strategy rest with the leader, and how much with the environment?
- How do the skills demanded of a leader differ between transformational leadership and transactional leadership? How do the risks differ between the two strategies?
- Roosevelt led the United States for twelve of the most turbulent years in the nation's history. How does one maintain the stamina and energy to face up to a challenge of this magnitude?

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References

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