



American Leaders: Generations Apart

Reading about the great figures of the 18th century, our embryonic stage, enables one to view Jefferson, Washington, Hamilton, Madison, Adams, and Franklin in the lead roles of a dramatic contest between the forces of democracy and the forces of aristocracy. Perhaps the acts of these great men seem foreign to us because in our modern context we have nothing comparable to the grand scale of the past. Men of Jefferson's generation and Clinton's generation differ in nature and the way in which they tackled the problems of the America they shared, but the basic leadership skills run consistent through the threads of our history. The problems of the people against the elite, the laborers versus the business owners, party conflict, rich against poor, and blacks against whites still run through 20th century just as they did in the 18th century. Thomas Jefferson's generation of American leaders differ from twentieth century American Leaders in their individual constitutions, the impact of the strong two party system, the role of religion, and the influence of special interest groups and factions.

Long before examining the actual leaders and the significance of their presidencies, a far more incisive probe of their individual constitutions is necessary. What matter of men were Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, and Adams? They were certainly not the brand that occupies positions of leadership in America's public eye today. In the late 18th century, politicians simply happened. They assumed politics as a duty, but they were made and molded in the democratic ideals that this country was founded upon. Politicians of the 18th century could be soldiers, architects, farmers, businessmen, or inventors and our 20th century politicians are a much more specialized group with training and "grooming." It is equally clear that the realm of American politics has, during the course of more than two centuries, become an intensely specialized sphere of life, and that it draws on a very specific breed of men/women to fill its offices (Miroff, 349).

Robert Dahl, in his influential book, *Who Governs?*, said that "to the political entrepreneur who has skill and drive, the political system offers unusual opportunities for pyramiding a small amount of initial resource into a sizable political holding" (Dahl, 227). The politicians on the stage of the 20th century are generally men/women of wealth and while in office, they have the opportunity to amass an even greater wealth. Leaders of the 18th century received compensation for their political duties but the emphasis was not on financial gain, but on being leaders for the good of the country. The average 20th century politician knows from early in his life where his ambitions lie, and such a goal is aggressively pursued. In startling contrast, an inordinate number of 18th century American leaders didn't even intend to go into politics. For example, George Washington wanted nothing more than to retire to his beloved Mount Vernon at the end of the American Revolutionary War. Historian Joseph J. Ellis, reminds us that one of the nation's great leaders, Thomas Jefferson, was "a man who insisted that life on the public stage was not what he had in mind" (Ellis, 6). Jefferson had constantly said that his purpose

in life certainly was not in politics, and he spoke of "the hated occupation" as something of a large

detour (Ellis, 119).

The men of Jefferson's generation were transformational leaders, not careerists. The leaders of the 18th century fit perfectly into the leadership model of being innovators because they had to live with change, think creatively and create change for the future of this country. Even though early leadership represented only the white male, and wealthy landowners, Jefferson was a staunch advocate of government by the people and of the view that government which governs least governs best. Our government today is much more formalized and complex than anything Jefferson ever contemplated (Wise, 13).

Although 18th and 20th century leaders may share some vague ideological points, the way in which they arrived at those positions differ greatly. In the late 1700's the concept of political parties was just dawning on Americans, as the two-party system was preparing to become irrevocably entrenched in American political life. Therefore, the politicians of 1790 and 1990 would have been molded in two very different environments. As the 18th century drew to a close, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton drove their sharply opposing ideals into the national consciousness; as a result, their political theories came to define the dualistic American party system. "Although the standards they set are not often met, they function both as benchmarks for criticism and reminders of what American leadership has been at its best" (Miroff, 352). "The best American leaders have not slighted the realities of power but have understood the tasks of leadership as demanding the empowerment of a democratic people" (Carroll, 142).

