



The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics

By Robert Faulkner

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The Case for Greatness is a spirited look at political ambition, good and bad, with particular attention to honorable ambition. Robert Faulkner contends that too many modern accounts of leadership slight such things as determination to excel, good judgment, justice, and a sense of honor—the very qualities that distinguish the truly great. And here he offers an attempt to recover “a reasonable understanding of excellence,” that which distinguishes a Franklin D. Roosevelt and a Lincoln from lesser leaders.

Faulkner finds the most telling diagnoses in antiquity and examines closely Aristotle’s great-souled man, two accounts of the spectacular and dubious Athenian politician Alcibiades, and the life of the imperial conqueror Cyrus the Great. There results a complex and compelling picture of greatness and its problems. Faulkner dissects military and imperial ambition, the art of leadership, and, in the later example of George Washington, ambition in the service of popular self-government. He also addresses modern indictments of even the best forms of political greatness, whether in the critical thinking of Hobbes, the idealism of Kant, the relativism and brutalism of Nietzsche, or the egalitarianism of Rawls and Arendt. He shows how modern philosophy came to doubt and indeed disdain even the best forms of ambition. This book is a nuanced defense of admirable ambition and the honor-seeking life, as well as an irresistible invitation to apply these terms to our own times and leaders.

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Editorial Review

Review

"The classic philosophers, Faulkner contends, help us far more than modern theoreticians to make sense of genuinely great men and women. The chapter on Aristotle's 'megalopsychos' is the best I have read in any of the literatures and Faulkner does a masterful job of focusing on the inner-life of the great-souled man, not just the desire for honors, but the desire to be worthy of honors. An excellent study of a much-needed subject."—Steven Smith, author of *Reading Leo Strauss and Spinoza's Book of Life*
(Steven Smith)

"Deftly mixing history, theory, and witty common sense, Robert Faulkner makes a compelling case for honorable ambition—as distinct from both radical egalitarianism and amoral elitism—in the service of republican self-government."—William A. Galston, The Brookings Institution
(William A. Galston)

"In a searching study of politics and philosophy, Robert Faulkner defends honorable ambition against cynics and skeptics in our day. His search centers on the ancients, always our best source for greatness and its eternal rivalry with goodness. This is a book of matured and ready wisdom."—Harvey Mansfield
(Harvey Mansfield)

About the Author

Robert Faulkner is professor of political science at Boston College.

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