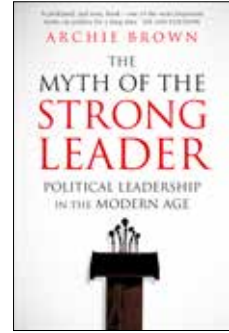


Book Reviews

The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age



By Archie Brown

Publisher: Vintage (16 April 2015) (ISBN: 978-0099554851) 480 pages

Reviewed by Group Captain Sean O'Connor

Biography: Group Captain O'Connor commissioned into the Fighter Control Branch and has served on Nos 8 and 23 Squadrons, undertaken MOD, PJHQ and NATO tours as well as numerous out-of-area deployments. Awarded a CAS Fellowship, he completed his Masters in Philosophy Degree in International Relations at Cambridge and is currently the Deputy Commandant of the RAF College Cranwell.

"What the three 'great dictators' of the inter-war era of the twentieth century had in common was that their most serious foreign policy misjudgements were a result of succumbing to their own myths." (pp.295-6).

This quote from the book assessing the foreign policy illusions of 'strong leaders', is a salutary lesson for all in leadership positions. That said, this book is as much about how the world works as it is about the tenets of leadership. It exposes the freedoms and constraints of leaders as the agents of change, concluding that those that amass the most personal power are apt to make the largest errors of judgment resulting in commensurate degrees of disaster.

In this detailed and extremely well-researched work on political leadership worldwide since the beginning of the twentieth century, Brown sets out to disprove the widely held belief that 'strong leaders' who are able to dominate their political colleagues achieve the greatest results. He adeptly uses 50 years' of study to pull together a comprehensive range of historical examples of notable leaders, their successes and failures. Brown concentrates on British and American formative political leaders and uses a wide range of other examples across a variety

of alternative political systems. Russia and China figure prominently, but the analysis also casts wider to examine relevant evidence from Germany, France, South Africa, Turkey and North Korea, as well as useful examples from the Middle East and South America. The book is a comprehensive, but broad, political science comparative-historical text, yet it is written in a compelling and easily accessible style.

Although there is nothing new in the political record examined, it is Brown's use of the assumed strength of individual leaders within the context of their own political systems as the prime framework for analysis that brings real and tangible relevance to this study. Brown's argument develops in three main stages. Firstly, he sets out the multifaceted political context of the International System within which individual leaders must operate, focusing on the inadequacy of the 'strong' versus 'weak' dichotomy often used to delineate success or failure. Brown then moves on to examine the nature of change delivered by political leaders, assessing those that succeed in redefining what is thought to be politically possible. In doing so he explores tiers of change along the spectrum of transformational to revolutionary and includes a detailed analysis of the variance within totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. In the concluding section, Brown draws on many of the foreign policy failures of claimed 'strong leaders' to offer a view as to what kind of leadership attributes are required for a political leader to be considered successful.

The author's well-structured analysis produces a genuinely persuasive argument that, in contemporary democracies, those leaders that leverage the talents of experts and consider a divergent range of views are far from being weak as they are the most likely to be successful. Brown reminds us that leaders may create bold visions for change but it is rarely delivered by them. Instead, leaders rely on a capable and empowered executive to ensure that positive change is not only delivered but also endures beyond the leader's usually limited tenure. Moreover, by stating that "obedience to authority figures can allow 'toxic leaders' in many professions...to survive in office when they should be driven from it" (p.50), he convincingly allows one to conclude that effective leadership relies on sanctioned critique.

Bill Gates described this text as 'an important read' and chose it as his recommended book of 2016 for very good reason. It stands in its own right as a detailed exploration of the role of individual leaders in creating a climate and culture that supports constructive and meaningful change. Indeed, all who read this book will be both wiser and better informed; not only of the nature of political governance but also of the art of leadership in general. Brown's study, therefore, is a must for any in a senior leadership role who seek a genuine 360° perspective on their leadership style. It is equally useful to those starting out on their leadership journey as it reinforces the position that success comes from informed decision making where the leader engenders collective responsibility and the shared ownership of change.

The Myth of the Strong Leader is a natural sequel to AP7001 *Leadership in the RAF*. It supports RAF Leadership Doctrine by framing potential leadership dilemmas in a political context, elaborating on why 'leadership does not depend on power' and aiding a better understanding

of what it is to be a 'politically and globally astute' leader. In presenting well-chosen, real-world examples, Brown brings political context to the notions of transactional, 'positional power' and the more transformative 'personal power', thereby reinforcing the AP7001 concept of a 'continuum of leadership behaviour'. Moreover, in the broader International Relations setting, one can usefully extract the lessons from this persuasive study to cast forward and critique the various political narratives being played out in the current Turkish, Russian, French and North Korean spheres of influence, as well as postulate on the likely limits of what President Trump may be able to achieve at home and abroad. Although the book was written in the 'pre-BREXIT' era there is much to signpost caution when reviewing national (and nationalist) rhetoric currently being conveyed across the European Union.

Archie Brown is a political scientist and historian who has worked extensively in the UK, America and Russia, having access to political leaders, their executives and advisors. He is Emeritus Professor of Politics for Oxford University, a Fellow of the British Academy and was elected Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2003. He has written and edited over twenty books and published numerous articles. These have covered, *inter alia*, Soviet and Communist politics, the end of the Cold War, British politics, post-Soviet Russian politics as well as the wider fields of political leadership and culture.

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