The typical 18th century American politician was reared in a masculine controlled society, but for a 20th century politician to be successful, they must transcend the conventional dichotomy of gender. The 20th century leaders are skilled at political maneuvering, but they must also develop the capacity for empathy and care (Miroff, 354). In this area one can clearly see mentor qualities developing according to the human relations model for leadership. It is no longer rule by the elites, but more a government that must represent a very diverse people. Politicians today must appeal to a wide variety of people if they intend to be successful in the political arena. Approval ratings, Gallup polls, and other media greatly influence the success of 20th century leaders, and this was not an issue for 18th century leadership. Currently, one can see that "a healthy economy covers a multitude of Presidential sins" (Leer, 1).

Religion has always been an essential element in America's composition. The weight religion has borne on politics has changed from the 18th to 20th centuries, and has thus produced extremely different leaders. Due most likely to the primitive means of communication, the moral character of American leaders wasn't nearly as scrutinized as it is today. Had Thomas Jefferson or George Washington lived in the age of manic paparazzi and telecommunications, they probably would not have stood a chance at the presidency. Today's politicians are screened for their religious acceptability (Davis, 156).

The media has had a field day with stories of Franklin D. Roosevelt's infidelity, John Kennedy's loves and now Bill Clinton's illustrious list of females. Americans are now looking more closely at the personal habits of men/women to be effective leaders; however, the media plays a tremendous role in how Americans perceive leadership.

The Jeffersonians were especially fearful that "the poor would plunder the rich, but most of them would probably have admitted that the rich unrestrained, would also plunder the poor" (Hofstadter, 11).

George Washington warned the American people in his Farewell Address to be cautious of permanent alliances and other 18th century leaders were fearful of factions. Twentieth century politicians have been engulfed with party divisions, special interest groups and various political factions. Jefferson admitted "that a majority will often decide public questions wrongly; and he argued that the duperies of the people are less injurious than the self-interested policies of kings, priests, and aristocrats" (Hofstadter, 35). Leaders of the 18th century would often treat the citizens as ignorant, to be excluded from the actual processes of decision making. Citizens were often ignored, but the 20th century politicians must establish themselves more as mentors. The relationship of 20th century leaders to the people or the electorate is more intense. Television has intensified the public's view of leaders, candidates and their supporting cast which may include party leaders, vice presidents, and congressional leaders. Eighteenth century leaders concerned themselves with a very limited electorate and they did not have to appeal to the masses as is required today. The electorate is constantly expanding and more groups have to be pacified.

The 18th century leadership was just beginning to organize a government based on a document written by fifty-five men in Philadelphia as a framework for government. American leaders of the 18th century were bound by honor, while modern politicians let the lure of the office convince them that deception is forgivable. Jefferson was rarely blinded by opportunism, but it's the rule these days. Jefferson was torn by his moral qualms of the Louisiana Purchase, even though it is considered by many to be the crowning achievement of his administration. The Louisiana Purchase was politically advantageous, but that didn't matter to Jefferson; his ties to ethics were what concerned him. A strict interpretation of the Constitution was a guiding force for Jefferson, and only after serious deliberation and soul searching did he agree with the Hamiltonians and a loose interpretation of the Constitution in this one instance (Boyer, 173.) Twentieth century politicians operate under the idea that whatever is politically advantageous is justified. Jefferson believed that "all power is derived from the people and that peace and tranquility throughout the land could best be secured by a strong Constitution conceived in the thought that by these means all the blessings of liberty could be best obtained for ourselves and transmitted to posterity" (Wise, 79).

America's prosperity has always been, at least to some degree, reliant on the men in the White House and their supporting casts. The America of the 18th century was a nation of promise while the America of the 20th century is, by most accounts, a deteriorating morass of public crisis. The variation between the two Americas, 18th century and 20th century, can be traced in great measure to the broad differences between their respective statesmen. American leaders have differed in terms of individual constitutions, party divisions, religious views and obligations to factions and special interest groups. A revival of American political leadership requires the restoration of honor to an American political realm and citizens who value their own political activity (Miroff, 358). The actual leadership skills for men/women from both centuries have not changed drastically, but the methods they must use to attain their goals are quite different in the 20th century.

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