

Mr. Boswell Goes to Corsica

The Surprising Origins of Modern Democratic Charisma

David A. Bell

WHEN HISTORIANS WRITE ABOUT the 18th-century origins of modern politics, they usually set the scene in a great city, in the midst of a revolution. They might choose Philadelphia, in the sweltering summer of 1776, and describe the delegates to the Second Continental Congress hunched over a table signing the Declaration of Independence. Or they might look to Paris, in July of 1789, and tell how a crowd of ordinary Parisians, haphazardly armed but determined, confronted royal troops in front of the imposing fortress called the Bastille. One place they have not thought to single out, however, is the Mediterranean island of Corsica, in the early fall of 1765: not a prominent place and not a memorable year, or so it is usually thought. But in fact, it is here that we can trace, at least in part, the origins of a key element of modern political leadership: what is today referred to as “charisma.”

The word “charisma,” which originally meant a gift of divine grace, first entered the lexicon of political analysis a century ago, thanks to the great German social theorist Max Weber. He used it to denote a person’s ability to inspire exceptional devotion because of perceived personal magnetism. He contrasted it to the appeal of traditional, patriarchal rulers, which derives in the first place from their titles and ancestry. American journalists adopted the word in the mid-20th century and have applied it to political figures from John Kennedy to Donald Trump. Historians, meanwhile, have drawn on Weber’s concept in reference to everyone from George Washington to Hitler. But there has been relatively little research on how the phenomenon — which depends as much on the media in which charismatic individuals are represented as on the individuals themselves — first developed in its modern form. This is where Corsica comes in, and the story helps to illuminate the political world in which we live today.

On October 13, 1765, a Scotsman landed on the northern tip of Corsica. He was just 25 years old, with a wide face; thick, well-groomed hair; and a ruddy drinker’s complexion. He was well dressed, and would have struck casual observers as just another well-off, dissipated young Briton guzzling his way through a Grand Tour of Europe. His name was James Boswell. Today, he is remembered as a great literary figure. *His Life of Johnson* virtually invented the modern art of biography. His vivid, intimately personal, sexually explicit *London Journal*, published for the first time only in 1950, provides an unforgettable portrait of a young man on the make and of his 18th-century milieu. But in 1765 he was still wholly unknown.

He was already, however, an extraordinary character. Although prone to spells of dark melancholy, he otherwise had an effervescent temperament that made him highly entertaining company. As he confided to his journal: “I am one of the most engaging men that ever lived.” He also was a man of enormous appetites. He ate well, drank to excess, and had already endured several bouts with the lifetime sparring partner he privately nicknamed “Signor Gonorrhea.” But he was hungry for knowledge and experience as well. During two years on the continent, he had visited the usual destinations of the British Grand Tourist — art collections, palaces, and picturesque ruins — but he also had spent considerable time in libraries and classrooms. And he had sought out another, unusual sort of tourist attraction: great men. He had set himself the goal of meeting Frederick the Great, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and while the Prussian monarch snubbed him, the two writers did not. At the end of 1764, Boswell had made his way to the remote Swiss village of Môtiers, and there practically besieged the reclusive Rousseau’s modest cottage until he won admittance. He later would repay Rousseau very badly for the favor by seducing his mistress, Thérèse Levasseur, but at the time he impressed the great writer with his wit and enthusiasm.

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JAMES BOSWELL



It was thanks to Rousseau that in 1765 Boswell set out for Corsica. For some four decades, the island had been fighting a slow-burning war of independence against its long-time overlord, the Italian Republic of Genoa (at the time, Italy was not yet a united country). The Corsicans had won attention throughout Europe for their supposed attachment to republican liberty, and Rousseau himself had praised them in his recently published *Social Contract* as the "one country in Europe which is fit to receive laws" Rousseau not only talked to Boswell about the island, but told him in glowing terms about its leader, a 45-year-old professional soldier named Pasquale Paoli. Since coming to power 10 years before, Paoli had brought peace to the perennially fractious Corsican clans, reorganized the island's government and military, and even founded a press and a university, despite conditions of such poverty that he routinely scraped the ink off letters he received so as to reuse the paper. Here was another great man for Boswell to add to his collection, and the young Scot could not resist seeking out Paoli, despite the not-inconsiderable risk of falling prey to sea pirates or bandits, or being taken by the Corsicans for a spy.

