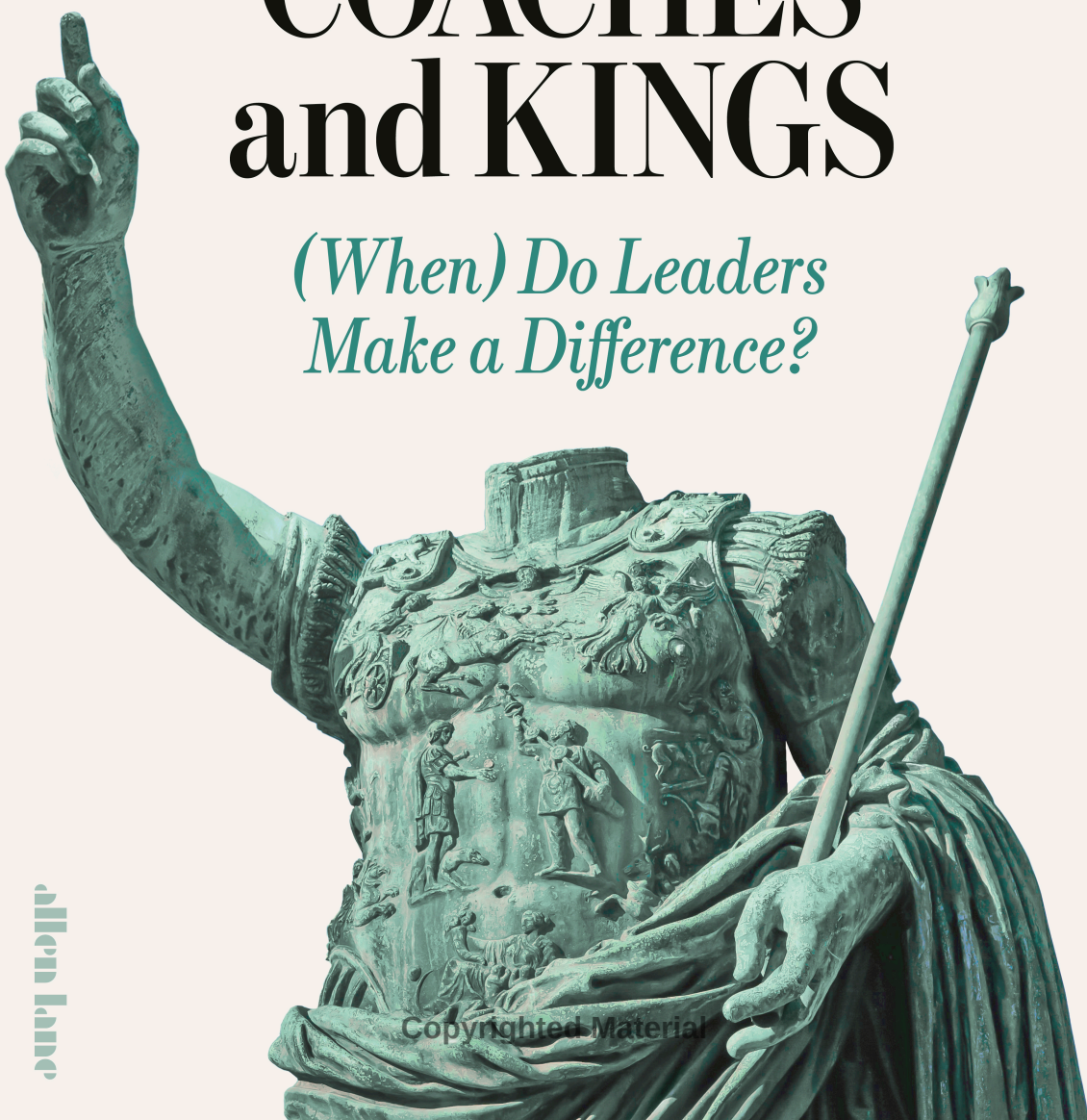


JARED DIAMOND

PROFITS, PROPHETS, COACHES and KINGS

*(When) Do Leaders
Make a Difference?*



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Coaches and Kings
(When) Do Leaders Make a Difference?

