Prologue – Enabler

FOLLOWERS

This book centers on what happened during the first six months of the coronavirus crisis – from approximately January 1, 2020 to July 1, 2020 – first as it hit and then as it impacted the United States of America more widely. During this time of what within months was declared a pandemic, Americans were fixated, as they are inclined anyway to be, on their leader, President Donald J. Trump. Some credited him with handling the crisis well. Others faulted him for handling it less well – much less well, or even inordinately badly. The point is that Trump was the country's national fixation, even more of a fixation during the fourth year of his presidency than he was during the first three.

The present book deviates from this pattern. Here the lens is trained not on Trump, the leader, but, primarily, on his followers. Specifically, on Trump's enablers, on those who made it possible for the president to lead as he did during the inception of the pandemic and then during the months immediately subsequent – during which, in the USA, the virus crisis went from bad to far worse. As I use the word here, enablers are followers who allow or even encourage their leaders to engage in, and then to persist in behaviors that are destructive. Given the enabled are leaders, their destructions have implications not only for them but, crucially, additionally, for others, sometimes for many, even millions of others. What we have then are not only bad leaders, but bad followers. The implications of this are not minor, they are major. Especially if the leader has great power, enablement can and often does have ramifications as pernicious as they are ubiquitous.

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Writing about followers is devilish business. First, people seem not much to care. What they care about more, infinitely more, are leaders. Second is the matter of semantics. Always the semantics. What exactly is a follower? And do followers necessarily, by definition, follow? Or do leadership and followership imply something different? Relationships that are complex, not obvious? And behaviors that are nimble, more nuanced?

First the evidence. The evidence that people do not care, or at least not much, is overwhelming. For all the many programs on leaders and leadership, almost none of them deal with the topic of followers and followership, and in comparison to the countless books and articles on the subject of leadership, there are very few specifically on followers and followership. Similarly, unlike the amount that is spent on leader training and development, the investment in follower training and development is meager at best. Followers and followership are, in sum, poor, pathetic, hangers-on. They are never at the center of what I call the leadership industry – they are always at the margin.

Second the semantics. The semantics are a problem, and for good reason. Curiously, while the words “leader” and “leadership” suffer from too many definitions, the words “follower” and “followership” suffer from too few. There are, literally, hundreds of definitions of the former, there are hardly any of the latter. Even in the smattering of books directly on the topic of followers and followership, clear, consistent definitions of what exactly is being discussed are hard to find. The truth is that the word “follower” makes us squirm. Being a follower conjures images of “docility, conformity, weakness and the failure to excel.” It conjures images of “subordination, submissiveness, passivity.” And these images are the opposite of those we have of leaders: leaders are strong, followers weak; leaders are active, followers passive; leaders are successful, followers not so much.

Most of the experts avoid the semantics by avoiding the topic. They focus laser-like on leaders; they steer clear of followers. But there is a problem with this approach – an insurmountable one. For leadership, like followership, is a relationship. Leaders and followers are
inextricably bound, the one to the other. So, the problem of language remains. Now as before the only antonym of leader is follower, the only antonym of leadership is followership. This does not, however, mean that followers always follow, any more than it means that leaders always lead.

I first focused on followers in 2008, in a book titled *Followership: How Followers are Creating Change and Changing Leaders*. Then as now my argument was deceptively simple: that to fixate on the person at the top at the expense of those in the middle and at the bottom is misguided and misleading – a mistake. It explains nothing, it distorts everything. If leaders are key determinants, followers are no less.

- Followers are subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line.
- Followership implies a relationship (rank) between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior) of the former to the latter.³

Defining followers by rank, as opposed to behavior, allows us immediately to see that while followers, subordinates, usually follow, they do not always follow. Sometimes, in fact, they refuse to follow, refuse to go along with what their leaders want and intend. The same applies to followership. Implying a relationship between leaders and followers that is determined by rank, the latter subordinate to the former, does not extrapolate from this rank the nature of the response. The ways in which followers respond to their leaders’ directives vary. They range from blind obedience to deliberate disobedience, from abject loyalty to outright disloyalty.

