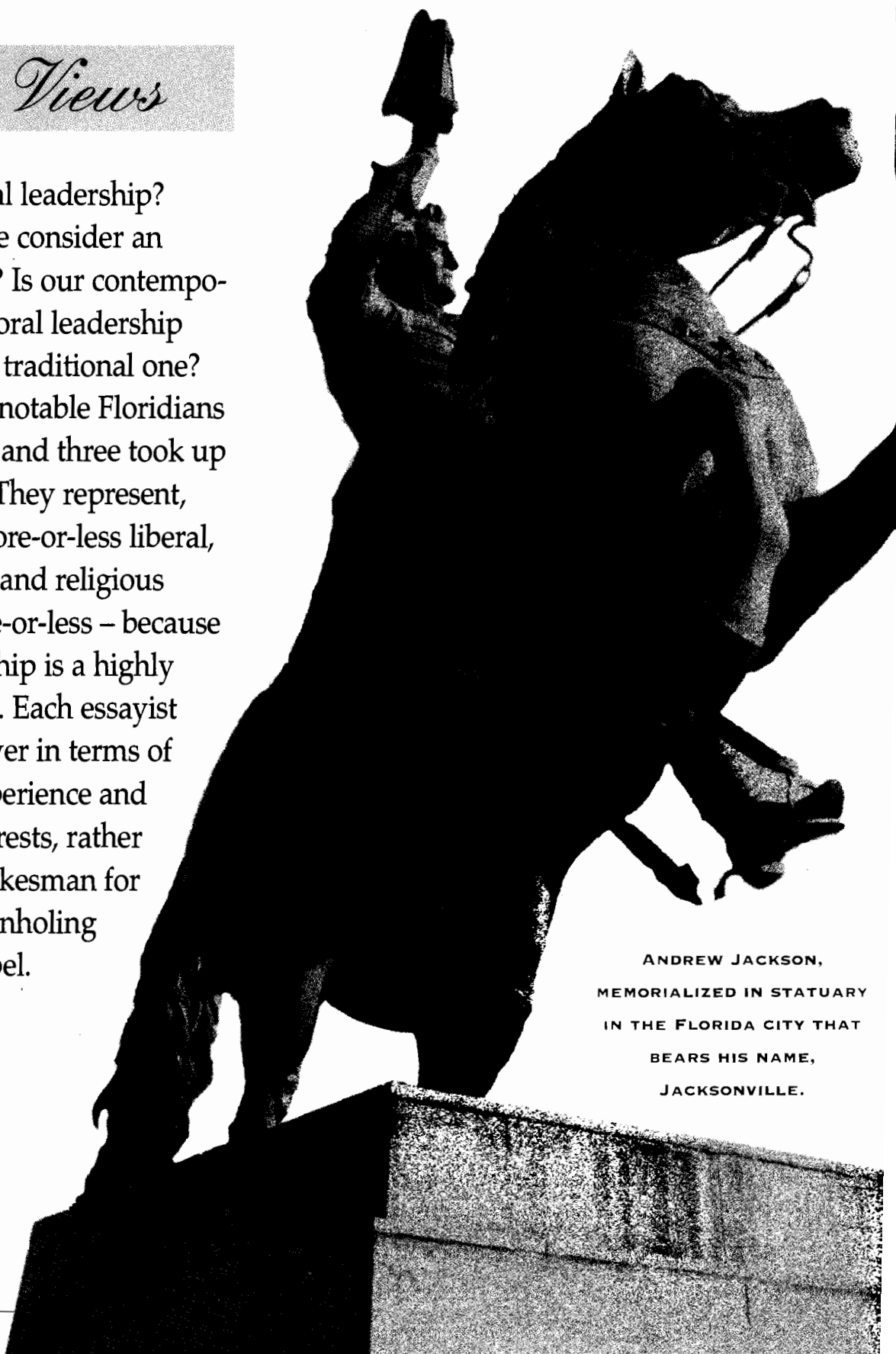


LEADERS AND

Three Views

What is moral leadership?
Whom do we consider an exemplary leader? Is our contemporary idea of moral leadership different from a traditional one? We asked several notable Floridians for their thoughts and three took up the challenge. They represent, respectively, a more-or-less liberal, conservative and religious perspective. More-or-less – because moral leadership is a highly personal topic. Each essayist opted to answer in terms of his own experience and special interests, rather than as spokesman for a pigeonholing label.