JARED DIAMOND



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Prologue

Spheres of Leadership: *Hamlet* and Genghis Khan

On 13 March 1930, as Adolf Hitler's chauffeur-driven car entered an intersection, a huge trailer truck sped into the intersection from the right, on a collision course with the car's right-hand side. That was the side on which Hitler was sitting in the front passenger seat. The truck struck the car, pushing it across the intersection, and came to a stop just before the truck would have run over the car and crushed it and its passengers. Everyone survived, though Hitler and two other passengers suffered bruises. Hitler called out, 'Everyone still alive?' Three years later, he became Germany's chancellor and went on to unleash the carnage of World War Two and the Holocaust, in which tens of millions of people died.

Would those deaths have happened if the truck had crushed the car, killing Hitler? To many people, it seems obvious that Hitler was unique in his evil capabilities, and that history would of course have been different without him. To many other people, it seems equally obvious that a World War Two was virtually guaranteed by the harsh conditions that the Versailles Treaty ending World War One had imposed on Germany, and by the ruin of Germany's middle class by 1923's hyperinflation. As for the anti-Semitism that fuelled the Holocaust, it was entrenched in Germany long before Hitler. How can one prove whether Hitler made a difference?

World War Two and the Holocaust illustrate a question arising in many spheres of human affairs: do individual leaders make a difference to outcomes? Among historians, there has been a long-running debate between three competing answers. An extreme version of one answer, often termed the ‘Great Man [sic] theory of history’, was embraced by the nineteenth-century British historian Thomas Carlyle. He viewed human history as dominated by exceptional, heroic leaders, such as Oliver Cromwell, Frederick the Great and Napoleon. He encapsulated his view in the sentence, ‘[The] history of the world is [just] the biography of great men.’

An extreme version of the opposite answer proposes that leaders are instead constrained by circumstances and have little influence on events. That view was depicted by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy in his novel *War and Peace*, whose battle scenes describe generals remotely issuing orders, but a battle’s outcome actually depended on myriad uncontrollable details. Tolstoy refers to leaders as ‘history’s slaves’ – ‘every act of theirs . . . is . . . predestined from eternity.’ Friedrich Engels claimed, ‘. . . in default of a Napoleon, another would have filled his place; that is established by the fact that whenever a man was necessary, he has always been found: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell . . .’

An intermediate view avoids posing the simplistic question, ‘Do leaders make a difference?’, and avoids presuming a universal answer. Instead, the intermediate view holds that individual leaders sometimes *do* and sometimes *don’t* make a difference. Hence the question that one should really ask becomes, ‘Under what circumstances is a leader most likely to make a difference?’ This alternative view recognizes that not just one, but several, contemporary exceptional individuals might have achieved similar outcomes, although perhaps in different ways. For example, other entrepreneurs founded social media sites before and after

PROLOGUE

Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook in 2004. Hence no one could claim that there would have been no social media without Mark Zuckerberg. However, one could argue that he is a distinctive person who caused social media to develop differently from how they would otherwise have developed.

My book adopts the middle ground in the debate. I seek to answer the question ‘When do leaders make a difference?’ in four different spheres: history, business, sports and religion. I’ll ask: when are individual political leaders (such as Hitler or Margaret Thatcher) likely to affect the course of history? If Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos had not been born, (how) would that have affected the computer revolution and the explosion of digital commerce respectively? Would my college, UCLA (the University of California at Los Angeles), have come to dominate college men’s basketball without our great coach John Wooden? If Jesus hadn’t existed and hadn’t founded Christianity, would the world’s largest religion today instead be some other religion founded around the same place and time by one of the many contemporaries of Jesus who also claimed to be divinely inspired?

Of course, these four areas of life don’t exhaust the list of spheres posing our question about leadership’s role. Others include the military sphere, protest movements, music, arts and science. Did Alexander the Great, Mahatma Gandhi, Beethoven, Picasso and Charles Darwin make a difference, or would the world have been much the same without them?

