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# *All the King's Men: Power Corrupts*

Mark Caleb Smith

“But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”

James Madison, *Federalist No. 51*

**W**illie Stark, a folksy fascist, is the governor of a southern state during the Great Depression. Jack Burden is a wily fixer, a close aid to “The Boss,” who digs up dirt to destroy anyone with the temerity to get in Stark’s way. Their complicated relationship drives the plot of *All the King’s Men*, a 1946 novel by Robert Penn Warren.

Neither Stark nor Burden are angels. They are precisely the kind of men Madison was worried about when he wrote in defense of the new U.S. Constitution. Madison hoped that a well-designed government—with separated powers, shared powers, and checks and balances—could limit the political damage demons might do. Warren’s story, which is a thinly disguised recounting of Huey Long’s control of Louisiana, examines the worst-case scenario. What if one man, by the force of his will, controls all the parts of government? In short, Willie Stark destroys himself and nearly everyone around him, and he damages his state and the people he governs for a generation.

The lessons of *All the King’s Men* are legion, but let’s focus on the recognition of political corruption. Corrupt political leaders follow patterns

that can be observed not only in fiction, but in the real world of politics. The Bible contains examples of corrupt leaders, and it thankfully provides principles for leaders who seek to glorify God.

### **Corrupt Leaders Are Easy to Recognize**

When we think of corruption, our minds naturally turn toward money. We may think of a judge or a jury member being bribed, or a politician taking a stack of cash in exchange for a vote. Corruption in *All the King's Men* isn't about money, but about the true currency of politics—power.

Power, like money, is not evil or wicked by itself. Power can be used properly to pursue good and noble things. Justice requires the ability to punish a criminal, and punishment, through arrest, trial, conviction, a fine, or imprisonment, only happens through government's power. When used with authority, power is a necessary element of good government. The abuse of power is at the heart of political corruption.

Crooked politicians, more than anything, use their power to their own benefit, and not for the good of citizens or society. Leaders like this lash out at obstacles. They see themselves as above rules, procedures, laws, or constitutions. They are natural opponents of limited government, and institutions that curb their power must change or be burned to the ground.

Some obstacles are flesh and blood. Treacherous rulers see people as tools to be used or discarded as necessary. Human beings, for them, have no inherent value or dignity. Instead, people are a means to an end, either a benefit or a detriment based on what they can provide.

One story in *All the King's Men* highlights Willie Stark's corruption. Byram B. White, one of "Willie's boys," is the State Auditor, and he is mired in an investigation. White is using his office to enrich himself illegally, and Stark is faced with a choice. He can do nothing and let justice run its course. If this happens, the nefarious White will likely lose his job and go to jail, and Stark would get a political black eye. Or Stark can protect the guilty man, guarantee his loyalty in the future, and use all his power (legal and otherwise) to stop the investigation and skirt the law. For Willie, this is an easy decision.

The Governor's Attorney General, who oversees enforcing law in the state, tries to persuade Willie to do the right thing, especially since White is guilty. Willie's response is revealing. "My God, you talk like Byram was human! He's a thing! You don't prosecute an adding machine if a spring goes bust and makes a mistake. You fix it." By comparing White to an inanimate object, and then treating him as such throughout the process, Stark shows that White's only value is what he can do for "The Boss."

White survives, but then Stark himself is threatened with his own investigation and impeachment. He wins this conflict because Willie and his cronies, like Jack Burden, have spent years searching for embarrassing or damaging information on potential enemies. Stark threatens to publicize every speck of dirt. Shady business deals, illicit affairs, and bad habits are dragged near the spotlight, so Willie can put the matter simply to his foes:

"This is your last chance...do you know what I can do to you?" And he could do it, too. For he had the goods."

Willie Stark has no interest in justice, or the government systems designed to produce it. The state's constitution allowed for impeachment as a mechanism to thwart dangerous governors. The system allowed Stark to present evidence, to counter the charges against him, and raise the support of the people. But like always, Stark is never constrained by the system. He did what was necessary to win, even if what was necessary was illegal.

