Presidential Difference in the Early Republic: 
The Highly Disparate Leadership Styles of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson

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The absence of well-established political precedents and norms posed the early American presidents with the political equivalent of a Rorschach test. This made for highly diverse leadership styles, as can be seen by comparing the leadership of George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. The present article makes such a comparison, doing so on the basis of cognitive style, emotional intelligence, public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, and policy vision.

It is a near axiom of the behavioral sciences that the actions people take are a function of two broad sets of influences—their personal characteristics and the environments in which they are situated. It is also widely accepted that the more ambiguous and unstructured the environment, the greater the influence of personal characteristics (Greenstein 1969, 33-62). This article examines the highly disparate leadership styles of American presidents in the nation’s earliest years, a period in which the absence of well-established political precedents and norms made it necessary for chief executives to define their own operating methods. Its specific focus is on the first three chief executives—George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson.

I begin by discussing the political, cultural, and material context of the nation’s early years and its significance for presidential leadership. I then lower a lens on each of my protagonists, drawing largely on the rich secondary literature on these much-studied figures. My concern is with the way these men discharged their presidential...
responsibilities, not with the full range of their extraordinary historical contributions. I go on to compare Washington, Adams, and Jefferson in terms of three pairs of qualities that have provided useful pegs for assessing modern chief executives, and conclude with a series of observations about the relationship between leadership and political development.

Two of the qualities I use for comparison relate to the president’s personal psychology: cognitive style and what has come to be called emotional intelligence—the capacity to control one’s emotions and turn them to productive purposes (Goleman 1995). Two bear on what might be thought of as the outer and inner faces of the president’s responsibilities—his public communication and organizational capacity. The final two are political skill and the extent to which it advances a workable policy vision (for an elaboration, see Greenstein 2004, 5-6). As might be expected, there are significant differences between the ways these attributes manifest themselves today and their form in the time of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson.

Different Times, Different Ways

“The past,” the English novelist L. P. Hartley has written, “is a foreign country.” In the case of the United States, the continuity of a single constitutional document from the founding to the present might lead one to assume otherwise, but to do so would be a mistake. Not only has the Constitution been modified by the twenty-seven amendments ratified between 1791 and 1991, but its political impact also has been altered by such developments as the emergence of political parties, the transformation of the veto from a rarely used means of negating unconstitutional laws to an instrument for shaping public policy, the assumption by the president of the role of initiating legislation, and innumerable changes in social norms and moral standards that bear on constitutional interpretation.

There also are less obvious differences between the early and modern American political universes. Consider the seemingly straightforward matter of the timing of the accession of a new president and the opening session of the newly elected Congress. We take it for granted today that the chief executive will be inaugurated on the January 20th following his election and go on to present his program to Congress, which will have convened earlier in the month. But until the ratification of the twentieth amendment in 1933 the president was inaugurated in March, whereas the new Congress typically did not convene until considerably later in the year, a timing that reduced the likelihood of cooperation between the branches (Ackerman 2005, 117-19). The existence of a continuing political community in the nation’s capital is also a late development. In the early period, congressional sessions were short, members spent the bulk of their time in their districts, and there was high legislative turnover. Abraham Lincoln, for example, was elected to Congress in 1846 with the understanding that he would step down after one term, so that the district’s seat could rotate to another local politician.

One notably foreign quality of early American politics is the virulence of its discourse. It is common to deplore the incivility of twenty-first-century American politics, but today’s political rhetoric is bland by the standards of a period when there was
no agreement about the legitimacy, much less constructiveness, of political opposition. Virginia’s John Randolph of Roanoke, for example, excoriated his Senate colleague Daniel Webster as “a vile slanderer” and called another of his colleagues “the most contemptible and degraded of beings whom no man ought to touch, unless with a pair of tongs” (Poore 1886, 69). Nor was the harshness of political encounters confined to words. From time to time, physical conflict erupted on the floor of Congress, and the code of honor of the period made deadly duels a continuing possibility, including the one in 1804 that ended the life of one of the major figures of the founding period, Alexander Hamilton (Freeman 2001). (On the political passions in the early republic, see Smelser 1958 and Howe 1967.)

The material conditions of the period were also politically relevant. The state of medicine and sanitation was such that important political figures might be removed from the scene by illness or death. The leader whose survival was most critical for placing the new nation on a firm footing, George Washington, was stricken with a life-threatening illness in the first year of his presidency. If Washington had been succeeded by Vice President John Adams at that early date, the nation would have taken its first steps under an emotionally volatile and capricious chief executive who was not held in anything resembling Washington’s near veneration (Ferling 1988, 378).

The leadership of the early presidents was complicated by the rudimentary state of transportation. It took between four and six days for a letter from New York to reach Boston in Washington’s time, and six months was required for an exchange of communications with Europe. As Leonard White observed in his classic study of public administration in the Federalist period, the slowness and uncertainty of trans-Atlantic communication made it necessary for foreign-policy makers to make many of their decisions “on the basis of conjecture or probability rather than solid fact” (White 1958, 486).