Rather than write about leadership in just one of those four spheres, I chose to compare all four of them. I took that decision for several reasons. First, all four spheres are fascinating, and three of them (history, business and religion) are vitally important. Second, as we shall see, methods developed for addressing the leadership question in one sphere (especially sports and business) have often proved useful for addressing the question

in other spheres. Finally, the similarities and differences among the spheres, in the answers they suggest to our question, often prove illuminating.

This book is NOT another book about *how* to be an effective leader. Innumerable books already propose answers to that question. Every business school claims to teach answers to aspiring business students. Of course, that question does arise as a secondary issue in my book. Having identified some situation in which some leader could make a difference, I then discuss why the person who took advantage of that opportunity was person X and not person Y. For example, why was Jesus the founder of the world religion that eventually spread out of the former Roman Empire, rather than the Essene Teacher of Righteousness? But I won't offer generalizations about that secondary question. That's because so many other books already discuss it – and because my focus is instead on the opportunity, rather than on the particular person who seized the opportunity.

From childhood on, I've grappled with the question, '(When) do leaders make a difference?' That's because of the apparently huge influence that leaders have had, both for bad and for good, on my own life and on the lives of my relatives and friends.

I was born in the USA in 1937, into a family of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. I married into a Polish family that had emigrated to the USA just after World War Two. As a result, I've spent my life in the shadow of Hitler's world. My European relatives variously did or didn't succeed in fleeing before the arrival of Hitler's armies. Of those who didn't flee, some were killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp or elsewhere. The others barely survived years in camps or in hiding, and spent the rest of their lives traumatized. A generation later, when they had become parents, their traumas affected their children.

Yet, already from my teenage years, my experiences of German music, the German language and German people have been highlights of my life. How could those wonderful things about Germany be reconciled with Auschwitz? Would the horrors of World War Two have unfolded without Hitler's leadership?

At the age of 23, I moved to Germany, in order to understand the world of Bach, Goethe and Hitler. I discovered that the Germans of my age who are among my dearest friends had suffered direct consequences of Hitler's power. Growing up in the USA, I had been spared those consequences. But my friends had been orphaned, or had lost siblings, or had watched their father's house being bombed, or had spent every night of the war years sleeping outdoors under a bridge in order not to be killed by bombs. I met Germans who denied the Holocaust. I learned about what Germans in the SS, and what ordinary German soldiers not in the SS, had done. Had Hitler's leadership caused the deeds of those Germans, and the sufferings of my friends? Or, would the debated 'German national character' have caused those things to happen even without Hitler?

Later, I experienced evil leaders' legacies in other countries. In 1967 I moved for a time to the South American country of Chile –the most democratic, most European, most politically stable, richest Latin American country, with the least history of military coups. Nevertheless, in 1973 Chile's democratic government was overthrown and replaced by General Augusto Pinochet's 15-year military dictatorship, which smashed modern world records for sadistic tortures too sickening to describe in print. No one – not even Pinochet's fellow generals – foresaw what would happen under him. Of course, he didn't administer torture himself: that was the job of his secret police force, which employed thousands of Chilean sadists to carry out his instructions. Were the horrors of Chile under Pinochet due

to Pinochet, or would they have happened without him? Like Chile, the USA has for a long time been a democracy. Could the USA nevertheless also quickly become a dictatorship under an evil leader?

Beginning 47 years ago, I repeatedly visited Indonesia to design national parks there. A dozen years before my first visit, a military government under General Suharto had killed between half a million and two million Indonesians; the number is very uncertain. A decade ago, my wife and I visited the southeast Asian country of Cambodia, where a Communist government under Pol Pot killed a quarter of Cambodia's population, targeting Cambodian city-dwellers, educated Cambodians, Cambodians who had learned a foreign language, Cambodians wearing eye-glasses, and other so-called 'undesirable elements'. Were those mass killings in Indonesia and Cambodia caused by those countries' distinctive leaders, Suharto and Pol Pot? Or, would those killings have happened under other leaders?

