Can anyone even remember now what Nixon did that was so terrible? He ended the war in Vietnam, brought home the POWs, ended the war in the Mideast, opened relations with China, started the first nuclear weapons reduction treaty, saved Eretz Israel’s life, started the Environmental Protection Administration. Does anyone remember what he did that was bad?

Oh, now I remember. He lied. He was a politician who lied. How remarkable. He lied to protect his subordinates who were covering up a ridiculous burglary that no one to this date has any clue about its purpose. He lied so he could stay in office and keep his agenda of peace going. That was his crime.

Ben Stein

He was a criminal president. Go listen to the Nixon tapes. . . . Nixon regularly orders lying to law enforcement, to the grand jury, to use the FBI, the IRS to screw . . . his opponents. . . . Not only is this criminal and abusive—and that is the basic foundation of our government, it is a government that is answerable, and Nixon became unanswerable—he became a power unto himself. Wiretap, break-in . . . the list of things that went on that are horrifying doesn’t stop. . . .

Listen to the tapes. . . . no one says, including Nixon, . . . what would be right, what would be good . . . what does the country need, what is the high purpose of the presidency. . . . It’s always about Nixon. . . . in the end it’s about the smallness of this man.

Bob Woodward
By definition, the president of the United States is a leader. But leadership signifies something apart from the obvious rights and appurtenances accompanying the office. What do we want to know when we ask what presidential leadership is? I do not believe there is a single question we are trying to answer, and I think a variety of confusions lurk in the questions we pose and the answers we offer to them. Here I try to sort out some of the questions, answers, and confusions. I begin with some basic puzzles.

It may seem that what matters for presidential leadership are appearances, not reality. If people think their president possesses qualities of leadership, they will behave accordingly, and the results will resemble those that would have occurred if he really did possess leadership qualities. Does leadership, then, amount to the ability to persuade people that one possesses qualities of leadership?

The answer must be at least partly yes. Leadership is a relational property (or set of properties) between one person and others—between the leader and the led (or the followers). Although we talk constantly about leadership, we neglect to mention—or perhaps even to think of—its correlative, the led. The concept of the led or the follower suggests an absence of autonomy and, in a democracy, sits uncomfortably with the liberal conception of the person, a rational agent who chooses and is not subject to the will of another.

That is an interesting subject, but not the main point here—which is that the perceptions of the led partly define and determine leadership. Even if these perceptions are misperceptions—even if what the led see or sense does not reflect the leader’s true characteristics—these perceptions can affect behavior and the course of events, on the basis of which we ascribe qualities of leadership. There cannot be a leader who leads no one, a leader whom no one follows.

Is anyone with followers, then, a leader? Yes, but not in the sense we are trying to establish. The reason is that when we ask what constitutes presidential leadership we are asking a normative question. Except in the trivial sense that whoever occupies the office of president is by definition a leader, a leader must be to some extent successful. At the minimum this means that he must succeed in carrying out certain goals. Yet a leader who succeeded in carrying out goals shared by no one but himself would not be deemed successful. (He would probably also not have followers; being successful and having followers go together.) So a