The potential political significance of the long period required for communications to cross the Atlantic is illustrated by a pair of events bearing on the War of 1812, one at its beginning and the other at its end. On the very day of the American declaration of war, the British government announced its willingness to respond positively to the principal grievance of the United States. By the time that information reached the United States, however, the war was in full sway. The hostilities continued until December 1814, at which point the American and British negotiators in Ghent arrived at a settlement. But before word of their agreement could be known, the United States triumphed in the Battle of New Orleans, a victory that had significant consequences for American politics by making Andrew Jackson a national hero (Nickles 2003, 17-30; Remini 1998, 276-97).

Another effect of the transportation conditions of the period on public affairs is noted in David Nickels’s study of the impact of the telegraph on international relations. In the era before the trans-Atlantic cable, Nickels points out, it was necessary to grant broad discretionary authority to overseas emissaries, a practice that had the effect of making the personal qualities of diplomats a force in international relations (Nickles 2003, 30). This, moreover, is an insight that can be broadly generalized. It was not merely the idiosyncrasies of diplomats that were politically important in the ill-defined
early American political universe; it was also those of other political actors, particularly the chief executive.

The Indispensable George Washington

The Founders appear to have been willing to create an independent presidency with significant powers in large part because they expected the position to be filled by George Washington. Two decades before there was a nation in which he could be first in war and peace, Washington was already acclaimed throughout the British colonies for his exploits in the French and Indian War (Dunkle 2000). In 1775, he made it known in a characteristically oblique manner that he was prepared to lead the army in a war of independence by appearing at the second Continental Congress in military regalia. Washington was held in such high esteem that the infant nation unanimously elected him to major offices four times—first as commander in chief in the Revolutionary War, then as chairman of the Constitutional Convention, and finally to his first and second presidential terms.

It is sometimes assumed that once he was in office Washington left the conduct of his presidency to his ostensible subordinates. Forrest McDonald, for example, claims that Washington was “indispensable, but only for what he was, not for what he did” (McDonald 1974, 186). That is no longer the prevailing view. Washington’s apolitical demeanor and status as symbolic personification of the new nation deflected attention from his more mundane acts of leadership, but Paul Longmore shows in The Invention of George Washington that even Washington’s “public and historical self” was the result of “conscious and purposive” effort (Longmore 1988, ix). Washington’s acts of leadership also tended to be overlooked because his practice was to work through intermediaries such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. As the historian Stuart Leibiger puts it, he was the nation’s “first hidden-hand president” (Leibiger 1999, 10; see also Phelps 1993, 218, n 49).

Whether Washington was leading the new nation or managing his Virginia plantation, he sought to be studiously methodical. As he once stated, “System to all things is the soul of business. To deliberate maturely and execute promptly is the way to conduct it to advantage” (White 1958, 102). Acting on this maxim, Washington prepared thoroughly for his presidency, asking the department heads of the government during the period of the Articles of Confederation for accounts of their responsibilities. Once he was in office, Washington instituted a routine for circulating paperwork within his administration designed to keep him informed and insure that he had the final say on its policies.

In 1801, Thomas Jefferson provided a description of that system in a circular to his own department heads. Explaining that he had participated in it as Washington’s secretary of state, Jefferson indicated that he intended to employ the same procedure in his own presidency. When Washington received a “letter of business,” Jefferson recounted, he forwarded it to the head of the appropriate department with the understanding that if it called for an answer, the draft of a reply would be returned to him for
approval. “By this means,” Jefferson continued, Washington “was always in accurate possession of all facts and proceedings” and was able to provide his administration with “unity of object and action” (White 1958, 35-36).

This is not to suggest that the internal workings of the Washington administration were confined to bloodless paperwork. Jefferson’s report needs to be qualified to take account of his own bitter rivalry with Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, which constituted a major dynamic of the Washington presidency. In addition, Washington continued to rely on Hamilton after the latter retired to practice law in New York, sending him government papers and drawing on him to draft messages to Congress and the final draft of his farewell address (Cunningham 1978, 318).

The policy differences between Jefferson and Hamilton were the template for the nation’s first party system. Hamilton’s advocacy of a strong central government that acted to foster commerce and industrial development was reflected in the programs of the aptly named Federalist party. Jefferson’s support for a decentralized agrarian republic and his fear of tyranny was the ideological basis for the Democratic-Republican party, the antecedent of the present Democratic party.

The early presidents did not enter office with publicly declared programs. Instead, they adhered at least nominally to the eighteenth-century ideal of a patriot leader who transcends policy disagreements (Ketcham 1984). Their policies, to the extent that they had them, need to be inferred from their private communications and actions. Washington enunciated one of his principal aims in a January 1789 letter to his wartime comrade in arms the Marquis de Lafayette, declaring that he hoped to “extricate my country from the embarrassments in which it is entangled, through want of credit” (George Washington: Writings 1997, 717). Washington’s other goals included arriving at a final peace settlement with Great Britain and opening the western frontier to settlement.