Conversely, numerous leaders at universities contributed decisively to my career satisfaction and success. For instance, when I was a graduate student in the Physiology Department at the University of Cambridge, a rubber water hose that I left running in my laboratory overnight to process samples burst in my absence, flooding the laboratory below me. That was not a good choice of lab to ruin: it was the lab of a Nobel laureate, who also happened to be my supervisor's father-in-law. The next morning, terrified in anticipation, I was summoned to the office of the department chairman, Sir Bryan Matthews. He sternly rebuked me, but he allowed me to continue as a graduate student. A different department chair would have expelled me and ended my career in science.

When I was being interviewed for my first faculty job, as a professor of physiology at UCLA Medical School, a critical

question for me was whether I would be permitted to spend several months each year studying bird evolution in New Guinea. Most medical school deans would have indignantly rejected my request: they hired faculty to teach medical students, not to go off and study birds. But UCLA's dean then was the widely admired Dr Sherman Mellinkoff, the longest-serving medical school dean in the USA. Sherm's unforgettable response to my question was, 'Jared, UCLA medical school is interested in New Guinea birds,' – and he spontaneously gave me a research grant to travel to New Guinea each year. That conversation was crucial for my career by enabling me to pursue multiple interests. I've been fortunate that other university leaders as well – some, but not all – have intervened to help me, when they could have blocked me or done nothing.

Those are some of the reasons why I, personally, continue to wonder about the effects of leaders.

Methods for addressing the leadership question fall into two broad categories: biographies and natural experiments. The traditional method, and until recently by far the most widely used one, has been to write a biography of a putative leader; to describe the leader's unusual qualities; to argue that those qualities caused history to turn out as it did; and to claim that there was no contemporary who could have achieved similar results. But that biographic method raises the problem of how to identify all the other people who were realistic alternatives to the actual leader, and how to test what those alternative possible leaders would have accomplished.

In some cases that difficulty can be addressed by what I term 'the *Hamlet* test'. If Shakespeare had died of smallpox at the age of 10, who were the 'competing' alternative playwrights of Elizabethan England, and was any of them capable of writing a play as

great as *Hamlet*? *Hamlet* was not, and could not have been, the first play of some inexperienced and previously unknown author. Instead, by the time that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, approximately the 22nd of his ca. 38 plays and produced about a decade after his first plays, he had already proved himself by writing many earlier masterpieces, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. For half a dozen years Shakespeare had been known as the leading playwright of a leading London theatre company that enjoyed the advantages of having London's best theatre and best actor. Hence anyone who might plausibly be considered capable of writing a work to rival *Hamlet* had to have been another known and established playwright, not one of thousands of unknown contemporaries.

In fact, we know who were the established Elizabethan playwrights contemporary with Shakespeare. The texts of many of their plays have been preserved, so we can judge them. Among those contemporaries, the three generally considered the best other than Shakespeare were Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe and John Webster. But not even their best plays remotely approach in quality *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's other masterpieces. Today, their plays are rarely performed. That's not because Shakespeare's survival inhibited their writing. If Shakespeare had indeed died of smallpox at an early age, that wouldn't have enabled those three contemporaries to write better plays.

Hence in this case we can make a strong argument that Shakespeare was uniquely talented. We can be confident that no Elizabethan other than Shakespeare could have written a masterpiece like *Hamlet* if Shakespeare hadn't done so – because we can name and judge all of the limited number of Shakespeare's competitors as playwrights. We shall see that we can apply that *Hamlet* test to some of the leaders discussed in this book.

Usually, though, we can't specify a limited number of other

potential leaders, in the way that we can specify the limited number of other established Elizabethan playwrights. There was an unknown large number of Americans, Sudanese and Germans contemporary respectively with Bill Gates, the Islamic prophet the Mahdi and Willy Brandt who were potentially in a position to match the achievements of those three actual leaders. Perhaps those three leaders really were far more talented than all of their many contemporaries. Or perhaps those three just had the good luck to live at precisely the right place at the right time. But we can't name and rule out all of the possible alternatives to them, as we can for Shakespeare.