No pirates materialized, and Boswell suffered nothing worse on the two-day journey than fleas, vermin, and the dark warnings of the crew to stay away from their women (they clearly knew their man). He landed safely at the northern tip of the island, and then undertook a grueling, 120-mile trek southward, arriving more than a week later in the town of Sollacaro, where Paoli was staying. The Corsican leader initially reacted with suspicion, thinking that Boswell — who kept scribbling down detailed notes of everything he saw — had indeed come to spy. But soon enough, the Boswellian charm — plus a letter of introduction from Rousseau — produced the desired effect. And Paoli for his part realized that Boswell might prove useful in mobilizing British support for the rebellion. So he treated his visitor royally, feasting him, introducing him to Corsican clan leaders, allowing him to ride his own finely outfitted horse, and spending long hours in conversation with him. When, after nearly two weeks, Boswell began the long trip back to the mainland, Paoli gave him a series of rich gifts, including an elegant suit of clothes, a brace of pistols, and a dog. Boswell asked Paoli to write him letters, and to do so as a philosopher and man of letters. "He

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James Boswell on
PASQUALE PAOLI



took me by the hand,” Boswell later wrote, “and said, ‘as a friend.’” Boswell nearly collapsed with pleasure.

Almost from the moment he landed back in Italy, Boswell started writing about Corsica and Paoli for London newspapers, and told everyone that his experiences on the island had left him a changed man. “Paoli,” he wrote to Rousseau, “has infused my soul with a firmness that it will never lose.” Arriving back in Britain in early 1766, Boswell talked of nothing but Corsica and Paoli to his literary acquaintances, and they urged him to write a book. “Give us as many anecdotes as you can,” Samuel Johnson told him. Boswell set to work, and in February 1768 there appeared *An Account of Corsica, The Journal of a Tour to That Island, and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli*.

Although the book devoted considerable space to a description of the island, it was the portrait of Paoli that caught readers’ attention. This portrait was quite different from that of the actual Paoli, as historians now view him. The historical Paoli was admirable in many respects, but also a consummate and occasionally brutal political operator whose rule in Corsica was decidedly

authoritarian. But what matters more for our story is the image of Paoli that circulated outside of Corsica, above all thanks to Boswell. For this image did a surprising amount to shape modern ideas of what it means to be a charismatic political figure.

Boswell’s account of Paoli had two striking features. On the one hand, he depicted the Corsican leader as almost inhumanly attractive: tall, handsome, and gracious; learned, sophisticated, and fearsomely intelligent; entirely devoted to the common good. Boswell claimed that until he met Paoli, he had believed such a man could no more exist in reality than “seas of milk” or “ships of amber.” But at the same time, Boswell took care to provide intimate, “behind the scenes” vignettes of Paoli. “One morning I remember,” the Scotsman wrote, “I came in upon him without ceremony, while he was dressing. I was glad to have an opportunity of seeing him in those teasing moments, when, according to the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, no man is a hero to his valet de chambre.” He also carefully noted small quirks that made Paoli seem less perfect and more approachable, such as his inability to sit still for more than five minutes. Finally, wherever

possible, Boswell adopted the breathless, melodramatic style of a sentimental novelist. Describing the moment when Paoli parted from his exiled father, and began his return to Corsica to lead the rebellion, he wrote: “The old man, hoary and gray with years, fell on his neck, and kissed him, gave him his blessing, and with a broken feeble voice, encouraged him in the undertaking on which he was entering; ‘My son,’ said he, ‘I may, possibly, never see you more; but in my mind I shall ever be present with you.’”

In Boswell’s hands, in other words, Paoli came off as a very new sort of political leader. He was not a king, whose right to rule came from his ancestors. He was not a prophet, anointed by God. And while he was a symbol of liberty, he was not a democratic statesman who had come to office as the result of an election. He was a paragon of nature who led by virtue of his extraordinary personal gifts, and who bound his followers to him through sheer, intense emotion. “Paoli sways the hearts of his countrymen,” Boswell wrote. “Their love for him is such, that ... [his] power knows no bounds. It is high treason so much as to speak against, or calumniate him; a species of despotism, founded, contrary to the principles of Montesquieu, on the affection of love.” These qualities remain central to the phenomenon of political charisma today. A charismatic politician is still one who is viewed as possessing extraordinary personal gifts, but who also seems approachable — who inspires feelings of intensely personal devotion and friendship, or even love. To be sure, today the image of charismatic individuals is transmitted to the public largely by electronic media, which shape the message as they do so. In the 18th century, the message was transmitted and shaped by printed prose. But the story is still recognizable.

