

1. Discovering leadership in the early republic

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An observation: none of the Founding Fathers—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams—ever wrote about “leadership.” Not once. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the official record of the English language, states that the word first appeared in 1821 in England. This raises an interesting question. If no one spoke of “leadership” at the American founding, can we?

The answer is yes, for two reasons. First, the actual origins of the concept of leadership date to the American Founding, much earlier than the OED identifies. While the OED claims that leadership originated in the nineteenth century, its first usage dates to at least the 1790s in America. Thanks to new digital resources that allow for text mining, it seems that the first time the word appeared in the English language was in 1796. Based on a search of an early American newspaper database, on May 28, 1796, the *Aurora General Advertiser*, an anti-Federalist newspaper, reproduced an article from a Federalist newspaper that contained the following passage:

The antifederal faction are somewhat mortified at the secession of Madison from the Leadership of the party and of the assumption of the dictatorship by Gallatin. They know the former, but they cannot find out what entitles the latter to take the lead.¹

Second, aside from when this word emerged, this passage also helps explain why the word *leadership* emerged when it did. Its development in the 1790s reveals a key facet of how successful leadership, especially political leadership, operates in a democratic republic. But to understand the 1790s, it is important to appreciate how the revolutionary changes for political institutions and officeholders during the 1770s and 80s transformed the relationship between leaders and those they led. Doing so reveals that even if leaders like George Washington, never used the word

in his life, his example is important for understanding leadership because his actions helped to define the very concept itself.

Before the American Revolution, when colonists were more or less dutiful subjects loyal to a monarch, political authority rested on very different foundations. In the British Empire, both at home in Great Britain and abroad in the colonies, virtually all political power descended from the Crown. Every political leader's authority rested on the king's approval and an individual's position depended on his ability to serve the Crown's wishes.

This top-down, command-and-follow structure infused all the institutions that governed the empire. The Privy Council, which oversaw the empire's colonial holdings, was stacked with ministers appointed by the king. The king also had an influential role in Parliament as he could appoint and recall the prime minister at will. Such hierarchical structures even influenced the operation of the military, as martial offices reflected a hierarchy descendant from the Crown. The king appointed many senior military leaders, such as the commander-in-chief for North America, to their office. Lower officers in the British military, meanwhile, needed to purchase their commissions, and every promotion came at a steeper cost, meaning that the officer corps was largely reserved for the wealthy and the noble-born. An entry-level lieutenantancy cost £500, while a ranking of lieutenant colonel cost £3,500. As a result of the financial requirements, half of all colonels in the 1760s were from the British nobility and many of these were the second sons of aristocrats who sought to maintain their position in society by serving the king in the battlefield. These gentlemen, having lost lands and titles to elder brothers, needed to maintain the family's status through other means, and the military provided a perfect opportunity for those seeking power and spoils.²

The king's role loomed large in many parts of colonial government as well. The king appointed colonial governors, and these governors found themselves answering more to the Board of Trade in Whitehall than to their colonial constituents. The most powerful of local, colonial officials, justices of the peace (JPs), also derived their authority from the king, with most receiving their appointments through royal governors. JPs enforced laws, sat as judges, and oversaw many other aspects of the legal system.

Indeed, the entire organization of appointments in the British Empire was premised on the idea that the king ruled and his subjects followed. These office-holders implemented the king's vision, and it was expected that those he ruled would abide by his decisions. What is notable about this colonial system is that, even though followership through the idea of subjecthood was essential to its operation, the idea of leadership was

absent from the thinking of eighteenth-century Britons and colonists in North America.

The American Revolution upended this system. The principle that drove most of the revolutionary reforms was the idea of popular sovereignty, or rule by the people. The changes wrought by this idea did more than alter a political system. It remade one. Before the Revolution, the foundation for political authority rested on the king. After it, governing legitimacy rested in the people themselves. This change produced a new word to describe this new political reality: *leadership*.

Just as the idea of monarchy infused all aspects of governing the British Empire, so too did the idea of popular sovereignty shape the governance of the new republic. Consider the changes made in the wake of the Revolution. Governors, most of whom were previously appointed by the king, were now elected by the people. Their powers were also weaker, as more responsibilities shifted to legislatures, the institutions that represented the people. To broaden this representation, franchise requirements were eased.

Office-holding also came to depend on the idea of rule by the people. Most colonial militias elected their officers during the Revolution, in marked contrast to the British military. Justices of the peace, likewise, were often elected by their neighbors, making the sovereignty of the law and its enforcement dependent upon the people rather than a distant monarch. Indeed, this change gave rise to instances of popular justice in which local communities used their JPs—who now depended on the support of their neighbors—to nullify unpopular laws.