Thus, the biographic method, in some cases strengthened by the *Hamlet* test, is the familiar traditional approach to assessing a leader's importance. The other method, more recently developed and less familiar, is the use of so-called natural experiments.

That method was inspired by the rigorous manipulative laboratory experiments of chemists and molecular biologists, who add a single substance to one set of 'experimental' test tubes, while maintaining as 'control' tubes a set of otherwise identical tubes without the added substance. If we had a time machine enabling us to re-run modern German history 20 times, in 10 cases killing Hitler in his 13 March 1930 car accident and in the other 10 cases sparing him, we could compare the 20 outcomes and establish with high statistical significance Hitler's effect on German history. Alas, given our current lack of time machines, that rigorous manipulative experiment is impossible.

As a fallback, we could experimentally assassinate some current leader and observe the results. But that would be immoral and illegal, as well as difficult. It would also be methodologically unsatisfactory – because, with just one experimental assassination and no control of an otherwise identical non-assassination, we

couldn't be sure that our single experimental assassination itself was the cause of subsequent events. Perhaps those subsequent events would have happened even without the assassination.

But nature creates approximations of such experiments for us. Dozens of modern political leaders have indeed been assassinated, while hundreds of others haven't. Every year, thousands of sports coaches do or don't get fired, or do or don't transfer to different teams. Every year, thousands of business CEOs do or don't die, or do or don't get fired, or do or don't get sick and hospitalized for varying numbers of days, or do or don't get distracted by the deaths of relatives of various degrees of closeness, or do or don't transfer to other companies. In recent decades, social scientists have made much progress in analysing those natural experiments in the historical, business and sports spheres, and in one study also in the religious sphere.

Natural experiments have always been the sole or principal method of answering questions in numerous fields that are acknowledged to be sciences, such as astronomy, geology, field biology and epidemiology. Astronomers learn about stars only by observing and comparing them, never by experimentally turning them on and off. Geologists learn about glaciers also by observing and comparing them, not by experimentally melting and freezing them. Field biologists, who are usually not permitted to exterminate bird populations, have nevertheless succeeded in gaining much understanding of them by observations and comparisons; that's how I've conducted all of my research on New Guinea birds for the last 62 years. (But field biologists have also become ingenious at designing morally acceptable, non-destructive, manipulative field experiments on plants and many animals, as well as morally acceptable, destructive experiments on insects and many other creatures.)

A famous natural experiment in epidemiology established

that the dreaded disease cholera was water-borne. During a London cholera epidemic in 1854, the physician John Snow observed that new cases were concentrated among people obtaining their water from one particular public pump on Broad Street. He correctly inferred that that pump's water was infected, and he convinced the aldermen to remove the pump's handle as a manipulative experiment. Lo and behold, the local epidemic promptly waned, confirming that John Snow's natural experiment had yielded the correct conclusion.

Hence natural experiments have had a long and honourable history, before the recent explosion of their use in the social sciences.

Who cares whether leaders make a difference? Why might you want to read this book about that question? One answer is: out of interest! Surely, you've already asked yourself the question, in one or more contexts. That's why you and other readers find life stories of individual leaders so gripping.

But there are also practical reasons for wanting to know whether leaders make a difference. Citizens of democracies regularly ask themselves whether political leaders make a difference, every time that they consider whether to bother to vote in the coming election, or (if they do vote) whom to vote for, or whether to devote their time and money to supporting their preferred candidate. Among citizens registered to vote, only about 60% of Americans do so even in presidential elections, and only 20% vote in elections for mayor of my city of Los Angeles. But the turnouts of Italians and Indonesians for national elections are consistently up to 80–93 per cent. Which countries' citizens are making a mistake by voting or by not voting? Do you feel strongly enough about an individual leader's negative impact that you'd sacrifice your own life in order to assassinate him or

her? Among the people who answered ‘yes’ to that question, and who died as a result, were Count Claus von Stauffenberg, who narrowly missed killing Hitler on 20 July 1944 – and Carl Weiss, who did succeed in assassinating the USA’s only proto-dictator, Louisiana’s Senator and former Governor Huey Long, on 10 September 1935.