ANDREW JACKSON,
MEMORIALIZED IN STATUARY
IN THE FLORIDA CITY THAT
BEARS HIS NAME,
JACKSONVILLE.

FOLLOWERS

LIFE, LIBERTY AND LOST FAITH

BY JOHN V. LOMBARDI

Mr. President," she asked, "I want to study moral leadership. Can you tell me how to be a moral leader?" Students are wonderful. They ask profound questions as if there were simple answers.

"Tell me," I replied, "what do you think moral leadership is, how do you know it when you see it?"

"Oh, that's easy," she came back with all the certainty of the young, "moral leadership is doing the right thing and getting other people to do the right thing."

Actually, of course, leadership of any kind depends greatly on the agreement of leaders and their collaborators about where we go and why. Leadership rarely involves a situation where we say, "Gee I need a leader to stay the same, change nothing, and respond to nothing." For this, we need only quiet, not leadership. Instead, leadership happens because we need help, because we want to go somewhere else, we want to live in a different way, we want to resolve a crisis or capture an opportunity. Whatever it is, leadership means direction, it means finding a path and helping us all take that path even though it is difficult.

Sometimes, leadership is easy, the path is wide and smooth, obvious to all, and slopes gradually downhill on a cool afternoon. Usually, leadership is hard, the path is narrow and rocky, hidden from most by boulders and shrubs, and runs on a ragged steep uphill climb during a hot muggy afternoon. Were it not so, we would not care much about leadership.

Leaders always respond to the will of the people they lead, and while we sometimes regret the directions that our leaders take, they could not lead if we did not agree, if we did not want that leadership. So that leadership requires our participation and is very often a reflection of our hearts and minds. When we find out our leaders have led us astray, we turn on them with particular fury because in our hearts we know that we too are at fault.

"OK, that's all fine," she said with the quick but polite irritation of the student who thinks the professor has missed the entire point of her

question, "but what about MORAL leadership? Isn't that a different kind of leadership?"

Knowing that I came perilously close to losing my audience here, I gently tried the following, "No, all leadership is moral leadership."

Indignant, for I had failed completely to understand her question and help her with the project, she said, "Oh, no, some leadership is immoral and some leadership is moral, and what we have to do is determine which is which."

Of course all leadership is moral. When we ask questions about moral leadership we are really asking whether the morality of this or that group of leaders matches our own. In most strong vital societies we share a baseline moral code so that we can get through life in reasonable and predictable ways, doing the minimum harm to our fellow citizens and creating the maximum benefit for ourselves. This code exists for us, captured in many historic documents but most clearly in the guarantee that we may in our country be secure in our "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness."

"When we lose faith in this moral code, we then seek leaders who reflect our lost faith. They will persuade us that we need not worry about the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of anyone but ourselves, they will help us pursue our own opportunities at the expense of the opportunities of others, they will help us destroy our larger concerns while we enhance our individual benefits. These leaders seek to construct, on our behalf and at our insistence, a new moral code fundamentally different from our core moral code."

Really impatient with me now, my student snapped in exasperation, "Sure, maybe so, but those are immoral leaders and we shouldn't let them succeed!"

Knowing I had but one more shot in this battle for the hearts and minds of the next generation, I took aim one final time. "My friend," I said, "moral leadership is the consequence of what you want to do, how you want to behave, and what morality you choose for yourself. The moral leaders will be the people you create to lead you in the directions you seek. If we have immoral leaders today, we have no one to blame but ourselves because they represent our ideas and attitudes, we create them, and were we not supportive of the values they promote, they could not lead us."

"So," she ended, "you're telling me that I'm responsible for moral leadership, that each individual creates the morality that invents moral leadership?"

"Right," I said. "You got it."

"Oh," she said. †

John V. Lombardi is the President of the University of Florida. He also is a historian, specializing in Latin America, and continues to teach regularly.