Laws are not all that different than rules in a game. In basketball, a player may only take two steps with the ball unless they are dribbling. A player can only spend three seconds at a time in "the lane," a defined area around the basket. These rules should make the game fair for all the participants, and referees should enforce the rules in the same way for all the players. The rules and the referees don't determine who wins the game, but they do define what the players may do to win. When players and referees act within the rules, the outcome of the game can be judged as fair or just. Winners can walk away sure of their victory, and losers can be confident the system worked, the game was fair, and the loss was deserved, even if painful.

For Willie Stark, and other corrupt politicians, the law is never honored or respected. Rules are for suckers. Judges, like referees, can be threatened or bribed, and laws, if inconvenient, can be ignored or changed, depending on what is available. The law, Stark says, is “like a single-bed blanket on a double bed and three folks in the bed on a cold night,” or “like the pants you bought last year for a growing boy... The best you can do is do something and then make up some law to fit.”

Willie Stark’s corruption is rooted, we are told in *All the King’s Men*, in his selfishness. Willie is the center of the universe, and everything in it must bend to his will and for his own satisfaction. When Jack Burden, during a moment of reflection, is asked to explain Governor Stark, he proclaims that Stark is not interested in money, or sex, or even power. In the end, “He’s interested in Willie. Quite simply and directly.”

### **The Bible and the Corruption of Political Power**

The Bible is full of history, especially in the Old Testament. The rise and fall of kingdoms and empires can be traced across its pages. God’s plan is for government to pursue righteousness by rewarding the good and punishing evil (see Rom. 13:1-7). Government’s justice should be blind, showing no partiality to the rich or powerful (see Amos 5). Israel’s history, unfortunately, provides manifold examples of political corruption, of leaders who ignore God’s teaching and use their power for themselves. The story of Ahab and Jezebel is just one example.

Ahab was King over Israel for twenty-two years. He married Jezebel, a woman who worshipped Baal instead of the one, true God. Ahab’s reign did not glorify God or live up to God’s standard for government. Instead, Ahab “did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the Kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Kings 16:33).

Ahab desired a vineyard (see 1 Kings 21) next to his palace, and it was owned by Naboth. Ahab tried to purchase the land, but Naboth inherited it from his ancestors and valued it more than whatever Ahab might give him. Ahab, sullen because of the refusal, told Jezebel, who then hatched a scheme to secure the vineyard.

Using Ahab's name and royal seal, Jezebel put Naboth in a difficult situation. Two scoundrels accused him of cursing God and the king. Naboth was stoned to death for blasphemy. "And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it" (1 Kings 21:16).

The chilling story obviously demonstrates corruption. Ahab wanted a vineyard and Jezebel used their power to get it. This instance is joined by many others in Scripture. David lusted after a woman, impregnated her, and used his power as king to put her husband in mortal danger during battle. The prophet Micah describes "the rulers of the house Israel! Is it not for you to know justice? You who hate the good and love the evil" (Micah 3:1b-2a). The prophet Habakkuk says, "Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth" (Hab. 1:3b-4a).

## **Responding to Corruption**

Political corruption, where leaders choose their own good over the good of society, is common in literature and history, and is described in the Bible in detail. The truth of corruption persists because human beings are sinful. We, by nature, put ourselves above one another and above God. When this bent is combined with the power of government, corruption is almost the inevitable outcome.

This is one reason why America's founders, like James Madison, were wise. They were aware of this tendency, so they constructed a government based on this belief. The government must be strong enough to govern but made so it might control itself.

But governmental designs, especially in free societies like ours, are only as good as the people being governed. It is our responsibility, as voters and citizens, to hold those who govern us responsible for their actions. The ballot box, when stuffed by a virtuous people, is the most potent medicine for political diseases. Even Willie Stark would tremble in the face of a righteous electorate, and he would rethink his choices or suffer the consequences.