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Foreword: On Statesmanship

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FOREWORD

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Statesmanship is often used to refer to a seemingly principled political leader, but what is statesmanship? Statesmanship refers to a particular set of skills and behaviors for managing public affairs. It is often used as a descriptor for men and women in the policy arena that appear to operate on a different level from other political actors. Indeed, scholars describe statesmanship as morally excellent political leadership, even though the exact characteristics of what makes someone a ‘statesman’ or ‘stateswoman’ remain unclear. We can intuit that statesmanship is somehow distinct from politics generally, if only that the former is often seen as a positive and the latter as negative. While definitions and characteristics of a statesman may vary, statesmanship is perhaps best understood through a public servant that exemplified the term. Mark Hatfield’s legacy, however, provides us principles that we as scholars and practitioners might look to for understanding statesmanship.

Scholars outline four characteristics of the modern statesman. While statesmanship has evolved over time, it can be identified through the person’s aim, scope, means, and virtues. The aim of a statesman is to promote and protect the general interest above any particular interest. Their scope is greater than simply a program or formal institution, but instead extends across their governance network to influence public and private actors. The means of a statesman tend to be through rhetoric and negotiation. In other words, influence is the tools they use rather than force or direct control. Lastly, they exhibit high moral virtues and professional skills.

Hatfield's legacy illustrates these criteria, albeit often in different words. Hatfield was known for balancing conflicting interests (aim) in order to seek the greater good for Oregon, especially as it came to environmental conservation and economic development. Etulain writes that Hatfield as Governor "began to work as a middle-of-the-roader," as position that often irritated passionate advocates on either side of an issue and especially his environmentally-focused Democratic allies.

Similarly, he worked within and outside his elected positions to advance policy goals across his governance network through speeches and writing (scope and means). He was known in his gubernatorial career especially for continually travelling to make speeches and writing essays on topics important to him to advance what he perceived as the general interest. Speaking to his own gubernatorial peers, Hatfield "spoke of far right conservatives as being like fascists... These right-wingers are 'here and now,' he told the governors, and they were 'a danger to American ideals'".

Lastly, Hatfield was known for his strong faith and conviction (virtues). As a life-long evangelical Baptist Christian, Hatfield sought to understand Christ's teachings and how they should inform his own political practices. Hatfield's beliefs often placed him outside of the mainstream for either party, as he saw Christ's teachings cutting across party lines and ideals. Early in his legislative career, his Christian convictions motivated him to seek passage of a statewide ban on racial discrimination in public accommodation, an achievement he deemed his "most proud throughout almost 50 years of public service". Indeed, his Christian convictions even led him to be deemed a non-Christian by more fundamentalist elements. His longtime and early opposition to the Vietnam War, for example, put him at odds with more fundamentalist Christians who believed support for military and country were synonymous with supporting Christ. His opposition was not theological only but born out of his own combat experience in World War 2. In other words, Hatfield led with conviction about what was good and right for humanity and compassion for the pain and suffering of others, even when it put him at odds with his own party and base.

To close, then, what does Hatfield's example show us about statesmanship? Hatfield's example shows that there is a higher calling in public affairs than many of us often consider. We see politicians and candidates during election cycles speaking in slogans that resonate with their base, but one can often feel emptiness behind what one hears—it is often hollow and appealing to a portion of society. Instead, Hatfield shows us that the aim of a true statesman is to seek the general interest over one's own base (or even one's own interest). It is to work with influence and rhetoric rather than control throughout one's governance network to seek out positive change over time. It is to think, speak, and act of clear conviction for what one believes and in compassionate understanding for what others. Hatfield was described at times as a liberal, radical, progressive, moderate, and many other often contrasting political monikers. As I see it, this confusion and contrasting of political labels shows us the value of statesmanship. It is often outside of politics as we commonly experience it and instead a calmer, wiser, steering influence based on a deep commitment to one's neighbor. It is a much more difficult and impactful path than simply being a politician.

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