Each of these goals was advanced in the course of the Washington presidency. In the financial sphere, Congress approved Treasury Secretary Hamilton’s sweeping financial program, which included paying off the Revolutionary War debt, raising revenues, and establishing a banking and monetary system. Washington met the goal of arriving at a settlement with Britain by means of a 1795 treaty negotiated by Supreme Court Justice John Jay. His administration opened the frontier to settlement by arriving at agreements with some Indian tribes and suppressing others with force, as in the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Jay’s Treaty also contributed to opening the frontier, as did a treaty negotiated with Spain by Charles Pinckney in 1795. The former provided for the evacuation of British military posts in the northwest; the latter gave the United States all territory in the southeast north of 30° latitude and granted it free navigation of the Mississippi River.

Two of Washington’s further actions were prompted by unfolding events: the outbreak of international war and a refusal by farmers to pay a new tax. In 1793, war erupted between revolutionary France and Great Britain. Despite pressure from Federalists to support Britain and from Republicans to side with France, Washington refused to involve the fledgling nation in the uncertainty of a military conflict. Such was his prestige that he was able to resist these demands and secure adherence to his controversial proclamation of neutrality. In 1794, there was violent resistance on the
Pennsylvania frontier to one of the government’s new revenue measures, a tax on distilled spirits. Washington dispatched troops to quell it, personally leading the first stage of their advance. The rebellion quickly evaporated. Two of its alleged instigators were convicted of high treason and sentenced to death, but Washington magnanimously pardoned them (Ferling 1988, 447-53).

Washington’s presidency was most significant, however, for its contribution to public acceptance of the new political arrangements. He won support for them by conducting his responsibilities effectively, staying in office until acceptance of the political system became habitual, and engaging in such exercises in symbolism as ceremonial visits to each of the states. Moreover, his prestige was such that he imparted legitimacy to the government by his mere association with it (Lipset 1963).

The Adams Interlude

It would be difficult to imagine a pair of men who brought more dissimilar attributes to their presidencies than Washington and Adams. The austere and implacable Washington radiated authority, even in his physical features. He was a head taller than most of his contemporaries and had a powerful physique, erect carriage, piercing eyes, and the profile of a Roman senator. Adams, in contrast, was distinctly unimposing. He was short, rotund, and susceptible to seemingly unprovoked rages. Adams has been variously described as “irritable,” “self-righteous,” “suspicious,” and “contentious.” Benjamin Franklin famously remarked that Adams was “always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things absolutely out of his senses.” The historian John Ferling and endocrinologist Lewis Braverman speculate that Adams’s emotional instability may have had a physiological basis, noting that he exhibited such outward manifestations of hyperthyroidism as red and irritated eyes, profuse sweating, and rapid heartbeat, especially when he was under stress (Ferling and Braverman 1998).

If the only requirement for being an effective president was having rendered important previous service, Adams would have been ideally qualified. He made significant contributions to the Continental Congress, was a governmental workhorse during the revolution, and served as a diplomatic representative of the former colonies to France, Holland, and England. As president, however, Adams was almost willful in his refusal to engage in the everyday arts of political persuasion, once stating his intention to “quarrel with both parties and every individual in each before I would subjugate my understanding, or prostitute my tongue or pen to either” (Taylor 2000, 27).

The Adams presidency was fraught with avoidable errors. The most effective of the early presidents had goals they privately made known, even though they did not advance formal programs. Adams, however, appears to have taken office with no larger goal than the virtuous conduct of his duties. Perhaps his most serious blunder was retaining the cabinet he inherited from Washington with seeming unawareness that three of its members were taking guidance from his rival Alexander Hamilton. Adams belatedly dismissed two of them in his final year in office, Secretary of State Thomas Pickering and
Secretary of War James McHenry, but he failed to remove his comparably culpable treasury secretary, Oliver Wolcott, Jr.

Adams had barely assumed office in 1797 when news arrived that France had dismissed the American minister and begun to attack American shipping. Out of this, there emerged what proved to be the overriding issue of the Adams years, the naval conflict with revolutionary France known as the Quasi-War (DeConde 1966). Adams convened Congress and recommended that the United States follow a policy of seeking a diplomatic solution, while at the same time engaging in a military buildup. In 1798, however, he engaged in undiplomatic saber-rattling, replying with bellicose rhetoric to resolutions of support he received from the public and even taking to wearing a military uniform and sword. Then, in 1799, Adams astonished the political community by announcing without warning that he was sending an emissary to France to seek peace. In the ensuing outburst of controversy, he agreed to send a larger group of negotiators, but abruptly returned to his Massachusetts home for seven months without instructing the delegation on its mission.

