

1 HISTORY

EVERY NATION has its founding myths, myths about its genesis that not only endure but that set the stage for whatever is subsequent. In the case of leadership in America, it matters that our founders were revolutionists, leaders who first were followers, subjects of the British Crown, until they successfully seized power and ultimately authority by force. It matters to leadership in America that many of these founders, including General George Washington, were ready and willing to put their lives at risk for the principles they held dear. And it matters to leadership in America that they refused to suffer a system that they had come to detest, to deem not only tyrannical but illegitimate. War wrenched the American colonies from the British Empire and secured the United States of America. To this day this war, the American Revolution, has an impact on how leadership in America is exercised.

History matters. It matters that American history is different from, say, Canadian or Mexican history, or for that matter from British history. The United States is singular in that it was the first to boast a band of revolutionists that declared the old authoritarian order dead, and a new democratic order begun. It was the first among nations to put into practice or, better, to try to, the humanistic ideas that distinguished the ideals of the Western Enlightenment.

The American Revolution was not the first of the American rebellions. By the time independence was declared in 1776, the colonies had a history of resistance, a history in which those who ostensibly were powerless took on those who obviously were powerful. In 1676 in Virginia, for example, there was Bacon's Rebellion, an uprising of white frontiersmen joined by slaves and servants that so threatened the British governor he was forced to flee the capital, Jamestown. England's response was to send a thousand British soldiers to pacify the forty thousand American colonists and, after order was restored, to hang the leader of the insurrectionists, Nathaniel Bacon. But Bacon's Rebellion was just one among many revolts against the English, all up and down the eastern seaboard, in colonies from Massachusetts to Virginia. In New York there were strikes of coopers, butchers, bakers, and porters. In New Jersey there were demonstrations by farmers against landowners. And years before the Boston Tea Party, in Massachusetts there were protests and petitions and pamphlets, all signs and symbols of growing hostility to the English Crown.¹ In truth, while the colonists lived in a monarchy and were monarchical subjects, they never did much respect royalty. From the beginning they were "the most republican of people in the English-speaking world. Every visitor to the New World sensed it."²

In the decade or so before 1776, resistance against the British came to a head, especially, again, in Massachusetts. In 1767, riots in Boston broke out, against the Stamp Act. Three years later came a fight since known as the Boston Massacre. (Ten thousand Bostonians, over two-thirds the total population, took part in the funerals.) And in 1773 there was the Boston Tea Party—a protest against the English government and the English-owned East India Company—that led to the imposition by the British of martial law.

As historian Edmund Morgan has vividly detailed, there was from the start a striking inconsistency, a stunning hypocrisy. Here is a case in point: two Virginians, both leaders, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. On the one hand both led the fight for freedom. On the other hand both owned slaves. It was not that every single white man was a slave owner. Rather, it was that the men who came together to found the

United States of America, which was dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, either did own slaves or were “willing to join hands with those who did.”³ This striking contradiction characterized American history not merely briefly, but for nearly two hundred years, from before the revolution straight through to emancipation. Still, it never precluded a conglomeration of republican ideas and ideals from dominating politics. In colonial America a slave labor force was isolated from the rest of society, while the rest of society—a body of large planters and a larger body of small planters—was increasingly committed to freedom and equality. In fact, (white) Virginians remained throughout the colonial period at the forefront of opposition to England, and took leading roles in creating the American republic.⁴

The American Revolution was, then, the culmination of decades of resistance and rebellion, which in time hardened to righteous rage at royalty thousands of miles and an ocean away. As Thomas Paine put it in his iconic, incendiary booklet *Common Sense*, intended to persuade the public to support independence from Great Britain, “This new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother [country], but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home pursues their descendents still.”⁵

Above all, the freshly minted governors of the United States of America determined to protect against tyranny. The Constitution was to be crafted with this in mind, structured to preclude the possibility of too much power held by a single individual or institution. Put on notice by yet another revolt—Shays’ Rebellion, in 1786, again in Massachusetts—the framers viewed their task as a balancing act. They wanted a system of representation that would respond to the legitimate needs of the people, but they also wanted to curb the peoples’ passions and greed. Similarly, they thought to gain safety and security by creating a stronger and broader union, but they did not intend for this union to be so broad or so strong as to tip toward tyranny. It was James Madison who proposed the solution that ultimately prevailed—the Constitution of the United

States. It was he who perhaps best understood that in order to preclude populism and factionalism from destroying the Revolution's hard-won gains, it was necessary to secure the new nation, in its entirety. It "alone could be thought to stand superior to the people of any single state."⁶