Followers who are enablers enable then by choice – some of the time. Not all the time, not for example in situations in which they are threatened with physical harm if they refuse to enable. But while in the United States refusing to enable President Donald Trump might have put a very few of his followers at professional or political risk, the risk was not to life or limb. Therefore, had a highly placed administration
official such as, say, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, or for that matter a Republican Party stalwart such as, say, South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, decided not to follow where Trump led, decided not to enable him, it would have put them at risk—but not in a way that came close to life-threatening. Professionally or politically impairing? Possibly, maybe even probably. But life-threatening? Certainly not.

Which raises the question of what should followers do? Take orders from on high even if these orders are seriously misguided? Pay deference to their leader even if their leader is evidently incompetent and demonstrably corrupt? Or should followers follow the dictates of their conscience? Should followers who want to be good refuse to follow leaders who obviously are bad?

HISTORY

The great leadership literature has always taken followers into account. But go back thousands of years and you will find then what we find now: leaders in the foreground, followers in the background. Leaders as leading actors, followers as second bananas. This is not to say that followers were unimportant, rather it is to say that they were not important in and of themselves, as worthy of dignity. Rather their role was a supporting one: their task was to support, or even to enable, their leaders, ideally not because they had to but because they wanted to. In other words, the great leadership teachers taught how to lead with a light hand.

Lao Tsu: “If the sage would guide the people, he must serve with humility. If he would lead them, he must follow behind. In this way when the sage rules, the people will not feel oppressed.” Confucius: “Lead [the people] by political maneuvers, restrain them with punishments; [they] will become cunning and shameless. Lead them by virtue . . . they will develop a sense of shame and a sense of participation.” And though Machiavelli is usually thought to have taught that it was better for a prince (a leader) to be feared than loved, fear was to be the last arrow in the leader’s quiver, used only if all else failed.
prince “should think to avoid those things that make him hateful and contemptible.”

But if the great leadership literature that was earliest has a familiar ring – followers as supporters – the great leadership literature that came later was different. Now followers were individuals with their own rights and privileges. For the ideals and ideas of the Enlightenment signaled a major shift. A shift that redressed, in theory if by no means always in practice, the balance of power between leaders and followers. To be sure, there were precursors to the Enlightenment, prominent among them Athenian democracy. But the impact of the Enlightenment was expansive, and it was enduring.

In the late 1600s John Locke provided moral and legal grounds for a system of governance that distributed power between leaders and led. “There remains still in the people,” Locke wrote, “a supreme power to remove or alter the legislative, when they find the legislative act contrary to the trust reposed in them.” Imagine that – power to the people! Similarly, in the mid and late 1700s, the revolutionary firebrand Thomas Paine raged against control of the American colonies by Great Britain, declaring that even “brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families.” By the mid-1800s women’s voices surfaced or, if you will, resurfaced, among them Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s, urging women to rise against the “history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman.” And little more than a century later Nelson Mandela declared in a South Africa courtroom that, “the ideal of a democratic and free society” was one for which he was “prepared to die.”

The Enlightenment, then, signaled a sea change. Followers were no longer expected to be, or even supposed to be mere appendages – appendages to leaders who had a right to control them as they saw fit. Rather those who ranked lower than leaders were themselves a force to be reckoned with. Not for nothing those revolutionary references to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, to liberty, equality, and fraternity. They sent a signal that ideally anyway things now were different – that ideally power now was to be shared.
The history of followership is not, though, either in theory or practice, only about ideals and ideas. It is also about facts and figures. Which is where war comes in – specifically World War II. For it was primarily in the wake of World War II that followers became not just objects of abstract intellectual exercises but subjects of scientific studies. How, historians and social scientists wondered, had it happened that followers had followed bad leaders, enabled leaders so bad they were evil? Enabled a leader such as Adolf Hitler, a genocidal dictator who, notwithstanding his malevolence, was able nonetheless to get his most of his followers to do most of his bidding, and to do so of their own volition.