Adams’s sudden exit from the seat of government in 1799 was part of a pattern of absenteeing himself from the capital for extended periods that impaired his effectiveness. In addition to his seven months in Quincy in 1789, Adams spent four months there in each of the other three years of his presidency (Butterfield 1961, 268-69). As Jefferson put it in his 1801 circular, Adams’s “long and habitual absences” made it impossible for him to continue Washington’s practice of coordinating his administration by circulating drafts of official communications. The result was that the members of the cabinet were left to chart their own courses, “sometimes in opposite directions” (White 1948, 35).

During the run-up to the election of 1800, France agreed to a settlement of the undeclared naval war. It did so as a result of changes in its own domestic politics and because the American navy proved to be unexpectedly effective. However, the agreement occurred too late to prevent Adams’s defeat.

My emphasis on Adams’s shortcomings as chief executive may seem to be at variance with accounts of him that stress his positive qualities, such as David McCullough’s *John Adams* (2001) and Joseph Ellis’s *Passionate Sage* (2001). The apparent discrepancy is resolved by Alan Taylor, who remarks that “the same qualities of biting honesty, prolix writing, and determined independence that so offended colleagues have endeared Adams to scholars. They delight in his vivid quotations, exhaustive documentation, and utter inability to hide his feelings or cover his tracks. He is such a remarkably instructive and cooperative historical source precisely because he was so difficult for most of his contemporaries to work with” (Taylor 2000, 35).

**Thomas Jefferson and the Art of Governance**

Two pre-Civil War presidents were chosen to be immortalized on Mount Rushmore—Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Washington’s place in the pantheon of presidential greats has been unaltered over the years, but as a recent biographer points out, Jefferson’s reputation has risen and fallen with the climate of the times
(Bernstein 2003, 191-98). For much of the nineteenth century, he was widely dismissed as an impractical idealist whose vision of a nation of small farmers was irrelevant to an age of industrialization and urban growth. Then in the Progressive Era and the New Deal years Jefferson’s reputation revived, and he became a liberal icon. By the late twentieth century, he was again in disfavor as attention shifted to his status as a slave owner, his failure to make provision for freeing his slaves, the assertions in his writings that blacks are genetically inferior to whites, and the emergence in 1998 of DNA evidence suggesting that despite such views he had fathered several children with one of his slaves.

Jefferson’s complexities have made him a fertile subject for character analyses, including Joseph Ellis’s aptly titled American Sphinx (1997; also see Beran 2003; Brodie 1974; Burstein 1995). The DNA revelations prompted Ellis to enumerate a striking number of inconsistencies between Jefferson’s professed views and his behavior, in addition to the contradiction between his negative depiction of blacks and his intimate relations with an African-American woman. As a member of the Washington administration, Jefferson hired a journalist to criticize the president and his policies but denied doing so. He declared his opposition to parties, but helped found the Republican party. He also favored public and private frugality, but "spent lavishly on his personal comforts," driving himself deeply into debt (Ellis 2000, 131; on Jefferson and debt, see Sloan 1995).

Jefferson’s political convictions were more straightforward. He was guided by a commitment to social egalitarianism, popular sovereignty, and limited government. His election in 1800 marked the first transformation of power from one political party to another in the nation’s history, and it was all the more significant because it occurred without violence. Although Jefferson’s republicanism placed him in direct opposition to his Federalist predecessors, he assumed office on a conciliatory note, memorably declaring in his inaugural address that “we are all republicans: we are all federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it” (Oberg 2006, 145).1

One might expect to find little in the way of political skill on the part of a chief executive who was personally retiring and steeped in cerebral matters, but Jefferson was a subtle and deft politician. If his presidential methods were distilled into a handful of propositions, they might take the following form:

Consolidate the administration. Even if he had been of the same party as his predecessor, it is unlikely that Jefferson would have followed Adams’s practice of keeping his predecessor’s cabinet. Instead, he took pains to select a team of congenial, like-minded fellow Republicans. The inner circle of the Jefferson presidency was the president himself, Secretary of State James Madison, and Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin. Madison was Jefferson’s intellectual soul mate, disciple, and fellow Virginia planter. Gallatin, who had been a prominent congressional Republican, had the necessary finan-

1. The words “federalists” and “republicans” have typically been capitalized in quotations of this passage, and the colon in the quotation has been rendered as a comma. The quotation use here is from the most recent volume of The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, which uses original manuscript sources. I am indebted to Barbara Oberg for drawing my attention to it.
cial acumen to dismantle the portions of Hamilton’s financial system that were dispensable and retain those that were not. The cabinet was rounded out by Attorney General Levi Lincoln, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, and Secretary of the Navy Samuel Smith, all of whom also were regularly consulted by the president. It is a sign of Jefferson’s organizational skills that this group remained largely intact for the eight years of his presidency. Jefferson met with his aides singly or in small groups and convened his full cabinet for what he deemed to be particularly important matters, as well as consulting with his colleagues by circulating documents in the manner described in his 1801 circular.

