vision and idealism in politics, and also great promise. Scholars have persistently rated him highly -- in the category of near-greats -- among presidents, largely for his domestic reforms. Wilson was said to have an almost an almost messianic view of his own role. He could approve nothing that was less than perfect. The achievable, to him, was almost the enemy of the ideal. None could disagree with him and remain a friend. One after another his trusted advisers were dispensed with; he felt comfortable "only in the company of sycophants and admiring women."

By 1919, the Republican Party controlled both Houses of Congress, and yet Wilson virtually excluded the Republican leadership from involvement in the Paris peace conference. In July 1919, he presented the Treaty of Versailles to the Senate for ratification, but would not compromise even on the smallest detail of policy. The Senate did not ratify the treaty, and the US could not join the League of Nations. In the 1920 election, Democratic candidate Cox was emphatically rejected, and with him Wilsonian idealism. Wilson left the White House embittered and broken in health. He never wavered in his belief though that he would be vindicated in times to come. In some ways he was a modern and modified version of King Lear.

Closer to present times, in the latter part of the decade of the 1960's, the head of the President's Secretariat in Islamabad was a senior bureaucrat who had started his career in the Indian Civil Service in 1931. On one occasion, perhaps carried away by some event or other, he is said to have fulsomely declared to Ayub Khan: "*Nabuyat agar khatam na hotey, aapko tho aadmi nabi samajthey* (if the age of prophets had not passed, people would take you for a prophet)." The field marshal was not amused. The tale may or may not be true.

Ayub Khan was not exactly impervious to praise. It was supposedly at the instance of his advisers and admirers that he promoted himself to field marshal. The highest military rank would have added to his feeling of importance. It does illustrate a truth though; even people who have no need to, can, at times, give in to the temptation to flatter. In India, for example, in the heyday of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a senior party leader came up with the cloying slogan: "India is Indira, and Indira is India."

Professor and philosopher, John Dewey, believed that the deepest urge in human nature was the "desire to be important." Philosopher and psychologist William James had a slightly different perspective. "The deepest principle in human nature," he observed, "is the craving to be appreciated." Praise would seem to go a considerable way towards meeting both the desire and the craving. Diogenes and his likes would have no use or time for praise, but they are few and far between. A vital distinction, exists, though, that may not be overlooked. Genuine praise serves a constructive purpose; it encourages, boosts morale and strengthens confidence. Then there is the other variety, flattery, sycophancy, adulation or blandishment, which is by definition insincere, counterfeit and motivated.



To Cicero of old, flattery was "the handmaid of the vices." Seneca of a slightly later period observed, tongue in cheek, that flattery closely resembled friendship. And centuries later, La Rochefoucauld noted with gentle irony that we should have but little pleasure, if we were never to flatter ourselves. Flattery can be a balm and it can amuse. It can also hurt when it clouds judgment or obscures reality. There is, of course, the converse aspect of flattery, namely, plain speaking and honest advice that may grate, but which may not, solely for that reason, be discounted. Many have discovered this truth at great cost.

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