Today, James Boswell’s book is usually remembered for how it launched its author’s literary career. It sold at least 7,000 copies in Britain, to say nothing of four pirated Irish editions. It was translated into French, German, Dutch, and Italian. Reviewers gushed. King George III himself was heard to say that “I have read Boswell’s book which is well written.” In 1769, Boswell appeared at the Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon wearing the suit and pistols Paoli had given him, and with the words “Corsica Boswell” inscribed on the outside of his hat. As he later put it, “I had got upon a rock in Corsica, and jumped into the middle of life.”

But the book also made a previously obscure Corsican rebel a celebrity in the English-speaking world. Following its publication, references to Paoli and his movement multiplied manyfold in the British press. Engraved portraits of Paoli appeared, as did a profusion of mostly

mediocre verse, including a work called *The Paoliad*. The well-known poet Anna Barbauld praised “the godlike man who saved his country.” A British women’s magazine published a recipe for “Chicken Paoli,” and the sporting press tracked at least four racehorses named Pascal Paoli. In several novels from the late 1760s, characters spoke of “going a volunteer under the brave Paoli” much as Britons of the 1930s spoke of going to fight in Spain. Boswell helped lead a campaign that raised nearly £15,000 to buy arms for Paoli — an immense sum at the time — and calls for British intervention on the side of the rebels became intense. Lord Holland, a leader of the Whig party, was forced to comment: “Foolish as we are, we cannot be so foolish as to go to war because Mr. Boswell has been in Corsica.”

Ultimately, Britain did not intervene, and Paoli’s rebellion did not survive. The Kingdom of France, having bought the rights to Corsica from the Genoese, sent in its well-equipped professional army to occupy the island, and against this opponent, Paoli’s ragtag forces had no chance. By the end of 1768 they had been defeated, and Paoli himself went into exile. He eventually landed in London, where he bought a large townhouse and became part of Boswell’s social and literary circle. Boswell himself moved on to a new subject of adulation: Dr. Johnson, the subject of his great biography. In Britain, the vogue for Paoli and his Corsicans gradually faded.

Yet elsewhere, the vision of Paoli that Boswell had done so much to shape had a surprisingly enduring impact. One such place, crucially, was British North America, where the last acts of the Corsican rebellion coincided with the first great wave of pre-revolutionary colonial agitation. As a symbol of resistance against despotic overseas rule, Paoli served an obvious political purpose for the Americans. Boswell’s book sold well in the 13 colonies, and a popular almanac reprinted extracts. Between 1755 and 1775, Paoli’s name appeared in American newspapers nearly 2,000 times. Right through the outbreak of the American Revolution, these newspapers reprinted poetic paeans to Paoli, as well as letters Paoli himself had written to the British press. (In one of these, probably in reaction to Boswell, he insisted: “My character has not been that of a hero of romance There is nothing more real than the object I pursue.”) John Hancock named one of his ships the *Paoli*, and a number of unfortunate Americans grew up with names such as Pascal Paoli Macintosh and Pascal Paoli Leavens. A tavern called the Paoli outside of Philadelphia eventually gave its name to the town of Paoli, Pennsylvania, the first of at least six communities called Paoli in the United States.



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Paoli's vogue in America is today largely forgotten, but it arguably played a role in the career of a man who soon became infinitely better known: George Washington. Historians, and Washington's biographers, often play down the fact, but to an astonishing extent, Washington became an object of almost universal adulation in America well before he had done much to earn it. Although he succeeded in driving the British out of Boston in the spring of 1776, the year 1776 as a whole was a military disaster for the new United States. Washington lost the Battle of Long Island, abandoned New York City to the British, and then fled ignominiously across New Jersey with a disintegrating army. British officers believed they had crushed the rebellion, and in December Thomas Paine put out the first issue of *The American Crisis*, which opened with the famous words: "These are the times that try men's souls." American General Charles Lee wrote to his colleague Horatio Gates: "*entre nous*, a certain great man is most damnably deficient. ... Unless something which I do not expect turns up we are lost."