Practice personal politics. “No one can know Mr. Jefferson and be his personal enemy.” This was the comment of a prominent Federalist who had shared a coach with him for three days without knowing his identity. Jefferson’s ingratiating personal manner was a lubricant to his leadership. There is no better illustration of his genius for personal politics than the regular dinners he hosted during each session of Congress. Invitations to Jefferson’s dinners were coveted by Federalists as well as Republicans. The excellent French cuisine and wine were part of the lure. The pièce de résistance, however, was the urbane conversation, which ranged across the innumerable topics on which Jefferson was knowledgeable, including philosophy, natural history, and architecture—but not politics. Jefferson reserved this for other occasions, but his political effectiveness was enhanced by the harmony fostered in his dining room (Young 1966, 169-70; Cullen 2006).

Be visibly republican. Jefferson comported himself in a manner that advertised his republicanism. He walked from his boarding house to Capitol Hill for his inauguration and took the oath of office in everyday garb rather than the formal attire favored by Washington and Adams. He abandoned the practice of personally addressing Congress on grounds that it resembled the British monarch’s address to Parliament, transmitting his State of the Union addresses to Capitol Hill in writing. He also made a point of dressing plainly almost to the point of ostentation, on one occasion wearing down-at-the-heels carpet slippers when he received the British ambassador. Even the seating arrangement at Jefferson’s dinners was egalitarian. Guests were expected to find their own places without regard for precedence and the table was round so as to have no head.

Bridge the separation of powers. Jefferson’s public position was that he did not involve himself in the business of Congress. That was far from the truth. He typically worked through intermediaries, sometimes taking it upon himself to draft legislative measures for introduction by sympathetic lawmakers. Jefferson minced no words in private about the importance he placed on influencing Congress. As he put it in urging a member of Congress to be his unofficial lieutenant in Congress, if there was no one in the legislature to advance the president’s program, the unfortunate result would be a government of “chance and not of design” (Cunningham 1978, 189).

Be guided by principle, but attempt to be flexible. In 1803, an unanticipated opportunity provided a challenge to Jefferson’s constitutional principles. Shortly before he took office, Spain ceded its huge land holdings in the Mississippi River valley to Napoleonic France. Included was the port of New Orleans, which controlled river shipping. Jefferson sought to buy New Orleans, dispatching James Monroe as his emissary to Napoleon. Monroe
reported that Napoleon was prepared to sell all of France’s former Spanish holdings for scarcely more than Jefferson had been prepared to pay for New Orleans, an acquisition that would virtually double the size of the United States. As a strict constructionist, Jefferson had opposed Hamilton’s plan for a national bank, pointing out that the Constitution made no provision for such an entity. The Constitution also did not provide for the acquisition of new territory. Jefferson’s first impulse was to call for a Constitutional amendment, but it quickly became evident that Napoleon’s offer could not wait. Dismissing his legal scruples as “metaphysical subtleties,” Jefferson consummated the purchase.

There is a night-and-day contrast between the highly successful early years of the Jefferson presidency and its troubled conclusion. The difference between the two periods bears a resemblance to that between Lyndon Johnson’s unelected and elected terms a century and a half later. In each instance, a politically skilled chief executive began his presidency with major domestic achievements, but went on to founder over an ill-considered international initiative. By 1804, Jefferson had presided over the popular Louisiana Purchase, and fulfilled his promises to shrink the federal government, reduce the national debt, and eliminate internal taxes. The Embargo of 1807 was Jefferson’s Vietnam. Hostilities between France and Britain had been in abeyance during much of Jefferson’s first term, but they broke out again early in his second term. In response to depredations against American shipping by the European powers, he instituted a strict embargo on American shipping to those nations.

Jefferson’s unrealistic conviction was that if France and Britain were deprived of trade with the United States they would be forced to alter their policies. The principal effect of the embargo, however, was to close American ports, foster smuggling, and cripple the economy, particularly that of New England. Jefferson responded to efforts to evade the embargo with a policy of draconian repression that ran counter to his idealistic principles. The embargo and Jefferson’s efforts to enforce it proved as politically costly for him as the Alien and Sedition Acts had been for Adams. For whatever reasons, he persisted in this counterproductive course of action, not displaying the pragmatism he had evinced in connection with the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson did not seek a third term in 1808. If he had done so, he might well have been defeated. (For a close examination of the Jefferson administration’s deliberations on the embargo and Jefferson’s shifting rationale for it, see Spivak 1979.)

Washington, Adams, and Jefferson Compared

The early republic posed chief executives with the political equivalent of a Rorschach test. The responses of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson to the ambiguities of their political environment lend themselves to comparison in terms of the leadership qualities enumerated in the introduction of this article, but a number of qualities manifested themselves differently in the nation’s early period than they do in the contemporary United States.
Cognitive style and emotional intelligence. The separation of powers and the constitutional provision of the president with such autonomous powers as the veto have enabled chief executives to place their stamp on public policy from the founding of the nation to the twenty-first century. The actions of presidents are determined not only by the policies they pursue but also by their more personal attributes, including the cognitive styles with which they process advice and information and their emotional strengths and weaknesses. Cognitive and emotional qualities are closely intertwined. It has periodically been the case, for example, that a president with high cognitive intelligence came to grief because he was deficient in emotional intelligence. Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton were obvious, if quite different, twentieth-century examples.