For most of the immediate postwar period the explanations for what happened in Germany between 1933 and 1945 centered primarily on Hitler. He was held personally as well as politically responsible for everything that had gone calamitously wrong: from the horrors of the Holocaust and the massive numbers of Europeans and Americans dead and wounded, to the destruction of large swaths of the European continent. More to the point, perhaps, it was Hitler who was the explicator. For example, though so far as we know Hitler personally never killed a single Jew, it was he who was held responsible for the murder of six million.

But before long, attention shifted and by the time the postwar period was over, Germans during the Nazi era were the most carefully studied followers ever. The first academic treatise on the subject was published in 1950, titled *The Authoritarian Personality*.\(^6\) The lead author was Theodor Adorno, a philosopher and social scientist whose impetus was the Holocaust. How could it possibly have happened, he wondered, that in a country as cultured as Germany many millions of people were ready, willing, and even eager to follow where Hitler led? This profoundly important question was repeatedly raised thereafter, notably by other experts who sought similarly to explain what Hannah Arendt famously (infamously) called “the banality of evil.”\(^7\)

Two other studies – also of followers, also triggered by what happened during World War II – were of seminal importance. The
first, on “obedience to authority,” was based on Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram’s work in the 1960s, which centered on the single most famous social science experiment ever. The experiment was designed to shed light on why followers were willing to obey people in positions of authority who ordered them to do something they never normally would do: inflict pain, obvious physical pain, on another human being. Again, Milgram sought to answer the question raised by the Nazis: how do people get to the point of behaving so “callously and inhumanely”? The second seminal study of followers during the Nazi period was Christopher Browning’s 1992 book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland.* As the title makes clear, the book is about men who before the war were “ordinary.” Nevertheless, with only a very few exceptions, during the war they did what they were told to do, no matter how cruel, how treacherous, or murderous. Within months or even weeks they went from being ordinary men to enabling Hitler to implement “the final solution” – to eradicate, or try to eradicate, European Jews.

The history of followership has been curiously cyclical. Thousands of years ago followers were thought of rather as they are now: they were part of the action, but not central to the action. In the interim, however, were several periods during which followers came to the fore. In the wake of World War II certainly it was well understood that without followers there are no leaders, that without followership there is no leadership, and that while leaders matter so do followers – just as much. More recently though, there has been a retreat, a retreat to a time when followers were afterthoughts, sidebars, bit players. This book takes exception to what is now again the conventional wisdom. It reaffirms in no uncertain terms the power of the follower, and that subordinates determine outcomes – not just superiors.

**THE LEADERSHIP SYSTEM**

As it became apparent that it was impossible to understand what happened in Nazi Germany without accounting for the German
people, so also it was recognized that this required understanding Germany itself – its history and culture, its geography and demography, and the country's political transformation and rampant inflation. To take an obvious example: Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933. How this happened cannot be understood separate and apart from Germany in the ruinous wake of World War I and the devastating vortex of the Great Depression. In short, context matters.

The presidential leadership of Donald Trump cannot then be understood separate and apart from the event that constitutes the context of this book – the pandemic as it unfolded in a particular place at a particular time, the United States during the first six months of 2020. We need to understand what I call the “leadership system” – which consists of three parts: leaders, followers, and contexts. I have argued, in other words, that it is impossible to understand leaders without their followers, or followers without their leaders, or to understand either leaders or followers without understanding the contexts within which they are situated.