Yet all through this disastrous year, that "certain great man" was by far the most popular person in North America. Ships and towns were named for him and his wife. Printed portraits of him appeared by the thousands, and when he arrived in New York in the spring of 1776, more people turned out to see him than had ever gathered together in the city. Jonathan Mitchell Sewall composed a widely publicized song whose chorus ended with praise for "glorious Washington." Phillis Wheatley, the enslaved African American poet, seemed to hail Washington as a king: "A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine, / With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine." Although Washington had a military command, not a political position, he was already being seen as the embodiment of the new nation. As early as 1778, a Pennsylvania almanac would hail him as "father of his country."

Looking back many years later on what he saw as the "mystery" of Washington's early reputation, John Adams wrote a remarkable letter to his friend Benjamin Rush (a Princeton graduate and the son-in-law of Princeton's first president, John Witherspoon). "The great Character," he began, "was a Character of Convention. ... There was a time when ... Statesmen, and ... Officers of The Army, expressly agreed to blow the Trumpets of Panegyric in concert; to cover and dissemble all Faults and Errors; to represent every

defeat as a Victory, and every Retreat as an Advancement; to make that Character popular and fashionable, with all Parties in all places and with all Persons, as a Centre of Union, as the Central Stone in the Geometrical Arch.” In Adams’ view, Washington’s reputation, at least initially, owed less to the man’s achievements than to the American revolutionaries’ need for a heroic figure who could serve as a unifying and inspiring symbol. And who better than Washington? As contemporary observers rarely failed to mention, he was exceptionally tall, strong, and graceful, enjoyed a spotless personal reputation, and seemed almost impossibly noble and virtuous. As Washington’s career proceeded, he would earn the adulation that was heaped on him, and turn into much more than just a “character of convention.” But in 1775 and 1776, his reputation was still mostly a product of the extraordinary hopes and desires of his American followers.

Is it too much to suggest that what Americans had earlier read about Pascal Paoli prepared them to invest Washington with these hopes and desires? It may simply be the case that Washington benefited from the same historical processes that had earlier allowed Paoli to serve as the focus and incarnation of his admirers’ political dreams. But there is at least some evidence that the cult of Paoli had direct influence on what followed in America. In 1780, newspapers in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut reprinted a poem about Paoli that had appeared in *Boswell’s Account*, and added this note of explanation: “The character of the above General [Paoli], and that of our illustrious Commander in Chief, are so similar, that the following selected lines made on the former are well adapted and very applicable to the latter — only for the words CORSICA and PAOLI substitute AMERICA and WASHINGTON.”

There was, of course, one other area of the Western world where Paoli’s name continued to cast a spell for long after his 1768 defeat: Corsica itself. Despite Paoli’s defeat and the French occupation, many Corsicans continued to yearn for independence and to venerate the exiled leader. One of these was a man, born in 1769, a son of one of Paoli’s supporters, who benefited from French rule by gaining the chance to attend a prestigious French military school: Napoleon Bonaparte. As an adolescent, even while serving as a junior officer in the French artillery, Napoleon was passionately devoted to the Corsican cause. At the age of 20, as the French Revolution was beginning, he wrote to introduce himself to the exiled Paoli, in decidedly overblown prose: “General, I was born as the fatherland was dying. Thirty thousand Frenchmen, vomited on our coasts, were drowning the throne of liberty

in torrents of blood. ... You left our island, and as you did our hopes of happiness disappeared.”

How did the young Napoleon learn about Paoli? Having lived mostly on the French mainland, he had little contact with Corsicans with personal memories of the man. But in 1784, at age 15, Napoleon asked his father to send him Boswell’s *History of Corsica* — and it seems likely that this most charismatic of all French leaders, who emerged out of the turmoil of the French Revolution to rule the greatest European empire since the days of Rome, found decisive inspiration in this source. It was not so much the real Paoli, the Corsican Paoli, who inspired him. It was the literary image of Paoli, crafted with supreme skill by the young Scotsman who had gone to Corsica in 1765.

Two hundred and fifty years later, it is not talented writers like Boswell who shape the image of charismatic political leaders. These leaders’ image takes shape above all in electronic media. The Boswells of our day are the men and women who produce and direct 30-second television advertisements, and who try to direct the unruly forces of social media. But the qualities by which charismatic individuals exercise their appeal — above all the combination of apparently extraordinary personal gifts with the ability to forge intensely personal, emotional connections with followers — remain much the same. And as seen in the presidential campaign of 2016, these qualities are just as explosively powerful today as they were in the Age of Democratic Revolutions.