Emotional intelligence is of particular importance in the post-World War II presidency because the chief executive is the custodian of a potentially devastating nuclear arsenal, but its significance in the time of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson was far from trivial. The president’s cognitive capacity was of greater importance in the minimally staffed early presidency than it is today. Consider, for example, the personal workload of Thomas Jefferson, who composed his own letters and state papers in his own hand. In the first year of his presidency alone, Jefferson sent out 677 letters (Cunningham 1978, 35).

Washington was one of several largely self-educated early presidents, a group that includes Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. His habits of thought were shaped by his native endowments and his rich and demanding life experience, including the management of his plantation and his eight years as commander in chief of the Continental army. Adams and Jefferson, in contrast, were products of leading educational institutions—Harvard and William and Mary. Despite his modest schooling, Washington was a careful and clear-headed thinker. That was the testimony of his two successors, both of whom were veterans of his administration. Adams said Washington’s thought processes were “slow, but sure”; Jefferson described them as “slow in operation, being aided little by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion.” John Ferling quotes both statements in his biography of Washington, adding that he “had learned to elicit advice, sifting and sorting and weighing the counsel until, with great deliberateness, he made up his mind” (Ferling 1988, 257).

The methodical nature of Washington’s thought is illustrated by a carefully spelled out thought experiment he employed to explain how he wanted his estate at Mount Vernon to be managed:

Take two managers and give to each the same number of laborers, and let these laborers be equal in all respects. Let both these managers rise equally early, go equally late to rest, be equally active, sober and industrious, and yet, in the course of the year, one of them, without pushing the hands that are under him more than the other, shall have performed infinitely more work. To what is this owing? Why simply to contrivance resulting from that foresight and arrangement which will guard against the misapplication of labor, and doing it unseasonably. (White 1958, 101)

As the quotation suggests, Washington was not a mere concrete thinker who lacked the capacity for abstraction. He often enunciated general principles in the course of making practical assertions. However, he used abstractions to address practical issues, not in a spirit of philosophical speculation.
Adams and Jefferson were erudite and thoughtful. They were prolific and influential writers on the human condition and the principles of governance. However, students of Adams’s writings argue that his political philosophy was less a systematic body of doctrine than a reflection of his changing views of current political conditions (Howe 1966, xii-xiii; Shaw 1976, viii). Jefferson was an inspired polymath and an unequalled prose stylist, but he was wont to advance arguments by assertion and showed little interest in reconciling contradictions in his writings such as that between his opposition to slavery and his claim that blacks are in their nature inferior to whites. Moreover, the intellectual efforts of both men tended to be addressed to abstract issues of political philosophy rather than the detailed conduct of political affairs.

None of the three men was a paragon of emotional intelligence. Beneath Washington’s impassivity was a volcanic temper that he usually managed to control. Nevertheless, it did sometimes erupt. In 1795, for example, Washington angrily accused Jefferson’s successor as secretary of state, Edmund Randolph, of malfeasance on the basis of slender evidence, forcing his resignation. Adams was aware of his own explosive tendencies. “Zeal and fire,” he noted in his diary, “strike my imagination too much. I am obliged to be constantly on my guard; yet the heat within will burst forth at times” (Howe 1966, 25). Jefferson’s emotions are difficult to plumb. He produced thousands of personal documents, taking pains to preserve them, but they provide few clues to his inner life. He was serene on the surface, but capable of harboring intense animosities, and he had a tendency to lash out when he was defied, as he did in inflicting punishments on resisters to the embargo.

Public communication. When modern presidents seek to shape opinion, they make speeches, give news conferences, and convene public gatherings, but the spoken voice was of little utility for reaching the public in a period when travel was arduous and the lack of sound amplification made it difficult to be heard. It was necessary to rely on the written word. Archival collections of early American political documents abound with examples of public communications. Some of these take the form of broadsides—what today would be called fliers, leaflets, and pamphlets—but newspapers were the most important means of reaching the public (Pasley 2001).

The press flourished in the former British colonies. Newspapers circulated at reduced rates under the provisions of the Post Office Act of 1792 (Kielbowicz 1983). The number of papers mounted from 91 to 228 between 1790 and 1800 (Stewart 1969, 15). Moreover, newspaper readership was not confined to subscribers. It was common for news to be passed from hand to hand and even read aloud in taverns and coffee houses. Of particular importance for present purposes is what has been referred to as the presidential newspaper—a class of periodical based in the nation’s capital that was subsidized with government patronage and in effect served as the voice of the incumbent administration. These newspapers were an early equivalent of the official press release, in that their contents were reprinted in like-minded periodicals elsewhere in the nation (Laracey 2002).