Questions about the role of individual CEOs (‘Chief Executive Officers’) arise constantly in the business world. Many American CEOs justify paying themselves enormous salaries by claiming that they are uniquely qualified to make money for their business. Boards of directors, and company shareholders at annual meetings, have to evaluate whether that claim is correct. If the claim is indeed correct, then it makes sense for a company whose annual profits are billions of dollars to pay its CEO a salary and bonuses of ‘just’ a few hundred million dollars. If the claim is incorrect, then the company should instead hire one of the many other equally qualified potential CEOs, and pay them a salary of just a few hundred thousand dollars. If a company seems to be doing poorly, should the board of directors fire the CEO, or will a new CEO facing the same problems probably do just as poorly? If you are an ambitious young rising executive who wants to make a difference, in which business sector or country are you most likely to succeed? (Hint: we shall see that you’d do better to become the CEO of a perfume company than of a public utility company, and to become a CEO in the USA than in Europe or Japan.)

Sports team owners, and American college presidents and athletic directors, struggle with the question of how much to pay a sports coach, and whether to fire a coach whose team has had a disappointing record. Just as the business world debates enormous salaries paid to CEOs, American colleges debate whether the football coach really deserves a salary 10 times that of the

college's chancellor (as is currently the case at UCLA). Within the past few decades, UCLA has fired many consecutive men's basketball coaches and football coaches because of disappointing records. UCLA has paid tens of millions of dollars to buy out the remaining years of those coaches' contracts, only to find that their successor's record was equally disappointing. But sometimes a new coach does indeed achieve a better record. Is that really because the new coach is more effective and deserves the credit and a high salary? Or, is it just because of random factors unrelated to the coach? What advice can I give to my college's chancellor, and to other colleges and other sports team owners?

Christian Scientists and Mormons believe the claims of divine inspiration made by Mary Baker Eddy and Joseph Smith respectively. But many other contemporaries of those two prophets, and other prophets at other places and times, have also claimed divine inspiration, without succeeding in founding world religions. How much did the success of the Mormon Church depend on Brigham Young's organizational ability, and on the growing world power of the United States, rather than on Joseph Smith's claims of divine inspiration being more correct than those of innumerable other 19th-century American would-be prophets? Similar questions arise for Mary Baker Eddy.

Debates about the importance of leaders have arisen at many times and in many places. Many famous leaders usually thought of as having been uniquely qualified lived in the distant past – such as Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. But almost all of the examples of political, business, and sports leaders that I've selected for discussion in this book are modern leaders, active during my own lifetime. That's because far more detailed information is available about modern leaders and societies than about Alexander the Great and his society – and because

modern leaders and their societies are more understandable to modern readers. Religious leaders are the exception, in that my discussions are mostly of 19th- century religious founders. That's because prophets founding major world religions are rare, and the 20th century doesn't provide examples. Conversely, with just a few exceptions from the worlds of business and of sports, my examples are of leaders whose active careers have already ended, hence their outcomes are known with certainty.

The business leaders and 19th-century religious leaders whom I discuss are disproportionately American – partly because, as we shall see, the modern USA has offered more opportunities for success to business leaders and to 19th- century religious leaders than have other countries. The sports leader whom I shall discuss at length is from my own college: partly because I can contribute familiarity with him. I'll discuss him also because he is widely considered the greatest coach in the modern history of any American sport. It remains to be seen to what extent the conclusions from my USA- biased sample apply to other countries. I'll mention some already- available evidence for national differences in the impacts of political, business and religious leaders.