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the Constitutional Convention. For if the intention of the revolution was utopian, no less than the destruction of the old monarchical society, the reality the morning after was different. It is, as we have seen even in our own time, one thing to destroy the old, and quite another to build the new. "To form a new Government requires infinite care and unbounded attention," George Washington warned in 1776, "for if the foundation is badly laid, the superstructure must be bad." A "matter of such moment," he continued, "cannot be the Work of a day."⁷

And it was not. It took over a decade, until 1787, for the founders to agree to and sign off on the United States Constitution. Above all their intent was to fragment political power while, simultaneously, providing sufficient political power to make possible good governance. The Constitution included a federal system, which gave some powers to the federal government and others to the states; staggered elections for the president, the House and the Senate, so that no majority could seize power in a single swoop; and a separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.⁸ Whatever the deficiencies of this fragmented political system, it did over time accomplish what the framers wanted and intended. It precluded tyranny, even by the executive, while providing a system of governance that, whatever the mood of the moment, over more than 225 years of American history has served the United States of America relatively well. (The Constitution is not beyond reproach, however, especially not now, when the federal government is so obviously dysfunctional.⁹)

But so far as leadership is concerned, leadership of any kind, America's fractured political system has complicated the task. Democracy is, under the best of circumstances, a messy business. Leading democratically is far harder and less efficient than leading autocratically. (As Winston Churchill famously put it, "Democracy is the worst form of

government, except for all those others that have been tried.”) And when the history of a country leaves a legacy that renders its citizens virtually allergic to authority, leadership is the more difficult.

America is unlike other modern democracies—say, those in Western Europe—not only because of its revolutionary genesis, but also because Americans have never known another form of government. There never was a king on American soil. Nor did the papacy ever rule here, in contrast to England, for example, where the Anglican Church was in the grip of the crown. Nor was there ever a despot or autocrat to rival those in other lands. Nor was the colonial aristocracy ever as well established, as wealthy, or as dominant as its British counterpart.

Democratic political leadership is the only sort of political leadership ever enshrined in America, which is precisely why effective leadership has always been relatively difficult to exercise, and why effective followership has always been relatively easy. Put differently, historically it has been comparatively hard to create change from the top down, and comparatively easy to create change from the bottom up.¹⁰ Again, this is in consequence of history. “In the end the disintegration of the traditional eighteenth-century monarchical society of paternal and dependent relationships prepared the way for the emergence of the liberal, democratic, capitalist world of the early nineteenth century.”¹¹

Until the mid-eighteenth century, most Americans, if they were white, assumed that life in the “new world” would continue to mirror the life they left behind in the old world, in Europe. It would be hierarchically ordered, with some rich and others poor, some honored and others obscure, some powerful and others weak. The assumption was that authority would continue to exist without challenge. But the Revolution changed all that, permanently. There was no clinging to the past once *defiance* of power “poured from the colonial presses and was hurled from half the pulpits of the land.” There was no clinging to the past once “the right, the need, the absolute obligation to *disobey* legally constituted authority had become the universal cry” (*italics mine*). And there was no clinging to the past once, instead of obedience, it was *resistance* that was a “doctrine according to godliness.”¹²

After the United States of America became hard fact as opposed to imagined figment, after the Constitution was finally and fully ratified (1790), the anti-authority fever that had fueled the Revolutionary War hardened into an anti-authority attitude that has marked America's political culture ever since. In an earlier book, I wrote that so far as leadership in America is concerned, it has three key characteristics: a general antagonism toward governmental authority; a particular ambivalence toward those in positions of power; and an uncertainty about what constitutes effective leadership and management in a democratic society.¹³ And no wonder, for in the half century that followed the Revolution, what little did remain of the traditional social hierarchy virtually collapsed. In its place was a quest for independence that historically was unprecedented: first was independence from Great Britain, then independence of the states from each other, then independence of the people from the government, and "lastly, the members of society be equally independent of each other."¹⁴

Some fifty years after the conclusion of the Revolution, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, in his classic treatise, *Democracy in America*, marveled at how independent and idiosyncratic were ordinary Americans. "Since they do not recognize any signs of incontestable greatness or superiority in any of their fellows, are continually brought back to their own judgment as the most apparent and accessible test of truth. . . . There is a general distaste for accepting any man's word as proof of anything."¹⁵ The implications of this for leadership in America—for leadership in general, not just for political leadership—are easy enough to see. I will follow your lead if it is in my interest to do so, for whatever reason, such as the promise of reward or the fear of punishment. But if I am to follow your lead of my own free will, you will have to persuade me that it is what *I* want to do, not merely what *you* want me to do. If you cannot, or will not, I will chart my own course as I see fit.