The six-month period covered in this book – January through June 2020 – might seem arbitrary in that the pandemic persisted well beyond it. But for the purposes of this book the timeframe is apt. First, most of Trump’s enablers – including Trump’s team – had long since signed on and they chose during the half year to stay rather than go. Second, six months into the virus crisis was a marker. By then the facts and the figures had made clear just how bad was the pandemic – especially in the United States. Third, and most important, the first half year of the virus crisis set the template for what came subsequently. Whatever the patterns of leadership and followership as they pertained to the pandemic during Trump’s presidency by then were set in stone.

By the end of June, though the USA had only 4 percent of the world's population, it had almost 25 percent of new coronavirus cases. On one particular day in early July, Germany (population 80.2 million) had 159 new cases; the state of Florida (population 21.5 million) had 15,300. Six months into the virus crisis, more Americans had been
infected with and died from COVID-19 than any other people in any other country in the world. By October there was evidence that the pattern continued. A report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that in the five months preceding, per capita deaths in the USA, both from COVID-19 and from other causes, were far greater than in 18 other high-income countries. An expert at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, found the comparisons shocking. “The United States really has done remarkably badly compared to other countries. I mean remarkably badly.” Some states, such as Arizona, Florida, and Texas, fared particularly poorly: in early July, the Sun Belt was declared “the global virus capital.”

In short, by every objective measure, during the first half of 2020 and beyond, under the leadership of President Trump, the federal government’s management of the pandemic was woefully, humiliatingly, bad. George Packer, an astute observer of the American scene, wrote that the USA had reacted as if it were Pakistan or Belarus, “like a country with shoddy infrastructure and a dysfunctional government whose leaders were too corrupt or stupid to head off mass suffering.”

During this same six-month timeframe, the public health crisis was not the only crisis America faced. Two others also occurred: the economic crisis that was a direct result of the pandemic, and the social and political crisis that developed in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in late May. Neither of these two crises are at the center of this book, but nor are they at the margins. As I always tell my students, everything is connected to everything else.

As the title of this book makes clear, my focus is on followers who were enablers. Specifically, it is on those who enabled President Donald Trump during the first half year of the coronavirus crisis, in some cases primarily as members of groups, in others primarily as individuals. However, since followers who are enablers cannot be divorced either from their leaders or from the contexts within which they and their leaders are situated, Trump is never far from center stage. Additionally, that which takes place on center stage, the pandemic, is itself of utmost consequence. This then is the story of
a president who presided over a certain place at a certain time. It is also
the story of a new coronavirus that became a pandemic in this place at
this time. But at the center of this story are the president’s enablers –
followers who allowed or even encouraged Trump to engage in, and
then to persist in behaviors that were destructive. Some were in the
president’s orbit before the pandemic was ever imagined, others were
brought in as the pandemic came to pass. Every enabler chose in any
case for his or her own reasons – such as family fealty, group loyalty,
ideological affinity, party identity, professional anxiety, political
expediency, personal preference, promise of reward, or fear of punish-
ment – to remain in the president’s fold.

ENABLERS
This book has a large cast of characters all of whom were followers.
But was every follower an enabler? For example, Trump’s base was
composed of hardcore supporters who were critical to his presidency.
But most of these supporters, however dedicated, never came close to
the White House nor, obviously, were they involved in the president’s
management of the pandemic. Nevertheless, no matter what Trump
did or said as it pertained to the new coronavirus, no matter how
mistaken, misguided, or misleading his leadership; no matter how
bad the pandemic during the first half of 2020, they continued to
give him their undiminished, unconditional support. Included in
this book as well are men and women who were close to the president –
for example, Stephen Miller, a key aide, especially on immigration,
and Melania Trump, his wife – but who played only a small part or
even no part in managing the pandemic. Nevertheless, they played
a large part in Trump’s presidency.

They were then – both his base and a large cast of significant
others – not just followers, but enablers. They allowed and even
encouraged President Donald Trump to engage and then to persist in
behaviors that were destructive. The best way to think about enablers
is as along a continuum, depending on their level of engagement.
Enablers at a distance, such as Trump’s base, were, albeit only