# Ethics of Leadership

## Dirty Hands

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

**Reading**

- Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands" (PDF on webpage).

**Background**

When it comes to the issue of torture, its solution may seem obvious: torture is both ugly and evil, and therefore it should never be practiced by any nation that deems itself civilized. Yet Michael Walzer's classic essay explicitly endorses the necessity of having leaders who are willing, in dire circumstances, to "dirty their hands" by engaging in quite horrendous actions, including torture. This does not make torture right—in fact Walzer presumes it *is* immoral—but rather acknowledges that leaders will face moral dilemmas where no available choice is morally acceptable. However, by choosing to torture, the leader must take public responsible (i.e., show the public his or her "dirty hands") by explaining his or her decision and then accepting whatever consequences result.

**Questions**

1. Michael Walzer claims that "no one succeeds in politics [or leadership] without getting his hands dirty" (p. 164). Why? Do you agree?
2. What is the "moral dilemma inherent in the contention" (p. 164) that leadership requires getting one's hands dirty? That is, what is the dilemma for a leader involving dirty hands? How do his two examples of granting contracts and allowing torture illustrate that dilemma?
3. Ultimately, what is Walzer's final position on the issue? Is it ever permissible for a leader to engage in torture or other immoral activities? If a leader does something immoral, what does Walzer believe the consequences should be? Do you agree?