There are alternative views of American history, "spirited controversies about the underlying dynamics."¹⁶ Some historians are persuaded that the founders were not much better than their predecessors, the English, the earlier entitled class that sought to control profits and power.¹⁷

They see the nation's progress as more fundamentally marked by economic fights than shared values, and they are persuaded that early patterns of power persist to this day. (These patterns presumably explain why to this day the haves remain strongly advantaged over the have-nots.¹⁸) In addition, as earlier suggested, it has become almost impossible in the past several decades to comment on the American experiment without referencing the large swaths of people originally excluded from the promise of the process—particularly women and people of color.

Still, as I will further explore in the next section, ideas have an impact. They affect how and what we think, and what we do and why. In this case they explain why, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems obvious that the odious legal inconsistencies that had stained the republic since its inception would eventually, inevitably, be eradicated. Eighteenth-century America was, then, about promises made on paper: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” And nineteenth-century America was about promises realized—about extending these “inalienable rights” to all men and, finally, early in the twentieth century, to women.

Change took time, change spilled blood. That most wretched of all American wars, the Civil War, is still widely regarded as a necessary evil, necessary to preserve the Union and emancipate the slaves, necessary to put into democratic practice democratic theory.¹⁹ But notwithstanding our lionizing, our veritable worship of President Abraham Lincoln, he did not initially intend to upend the system by freeing the slaves. At the start of the war his goals were to restore the Union and bar slavery from spreading further. In fact, in order to keep Kentucky in the Union (to use as a military base), Lincoln deliberately muffled any talk of abolition, changing course only when he realized the South was so strong that the Civil War would likely not end until slavery did. Not by accident was the ex-slave turned abolitionist orator, Frederick Douglass, more prescient than his president. It was Douglass who foresaw even in 1861 that “the Negro is the key of the situation—the pivot upon which the

whole rebellion turns.”²⁰ He could see in a way that Lincoln could not that the inexorable logic of events would eventually oblige the American president to make eradication of slavery the spear point of the war.²¹

The trajectory of American history suggests that change of great magnitude—such as the abolition of slavery—nearly never happens of its own. Nor is it typically initiated by leaders, people in positions of authority, who generally are invested in the status quo.²² Rather, change of great magnitude requires pressure from below, populist pressure exerted by those in the middle or even at the bottom. The reason is, as Martin Luther King pointedly put it in “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” those *with* power nearly never surrender to those *without*—unless they are compelled to do so. “We know through painful experience,” King wrote, “that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”²³

To understand this particular truism is to understand why even the most liberal of American leaders do not generally get elected by promising or, as some would have it, by threatening to overturn the system, to initiate radical change. To be sure, there are moments of crisis—Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected to the White House at the height of the Great Depression—moments when the American people want major change and the president provides major change. It was under Roosevelt that the American welfare state—federal programs to help the old, the poor, the unemployed, and, more recently, the sick—was initially created. But such a shift initiated and implemented from on high is the historical exception, not the historical rule.

Clearly, then, notwithstanding America’s original revolutionary rhetoric, the pursuit of rights in America has been a messy business. Neither emancipation, nor universal suffrage, nor any other single step forward has meant that rights, the rights of all Americans, were finally fully and formally secured. In his second inaugural address, President Barack Obama acknowledged as much, describing Americans as being on a “journey” that even now is incomplete. “Our journey is not complete until [women] can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey

is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law. . . . Our journey is not complete until no citizen is forced to wait for hours to exercise the right to vote. . . .”²⁴

Even in the second decade of the twenty-first century, then, Americans remain engaged in an ongoing and generally ragtag process, in which leaders are pressed by followers, to different degrees at different times, to surrender something, usually power or money. It’s not always apparent what sets the process in motion, what gets it to going faster, or what brings it, eventually, to a temporary halt. What is evident is that the process continues—and that its most recent apogee was reached in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time of great change when those without came knocking on the door, hard, of those with.

In part, certainly, the 1960s and 1970s were so febrile and fertile a period in American history because of the war in Vietnam. The energies that went into the antiwar movement seemed then and still seem now to have spilled easily and effortlessly into other vaguely related causes, the one fueling the other in a fireball of anti-authority activity.

