



"Not Form, But Function: How Leaders in the Age of Jefferson Differ From Those of Today"

Thomas Jefferson and his generation of American leaders were fundamentally different from leaders today. By virtue of their presence at, and participation in, the creation of the American republic and the subsequent formative years of the new nation, Jefferson's generation was compelled to take action not required by leaders today: namely, they were obliged to set precedents for the new America based upon the blueprints (Declaration of Independence, Constitution) that they created. These precedents have had far-reaching effects, even until today. Essentially, then, I believe Jefferson's generation had a very different role, in terms of its peculiar obligations, than do leaders today. In Jefferson's time, American leaders bore, as a result of their being the first American leaders, the incredible two-fold responsibility of not only creating the republic but also of ensuring its future survival. Today's leaders are charged with a comparably great responsibility, but one that is concerned more with the maintenance and perpetuation of the principles espoused by the Founding Fathers. Whereas the elite cadre who convened at the constitutional convention more than two hundred years ago were by definition innovators, today's leaders have accepted for the good of the country a decidedly more imitative, although not completely dissimilar role.

In truth, the imitative nature of modern leaders is often unavoidable in light of precedents set by leaders of the Jeffersonian era. In terms of governmental power, this imitation gives rise to certain parallels between leaders then and now. The problem, of course, is that Jefferson and Hamilton didn't live in the late twentieth century. As Joseph J. Ellis points out in *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, "All efforts to wrench Jefferson out of his own time and place...are futile and misguided ventures that invariably compromise the integrity of the historical context that made him what he was" (Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 1997, 292). Jefferson, and most of the leaders of his time, were neither saints nor heretics, and although they are ever present in the modern political arena because of their precedents and visionary world view, they need not be canonized as either. In the end, they were similar to modern American leaders in form but different in function. So, instead of asking what the leaders in Jefferson's time would do today, a better question might be, "What did they do in their own time that illuminates and informs our understanding of contemporary American political life?" Two issues stand out as significant in comparing and contrasting these eras: foreign policy and domestic policy.

In terms of foreign policy during Jefferson's time, the passage of the Jay Treaty (1795) provides an interesting insight into what Joseph J. Ellis calls "simultaneously a landmark in the shaping of American foreign policy, [and] a decisive influence on the constitutional question of executive power in foreign affairs" (Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 157). The Jay Treaty removed duties on English imports, retained English tariffs on American exports to England, and held the United States liable for pre-Revolutionary debt. Jefferson was strongly against the treaty, which he saw as "a repudiation of the Declaration of Independence," whereas Alexander Hamilton was "its major advocate" (Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 159),

which sheds light on another reality: that much like today, in Jefferson's time leaders were very different from each other. In fact, as Richard Hofstadter, Norman Risjord, and Joyce Appleby have noted, these ideological oppositions which would eventually culminate in the American party system are not unlike current ideological debates.

What is different, however, is that at the time of the Jay Treaty the United States didn't resemble the twentieth century United States geographically, economically, or otherwise. As John M. Murrin says in his essay "A Roof Without Walls," "American national identity was, in short, an unexpected, impromptu, artificial, and therefore an extremely fragile creation of the Revolution" (Murrin, *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, 1987, 344). It was a different country whose relative instability at the time tended to magnify the ramifications of any political decisions, but especially with regard to foreign policy, as it had not yet been liberated from the burden of England's economic yoke. In this sense though, perhaps the political structure was the one concrete aspect of American life that bears more than passing resemblance to modern America.

One modern parallel to the foreign policy questions posed by the Jay Treaty is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 which created a free trade zone from Guatemala to the Arctic Ocean. The parallel illuminates two realities. First, in all but the most landmark foreign policy decisions, post-Jeffersonian leaders are bound to take an imitative role in terms of detailed political protocol. Moreover, because this role in modern America is inherently repetitive, based on principles and assumptions initially embraced by Jeffersonian statesmen, today's leaders are forced to look back two-hundred years, if only in the rhetorical abstract, to affect modern policy. Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and Madison were not bound by this construct, and although they relied on time honored models of statecraft, did so according to the new and unique context of republicanism. Second, precisely because America was so different in Jefferson's time, the essential function of modern leaders differs as well, lending itself in this case to the economic advantage of North American market consolidation. It differs functionally from the Jay Treaty in that America's relative global economic prowess has increased exponentially since the Jay Treaty signing. This dichotomy in time between similar forms of leadership encompassing different functions does not limit itself to foreign policy.

In terms of domestic policy during Jefferson's time, Hamilton's banking policies of the early 1790's stand out. Hamilton's fiscal programs presented an interesting conundrum, especially in a newly revolutionary nation, in the sense that they effectively increased the power of the federal government, and by so doing, limited the power of its citizenry through taxation. Edmund S. Morgan points to this in *Inventing the People*, when he says, "Alexander Hamilton's fiscal program...had the effect of requiring the national government to engage in heavier taxation than many, perhaps most Americans, thought necessary" (Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*, 1988, 285). Again, the dilemma between individual liberty and the cohesion of centralized federal power takes on a more palpable significance when seen in the light of an economically and politically vulnerable early America.

Alexander Hamilton's banking policies of the early 1790s present another instance in which America and modern leaders have been shaped. Richard Hofstadter says of Jefferson's reticence to reverse Federalist reforms, "The Hamiltonian system...had become part of the American economy. The nation was faring well" (Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 1948, 34). Hofstadter goes on to say, "To unscramble Hamilton's system of funding, banks, and revenues would precipitate a bitter

struggle, widen the breach between the classes and...it might bring a depression, perhaps even rend the Union" (Hofstadter, 34). Hamilton's system of financial programs effectively increased the power of the federal government, but also evolved into a system that is, in many ways, indispensable in modern America. Jefferson's opposition to Hamilton's policy (and to Hamilton himself) is not unlike differences in modern leadership, most notably the shift in social program appropriations from Reagan to Clinton. Joyce O. Appleby says that "where Republicans differed from Federalists was in the moral character of economic development. The promise in prosperity encouraged them to vault over the cumulative wisdom of the ages and imagine a future far different from the dreary past known to man" (Appleby, *Major Problems in the Early Republic*, 1992, 76). Also, their longer view for America, whether conscious or inadvertent, is evident in the longevity of their original policies, ideas, and principles. That modern leadership has deferred to these revolutionary predecessors in so many cases and on many levels is indicative of the prescience of that view, even though modern political thought has evolved so greatly.

In any discussion of modern parallels to the Hamiltonian finance system, it would be remiss to omit mention of Ronald Reagan's program of supply-side economics in the 1980s, which certainly seems Hamiltonian in its thrust, and also ironically Jeffersonian in its rhetoric. Of course, Reagan had the luxury of commanding a superpower, and this fact enabled him to implement massive tax cuts, the major consequence of which was that the nation incurred a huge deficit. This was a luxury not afforded to Hamilton and a result he would not have entertained lightly.

Historian Joseph J. Ellis sums it up nicely when he says, "The entire political landscape of twentieth century America would have struck Jefferson as alien" (Ellis, 298). He says further that "Jefferson created a particular style of leadership adapted to the special requirements of American political culture that remains relevant two centuries later. It is a style based on the capacity to rest comfortably with contradictions" (Ellis 301). So, in sum, leaders today have a similar role to leaders in the age of Jefferson in terms of form, but one that is different in terms of function.

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