There were two tracks to the Washington administration’s public communications, one bearing on policy and the other on what has come to be referred to as nation building. As would be expected from his apolitical public manner, Washington did not personally
advance his administration’s policies, although he referred to them in his annual addresses on the state of the union. Instead, they were promoted by his subordinates, the most influential of whom was Treasury Secretary Hamilton. Hamilton’s principal means of reaching the public was *The Gazette of the United States*, a newspaper that derived its support from Treasury Department patronage. The *Gazette* began its life in New York City shortly before Washington’s inauguration. The seat of government moved to Philadelphia in 1790, and the *Gazette* moved with it. Washington’s best-known public communication, his farewell address, was published directly in the *Gazette* without being delivered as a speech.

Washington’s efforts to legitimize the new nation were grounded in his public adulation. The nation was steeped in the celebrations of him. Portraits of him appeared on articles of adornment such as women’s lockets and household objects such as pitchers and vases, and were “a ubiquitous presence” in homes and public places (Cunningham 1991, 20).

In the course of his first three years as chief executive, Washington paid official visits to each of the states. In 1789, he devoted twenty-eight days to a tour of New England, omitting only Rhode Island which had not yet ratified the constitution. In 1790, he visited Rhode Island after it belatedly entered the union. In 1791, he spent four months touring the southern states. When Washington entered a community, the ritual was for a local reception committee to welcome him, extolling his virtues and those of the nation. He then would reply in kind, praising the community and voicing patriotic sentiments. These exchanges were occasions for bonding Americans to their new government. Washington did not use them to advance his administration’s policies.

The stiff-necked John Adams lacked a communications strategy. This is not surprising, in that he distrusted the public and scorned self-promotion. Adams spent roughly a year and a half of his four presidential years away from the seat of government and in virtual political limbo. His Inaugural, State of the Union, and other addresses were reported in the press, but he did not employ them to advance an overall program. Nor did he avail himself of a presidential newspaper to advance his purposes. Between April and August 1798, however, Adams was a virtual font of public communication: he replied to seventy-one messages of public support he received in connection with the conflict with France, doing so with a truculence which left the impression that he was about to lead the nation to war (Ferling 1992, 357). He seems, however, merely to have been giving vent to his feelings. There was no change in his policy of seeking a peaceful solution of the Quasi-War.

Thomas Jefferson was the first chief executive who both had a program and played an active part in promulgating it to the public. Jefferson’s bully pulpit was the *National Intelligencer*, a newspaper that set up shop in the new capital of Washington, DC, late in 1800. Jefferson availed himself of the *National Intelligencer* even before assuming office, providing it with a text of his Inauguration address, which it then printed in an Inauguration Day issue. Jefferson was in regular touch with its editor, suggesting what his paper should publish and even penning anonymous contributions to it, although he maintained that it was independent of him. One of the *National Intelligencer’s* contributions to publicizing Jefferson’s policies consisted of publishing his State of the Union
messages, and therefore making them available to be reprinted elsewhere in the nation (Peterson 1990, 659).

Organizational capacity. A recent count of the federal workforce places the number of executive branch personnel employed in and around the District of Columbia at one third of a million. There now are 3500 employees in the modern entity known as the Executive Office of the President and sixteen cabinet-level departments (U.S. Office of Personnel Management 2005). The number of executive branch employees in the nation’s capital at the time that Jefferson succeeded Adams was a mere 130 employees, and there were four cabinet-level departments. The presidency had a roster of two—the chief executive and his private secretary (Cunningham 1978, 325-26). As would be assumed, the two periods placed different organizational demands on the chief executive. Thus, it is to the advantage of modern presidents to be able to manage a large-scale organization, but that was of little utility in a period when the executive branch was miniscule. However, the far more intimate executive branch of the nation’s early years placed a premium on the president’s interpersonal skills and his ability to select compatible associates.

Washington and Jefferson were attentive to the need to structure their administrations, whereas the Adams presidency was an organizational disaster. Adams retained Washington’s cabinet with seeming obliviousness to the disloyalty of its members. His abrupt and quarrelsome manner made him ill-suited for team leadership, and his prolonged absences from the capital denied him organizational intelligence. To the extent that Adams took counsel, it was from the strong-willed Abigail Adams, who shared and reinforced her husband’s views.

Washington’s relations with his associates were those of an aloof patriarch. During the revolution, he once advised a newly promoted colonel not to be “too familiar” with his subordinates “lest you subject yourself to a want of respect which is necessary to support a proper command” (Morgan 1977, 7). Washington’s comportment with his cabinet was consistent with that advice. His prestige enabled him to command the services of exceptionally able appointees, the most notable being Hamilton and Jefferson. But the presence in his inner circle of two such strong-willed philosophical opposites led it to be riven with conflict. At one point, Washington sent letters to Hamilton and Jefferson urging them to reconcile their differences, but neither was prepared to comply.