The various rights revolutions—civil rights, women’s rights, gay and lesbian rights, children’s rights, people with disabilities rights, animal rights—in the middle years of the twentieth century were in the event little short of revolutionary. America *after* was strikingly different from America *before*.

Yet even so careful a student of these rights revolutions as Steven Pinker admits to being unable to explain exactly why they started when they did, and what made them so successful in so relatively short a period of time. Pinker finally concludes it is impossible to pinpoint “an exogenous factor that would explain” why these particular rights revolutions bunched up as they did, in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁵

What we do know though is this: that even these most recent of the recurring rights revolutions had the same ideological origins as their predecessors, in the liberal ideas and democratic ideals of the Enlightenment. Ideas and ideals like these inevitably debunk ignorance and superstition, and they necessarily, if sometimes only slowly, sow change.

I hasten to add that by no means is the United States of America invariably on the cutting edge of liberalism, or even of sociopolitical change. For example, in the nineteenth century the British beat the Americans to the banishment of slavery—the Slavery Abolition Act was passed in 1833, though it was easier for England to end a system not so deeply entrenched. And in the twenty-first century, some countries are by some measures well ahead of the United States: they are better, for example, at narrowing the gap between rich and poor and at narrowing the gap between women and men. Similarly, while same-sex marriage is still prohibited in many American states, it is entirely legal elsewhere, for instance, in Britain and Belgium, and in Sweden and Spain.²⁶

Still my overarching point is this. So far as leadership and followership are concerned, the United States of America is singular. First, because of its revolutionary inception it has always been characterized by a political culture that is anti-authority, that ensures and even encourages conflict between, and also among, leaders and led. Second, because of its revolutionary inception it has always been characterized by a political structure that makes it difficult for anyone at any level politically to lead—up to and including the chief executive. Third, because of its revolutionary inception it has always been characterized by a national character that is independent and idiosyncratic, by men and women who as soon follow their own path as anyone else's. Fourth, because of its revolutionary inception it has always been characterized by an ideology that, however idealized, advantages the have-nots at the expense of the haves. And, finally, because of its revolutionary inception it has always been characterized by a set of documents—by laws, if you will—that codify, sanctify, the fulfillments of followers as well as of leaders.

Anti-authoritarian attitudes and practices are, then, part of the American political system and national character in a way that they are not, or at least have not always been, of other political systems and national characters.²⁷ Obviously, this advantage in theory was not then, in the late eighteenth century, and is not now, in the early twenty-first, necessarily always an advantage in practice. Even this cursory chronicle

demonstrates how hard it has been for those without power, authority, and influence to get what rightfully, literally, is theirs. Still, when the weak are furious enough and fierce enough to take on the strong, history suggests that the former will get what they want, or at least some of what they want, if not today, then tomorrow.

Precisely because political leadership in America has always been difficult to exercise, other types of leadership have been difficult to exercise as well—there is a relationship, a corollary or parallel, between them. So, for example, private sector leaders obviously do not have the same kinds of constraints as do public sector leaders, but they suffer, so to speak, other kinds of constraints. Business leaders are not, in other words, exempt from the importance of culture and character. And they are not exempt from the ideological, intellectual foundations on which this country was built. As a result—because leadership in America has never been other than democratic, at least in theory, and because, as Tocqueville put it, there is a general “distaste for accepting any man’s word as proof of anything”—leadership in America, including corporate leadership, has always depended at least somewhat on the capacity to personally persuade, as opposed to only on the capacity to control.

In general, historically, leaders in other countries—say in Germany, Russia, China, and Japan—have been able more easily than leaders in the United States to command and control, to tell their followers what to do and when and how. Because they have had more power and greater authority they have not had to rely as much, if at all, on influence. But in the United States influence—my ability to get you to do what I want you to do, *of your own volition*—has always been relatively important, precisely because power and authority have always been relatively *unimportant*.²⁸ There is, in other words, along these general lines a difference between Americans and people from other places.²⁹ It’s one of the reasons why the leadership industry is, largely, certainly originally, an American industry. And it’s one of the reasons why the leadership literature—again, largely American—emphasizes soft skills, including communication, ingratiation, and emotional intelligence, even over hard ones relating to the particulars of the position.

In his second annual message to Congress, Abraham Lincoln said, “Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history.”³⁰ To this general rule, patterns of dominance and deference are no exceptions. The anti-authority fever that fueled the Revolutionary War, and that hardened over time into an anti-authority attitude, left a legacy that endures to this day. Americans remain by national nature and political culture relatively recalcitrant—one of the reasons why exercising leadership in twenty-first-century America is relatively hard.