Did the successes of famous leaders depend on their happening to be born at the right place and time? Here is one case in which we have only recently come to realize that the answer to that question is 'Yes!' It's the case of history's greatest conqueror, whose victories dwarfed those of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Napoleon and Hitler. For thousands of years, until the development of guns, horse-mounted tribes from the steppes of Central Asia terrorized and repeatedly overran adjacent areas of China, India, the Middle East and Europe. The largest of those empires, and indeed the largest land empire in world history, was conquered by the Mongol chief Genghis Khan and his successors in the 13th century. Genghis was

undoubtedly a military and administrative genius. But so were some other steppe leaders, such as Attila the Hun, Arpad the Hungarian, and Timur the Turk. Was Genghis so much more of a genius than his predecessors and his successors?

Not necessarily! He needed not just military and political genius, but also rain. Past values of annual rainfall on the Mongolian steppe have recently been calculated from tree rings of old pine trees. It turns out that the decades of Genghis's rise and maturity were the most consistently wet period on the steppe in recent history. More rain meant more grass for grazing animals, hence more sheep and goats to eat, more mares' milk to drink, more horses to ride into battle, and more Mongol babies to rear to adulthood and to ride those horses. While Genghis may have been the most skilled chief among his Mongol contemporaries, his skills would have been wasted if he had been born 20 years earlier, or 200 miles to the south. Without knowing it (because he wasn't a tree-ring dendrochronologist), Genghis had the good fortune to be born at the right time and place – and he was the best and the luckiest of those born then and there.

Seretse Khama, the Mahdi, Bill Gates, Jesus and many other great leaders were also born at the right time and right place. Were they, unlike Genghis Khan, aware of their good fortune? Many leaders certainly were not. Seretse Khama couldn't have foreseen that diamonds would be discovered in Botswana a few months after he became that country's founding president. Jesus couldn't have foreseen that, 15 centuries after his death, countries derived from the former Roman Empire in which Jesus had spent his entire life would begin to conquer most of the world, spreading the Christian religion.

But some other leaders understood how crucial it can be to choose the right time to act. They avoided acting until they recognized that their moment had arrived, whereupon they

seized their opportunity. An example that we shall discuss is Bill Gates, who kept telling Paul Allen that conditions weren't right for developing personal computers, until he told Paul that they had to act fast because the new fast Intel 8080 chip suddenly made personal computers practical. Similarly, Charles de Gaulle repeatedly recognized the critical importance of timing: he twice engineered the opportunity for himself to lead France at moments matched to his abilities, and he twice then resigned that leadership when he recognized that the situation was no longer favourable to him. We shall revisit this question of timing in the following chapters.

I hope that you'll find these questions about leadership as gripping, and as relevant to our personal lives, as I have.

PART I

Political Leaders

I

Seretse Khama: Shakespeare in Africa

Authors have written, and readers have eagerly devoured, innumerable biographies of thousands of political leaders. To use a phrase from the film *Casablanca*, protagonists of biographies include ‘the usual suspects’, such as Franklin Roosevelt and Napoleon Bonaparte, as well as myriad lesser-known figures.

Many of those biographies make gripping reading. They all aim not only to entertain, but also to reach a similar conclusion about their protagonist: that a single political leader really can make a difference, for better or for worse. In order to support that thesis, biographers describe their protagonist’s accomplishments and unusual qualities. They then assert that those qualities enabled the protagonist to change the course of history – because, supposedly, no other person at that place and time possessed those unusual qualities and had those opportunities.

But that biographical method suffers from a fundamental weakness. In a country with millions of citizens, how can one be sure that none of those citizens other than the biography’s protagonist could have achieved similar results? – or that the results were really due to the leader, rather than just to luck?

In this chapter and the next, I’ll relate mini-biographies of

two political figures for whom, as you'll see, a strong case can be made that they were indeed uniquely qualified – i.e., that they pass the *Hamlet* test that I explained in my Prologue. Neither figure is among the familiar 'usual suspects' whose lives have been raked over by many historians. In Chapter 3 I'll then consider 22 much better known modern political leaders, all of whose unique significance has been variously asserted or denied.