Jefferson’s leadership style reflected two of his most salient qualities: an unwillingness to engage in confrontation and an aptitude for face-to-face relations. As his biographer Merrill Peterson puts it, “By some personal magnetism he drew men to him, persuaded them to follow, and inspired their loyalty. His style of leadership was averse to dissension and controversy. He sought to engender amiability and, where possible to grasp ‘the smooth handle’ ” (Peterson 1998, 42). Jefferson spelled out his view of how to avoid confrontation in a letter to his grandson. “Never enter into dispute or argument with another,” he advised. “I never saw an instance of one of two disputants convincing the other by argument.” His recommendation for dealing with passionate political advocates was to “get by them as you would an angry bull; it is not for a man of sense to dispute the road with such an animal” (Johnstone 1978, 35).

Political skill and policy vision. Skill is of limited value if it is not wed to a workable policy vision; vision lacks utility without the skill to implement it. Adams was deficient
in both. He was stubbornly impolitic and had no general policy vision apart from his desire to avoid war and arrive at an honorable peace with France. Washington and Jefferson were abundantly endowed with both qualities, but differed in their visions and the skills with which they advanced them. Washington's overriding concerns were with providing the nation with a solid foundation and advancing the Federalist policies he viewed as necessary for that; Jefferson's was with advancing his republican philosophy and reversing Federalist programs that were inconsistent with his principles.

Washington's political skills were broadly strategic. He sought to advance policies that served a wide range of interests and therefore were likely to endure. Washington's attentiveness to interests is illustrated by his advice to the Continental Congress when it was deliberating on whether to request that France invade Canada. Washington urged it not to do so. If France defeated the British in Canada, Washington reasoned, it would acquire an interest to take possession of it, and it was not in the interest of the United States to have a major European power at its northern border. "It is a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind," he went on to state, "that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest" (Morgan 1977, 16).

Jefferson's political skills tended to be tactical. Despite claiming to dislike politics, he was an adroit practitioner of the art of the possible. Jefferson was particularly adept at promoting policies favored by his fellow Republicans. His shortcomings in the realm of strategic skill were evident in the economically disastrous Embargo of 1807, which ran counter to the interests of significant segments of the nation and was ultimately unsustainable. It is likely that the more strategically adept Washington would have rejected such a policy out of hand.

Leadership and Political Development

Just as the future of present-day new states is often uncertain, it was far from inevitable that the United States would take hold as a nation, much less endure for over two centuries. And just as the caliber of the leaders of those nations has been critical for their fate, the outcome of the American experiment might have been far different if other leaders had been in power. By way of conclusion, I draw on the preceding comparison to make five observations about the relationship between leadership and political development in the United States and in general.

1. The indispensability of George Washington cannot be overstated. Washington's case illustrates the importance of the personal qualities of the founding leaders of new political regimes. In this respect, it is instructive to contrast the highly constructive contribution of the selfless Nelson Mandela to the emergence of a democratic South Africa with the problematic part played by the feckless Boris Yeltsin in the transition from the Soviet regime to the present Russian political system (Glad 1996).

2. The order of the Washington, Adams, and Jefferson presidencies was critically important. Washington's formative contribution could not have been duplicated by Adams or Jefferson. In fact, there was no obvious second choice for legitimizing the new nation and setting it on a steady course. By the time Washington had served eight years,
the United States was firmly enough established to withstand Adams’s flawed leadership. Washington himself was acutely aware of the importance of providing the new nation with a firm foundation. (On the tendency of early developments to become self-reinforcing, see the extensive modern literature on “path dependency”—for example, Pierson 2000 and Mahoney 2000.)

3. Institutional memory plays a far greater part in the modern presidency than it did in the early presidencies. Adams appears to have had no impulse to look to the Washington presidency for insights into how to conduct his own presidential responsibilities. While Jefferson did emulate Washington’s method of circulating draft documents within his administration, he did not draw on other of Washington’s practices, such as that of using subordinates to conduct studies of policy options. In the modern period, however, even a president as different as George W. Bush is from Bill Clinton organized his White House in much the manner as his predecessor (Hult 2003).

4. The early republic provides a compelling reminder of the importance of contingency in political development and politics more generally, particularly the contingencies that relate to which individuals fill particular positions at particular times. Thus, if the illness that afflicted Washington in his first year in office had been fatal, the new political system might well not have taken hold. It was one thing to have an Adams presidency after eight years of Washington’s leadership. It would have been quite another to have had that irascible and politically inept New Englander at the helm from the start.

5. Finally, the variation in the leadership capacities of the nation’s early presidents points to the importance of what Dahl has referred to as slack resources—hitherto unused or inadequately employed sources of political influence (Dahl 1961, 309). Jefferson was remarkably successful in devising new ways to accomplish his purposes, including personal politicking, use of the press, and liaison with Congress. His innovations foreshadow such acts of presidential innovations as Jackson’s extensive use of the veto and Polk’s reliance on the presidential war powers. This reference to the political innovations of early presidents serves as a reminder that the American presidency has evolved into a powerful instrument of governance not only as a result of changes in the society and political system but also of the entrepreneurship of individual chief executives.

References


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