Rule by the people thus birthed a new type of leader, one who depended on independent citizens rather than subjects for his authority. Soon after the Revolution, this change gave rise to party politics. As “the people” developed competing notions of what the government they controlled should do, different groups fought to empower specific individuals who best represented their own ideas. The reciprocal relationship between leaders and citizens who share similar views is essential to understanding the fundamental change that the Revolution introduced to American politics. It is also essential to understanding the meaning of leadership developing to describe this new political world.

With this in mind, let us to return to that opening quote:

The antifederal faction are somewhat mortified at the secession of Madison from the Leadership of the party and of the assumption of the dictatorship by Gallatin. They know the former, but they cannot find out what entitles the latter to take the lead.

This quote encapsulates what leadership meant at the moment of the American Founding and, arguably, still means in this democratic republic today. Two things are of particular note in this quote. First, the contrast drawn between Madison's "leadership" and that of Albert Gallatin's "dictatorship." Dictatorship here is cast as an antonym of leadership. Dictators rule by command, and their followers do as they are told. They are absolute sovereigns. They are what the American Revolution threw off.

Second, and related, is the construction of the word *leadership* itself. Dissecting this very first use helps reveal what its authors meant at its creation. For one thing, the suffix "ship" emphasizes reciprocity inherent in leadership. Think of other words that end with this suffix: *fellowship*, *stewardship*, *friendship*, or *kinship* come to mind. These are all terms that imply a mutual and reciprocal bond between people. These relationships are cultivated and maintained. They can also be broken, meaning that they are contingent. A leader, then, must maintain supporters. As the quote says, Madison embodied the party's leadership because "they [meaning his supporters] know [him]." While Madison had the authority to lead the opposition because of the relationships and trust he had established with his supporters, Gallatin, the passage implies, lacked leadership because he did not have supporters, at least as far as these authors knew.

Voluntary support, then, is fundamental to the concept of leadership. This observation, revealed by contextualizing leadership's first usage, suggests that the way many scholars often talk about leaders, at least political leaders, may need some revision. Although leadership theorists often talk of a leader–follower relationship, it may make sense to adjust the language to better reflect the fundamentally reciprocal nature of leadership, at least as it pertains to elected officials. The relationship between a leader and *supporters*—supporters being those who can take away their approval at the ballot box, and thus "de-authorize" a leader—is very different from the idea of a leader whose followers are either blindly devoted or coerced into submission. Such a change is no mere semantic exercise. There is something substantively different between the responsibilities and decisions of a leader who relies on supporters for legitimacy and one who subjects followers to a self-created authority. This difference is what defined the change between an imperial monarchy and a democratic republic.

Washington probably understood the idea of leadership better than anyone. Indeed, John Adams's observation that Washington was "the best actor of the presidency we ever had" captures the essence of Washington and a key element of his leadership style.³ While Adams meant this as an

insult, he was right; and playing the role the people wanted of their first leader was one of Washington's greatest attributes—and a fundamental facet of successful leadership in a republic.

Washington understood his audience—he knew what they wanted in a military general and in a president—and he performed flawlessly, winning and maintaining supporters. His presidential tours in which he traveled almost 3,000 miles on horseback bringing the presidency to the people throughout the country are a prime example. Washington's awareness of and his ability to connect to the American public gave him the foundation upon which his right to lead rested. Adams may have dismissed Washington simply as an actor, but Adams failed at the presidency because he was not such an "actor." Adams was unable to adjust to a new political environment in which the people would not simply follow the dictates of a designated leader. Washington knew he needed supporters, something Adams never fully grasped.

Shifting the language, and in turn the mode of analysis, surrounding leaders and their *supporters* also helps answer the question of whether scholars can talk about leadership at the American Founding even if the Founding Fathers never spoke of it. This quotation tells us that we can. The founders may not have used the word *leadership*, but their actions tell us that they understood this new political culture—or at least the successful ones did. They knew how to marshal support and to wield power in a way that maintained political alliances essential to keeping their office. The successes—Washington and Jefferson—understood this new world. While Washington and his peers may never have used the word, Americans confronting this new political environment needed to develop a word to describe the novel ways in which Washington and other founders related to their supporters. And those observing the actions of their leaders, like the newspaper editor who described Madison's "leadership," introduced words to explain what they were witnessing. Indeed, the emergence of leadership into the lexicon marks the American founding as a revolutionary moment in political thought.

NOTES

* Dr. Spero was unable to attend the Mount Vernon conference in April 2015 but wrote the following chapter that was presented there by Dr. Susan Dunn from Williams College. Spero shows that a conception of the very idea of leadership took hold in early American republic which anticipates James MacGregor Burns's emphasis on the importance of followers in the leader-follower relationship, and his emphasis on the mutual power of leaders and followers. Burns's work can be seen as developing and elaborating the basic conception of leadership first appearing in American politics in 1796.

1. "Evidences of respect for the constituted authorities," *Aurora General Advertiser*, May 28, 1796, p. 3. In this passage, the *Aurora* editors are quoting from an even earlier usage of "leadership" found in an unnamed Federalist paper.
2. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33–4.
3. Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78.