Botswana is a country in southern Africa with an area similar to that of France or Texas, but with a population of under 2.5 million people – much lower than that of France, Texas or Botswana's African neighbours. My wife and I and our sons spent two wonderful vacations in Botswana, for the same motive that brings other modern tourists to the country: it's a stable, prosperous destination for viewing Africa's magnificent wildlife (see Plate 2). Our international jet flight landed at a modern airport, where we transferred to a six-seater twin-engine bush plane. A short flight over a largely uninhabited expanse of savannah and desert then took us to a comfortable, isolated safari lodge. Surrounding the lodge was glorious scenery populated by lions, zebras, elephants, giraffes, antelopes, hyenas, vultures, storks and hundreds of other species.

Our experience was typical of what international tourists think of at the mention of Botswana. But historians and political scientists instead think of Botswana as one of the most stunning success stories of national change in the modern world. When Botswana became independent from Great Britain in 1966, it was the world's third poorest country, with seemingly nothing in its favour. It suffered from big disadvantages, two of them permanent ones that persist today. No one expected Botswana to become prosperous or well-governed.

Nevertheless, for several decades after independence,

Botswana had the world's fastest-growing economy! It's now attractive to foreign investors as the best governed, least corrupt, safest, and nearly the richest country in Africa. It has a well-developed medical system, educational system and telecommunications system. It has always had free elections, and has never had a civil war or significant internal strife. It has negligible crime, and maintains only a very small army.

What happened to produce this unexpected outcome? Part of the explanation is that Botswana did start off with a few historical advantages, along with its glaring disadvantages. But those few advantages could have been squandered under poor leadership, as has happened to some other countries with natural advantages (such as Argentina and Nigeria). The other part of the reason for Botswana's success story is that its founding president was an exceptionally good leader. A country's or business's founder has an outsized influence, likely to be stronger than that of subsequent presidents or CEOs, because that first president or CEO establishes institutions that may then persist. Familiar examples are the importance of the USA's first president, George Washington, in the USA, and of Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in getting those two countries off to a good start; and the importance of Jeff Bezos and Steve Jobs in launching Amazon and Apple respectively.

What have been those disadvantages of Botswana that I mentioned? One permanent disadvantage, which no leader can change, is that the country is very dry, lying mostly in the Kalahari desert. Not only is Botswana dry even in average years: it also has periodic severe droughts that destroy crops and cattle. Only 4% of Botswana's land area is suitable for agriculture. That arid, drought-prone climate means that Botswana can't produce much food or support many people.

Another permanent disadvantage is that Botswana is landlocked. It lies in southern Africa's interior, with no sea coast and only two perennial rivers, neither of them navigable to the ocean. All transportation within the country, and all imports from and exports to the outside world, have to be overland or by air rather than by water. But transport overland is seven times more expensive than transport by water, and air transport is even more expensive. Hence being landlocked is a big economic disadvantage. Around the world, landlocked countries, such as Bolivia and Chad, tend to remain poor, compared to countries that can import and export cheaply.

Yet another disadvantage is that, when Botswana became independent in 1966, it seemed to have no natural resources of commercial value to support its economy. (Its diamond mines, which I'll mention below, weren't discovered until after independence.) In 1885 Britain had declared a protectorate, called Bechuanaland, over what is now Botswana: not because Bechuanaland was thought to contain anything valuable, but instead just because it lay between the German colony of Southwest Africa to the west, and the potential British colony of Rhodesia and the Portuguese colony of Mozambique to the east. The British cared only about keeping the Germans out of Bechuanaland and controlling Bechuanaland themselves, in order to have a potential route for building a road and a railway from South Africa to Rhodesia. Having declared a protectorate over Bechuanaland, Britain then made minimal investment and did virtually nothing to develop its protectorate, because Bechuanaland offered Britain nothing of value except its geographic location on the colonial map of Africa.

A result of those disadvantages was extreme poverty when Bechuanaland, after 80 years of British neglect, became independent in 1966 with the name Botswana. At that time the