US Leadership in Political Time and Space
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US Leadership in Political Time and Space
Pathfinders, Patriots, and Existential Heroes

Jon Johansson
This book is dedicated to the driving ideals of William J. Fulbright and the people who devote their lives to making his ideals happen
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Preface

A Leadership Dilemma

One cool morning in early fall 2009, my wife Paula and I took a boat cruise down the Potomac to Mount Vernon, home to George Washington. It was a quiet day on the river, and in my mind’s eye I tried to envisage how it might have looked in the early 1770s. I imagined a busy waterway filled with sailing ships and all manner of smaller boats and canoes laden with tobacco, or perhaps furs or rice for trade, while British ships docked at Alexandria with their manifests full of fine ware and other imported goods from Europe. I could also imagine seeing the shimmering movement of Powhatan Indians on the river banks and in the surrounding forests. Washington’s mansion, looking majestically down upon the flowing waters of the Potomac, had a command vista over all of this activity and our visit provided us with a glimpse of life for the tidewater Virginian planters; a multifaceted, complex business of managing large-scale farming, fishing, manufacturing, and real estate operations, as well as managing the human resources—laborers and slaves—who lived, worked, and frequently died there.

Returning to the District later that afternoon our sense of serenity was shattered by the noise of 75,000 Tea Party supporters singing and chanting on the Washington Mall. They’d descended upon the capital from across the country to protest against President Barack Obama and his policies. Incendiary signs that compared the president to Hitler waved alongside others copying the revolutionary era “DON’T TREAD ON ME” flag, with a coiled rattlesnake on it. Tea Party protests were a phenomenon that sprang up in early 2009, almost immediately after Obama assumed office. They were organic in origin but fertilized by conservative forces with deep pockets and an ideological rancor against the president to match. Opposition to government bailouts, stimulus spending, taxes, and therefore big government, was the ostensive organizing principles of the protesters, so Obama’s health care
bill—his signature domestic reform—became a major focus of their protests. Over summer, opposition to the president’s policy became more entrenched. Obama’s approval rating, at the time of the big mall protest in early September, was 15 points lower than when he assumed office. The Democrat-controlled Congress, easily distracted by the 2010 midterm elections, struggled to progress health care—even though its legislative genesis lay in a bipartisan Senate Finance Committee bill—and as delay heaped upon delay more Democratic senators headed toward exit signs, where their Republican colleagues were already waiting for them. Political pundits were suggesting that the Democrats were staring down the barrel of a 30-plus-seat loss in 2010 if they couldn’t win the argument over health care (it turned out far worse; a 63-seat loss). “Yes we can” was morphing into “no we can’t.”

In October, commander of US and international forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, saw a report leaked to media in which he requested tens of thousands of more troops in Afghanistan to halt the stubborn Taliban resistance. The president ordered a strategic review of the then eight-year war in Afghanistan, but Obama faced pressure simultaneously to acquiesce to his general(s) or end a war the country had wearied of. Between health care and the war, the president was being hammered for not being decisive enough.1 By early December, Obama’s approval rating fell below 50 percent. At the same time, during an unseasonably warm December day in the district, I read historian David McCullough’s brilliant account of the critical year, 1776, and marveled at a story about a Boston bookkeeper, Henry Knox. He retrieved 120,000 pounds of cannons during a 600-mile return, midwinter journey from Boston to Fort Ticonderoga, in Upstate New York, to help General Washington break the siege of Boston. I remember thinking, with health care reform facing still more obstruction, or even outright repudiation, where was Obama’s Henry Knox?

The question of how Obama could find himself in a deteriorating situation with his signature reform perilously poised, and with his presidency riding on its passage, was a troubling one. Just a year earlier, when riding a wave of optimism about his leading change, and with health care reform—to advance social justice goals while also attempting to constrain costs—his key campaign promise, Obama was given a clear mandate to do so by a majority of Americans who voted. Not only had he defeated his Republican Party opponent, Arizona Senator John McCain, by over seven percentage points, but Obama had received 52.9 percent of the popular vote. His dazzling campaign also helped mobilize the highest turnout of voters, at 61.6 percent, seen in 40 years.
Additionally, after the defection of Pennsylvania Republican Senator Arlen Specter to the Democrats, Obama had throughout 2009—until the late Massachusetts Senator, Edward Kennedy’s seat was won by Republican Scott Brown in a special election—the so-called magic 60 vote supermajority needed to shut down any Republican filibuster, and so prevent obstruction from Senate Republicans. The president’s party also held a solid majority in the House of Representatives (257 seats vs. 178 seats, behind a 53.2 percent to 42.6 percent advantage to the Democrats in overall votes). Obama’s political position was the strongest for a generation yet here he was, struggling to muster sufficient votes to achieve his signature domestic reform.

When the Affordable Care Act finally limped across the finishing line in early 2010, on the back of reluctant House support (219–212) for the Senate’s earlier Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which required an accompanying reconciliation bill to honor a deal between House and Senate leaderships, the filibuster had been thwarted. A policy dilemma that had defeated eight previous presidents had been, if not optimally fixed, at least given a thorough overhaul, although the Supreme Court and Republican governors have, since, altered its shape. However, millions of Americans could potentially gain access to basic security for the first time. The health care reform process can be offered as proof for how entropic the legislative process has become and how hyperpartisanship prevents policy change from happening. If Obama’s election victory wasn’t enough to convince his own congressional colleagues to support what was, in essence, their own imperfect plan, or to persuade Republicans that they should support rather than obstruct the president’s reform effort, then it revealed how change resistant the political system was. An election mandate wasn’t enough. Majority rule wasn’t enough. The political system seemed more geared toward inertia than action.

Health care’s passage proved political entropy in a further, paradoxical fashion. Given health care, in one form or another, constituted fully one-sixth of the domestic economy, such a hugely complex reform effort, however ungainly its passage, was nevertheless the most significant reform since civil rights legislation passed in the mid-1960s, which served as a stark reminder about just how ossified lawmaking had become during the intervening 45 years. The 111th Congress could be viewed historically, therefore, as one of the most productive since the acclaimed 89th Congress passed the Social Security Act (1965) and Voting Rights Act (1965) amongst a raft of other legislation. Yet, the 111th Congress’s brief flourish couldn’t be sustained, and during the
Obama presidency, its successor, the 112th Congress, provoked a near government shutdown and played chicken with the nation’s debt limit. The 113th Congress did shut the government down for 16 days, passed little legislation, and was rated by voters as the worst in the nation’s history. The main political strategy of the House Republicans ever since health care passed has been to destroy it. At the time of writing, Republicans have voted to repeal what they label as “Obamacare” 47 times.

The leadership dilemma that is posed here is whether the sclerosis of the American political system has effectively narrowed a president’s scope for action or closed these opportunities off altogether? And if so, the question then becomes from where else can leadership emerge in a political system that is almost completely change resistant but for the odd punctuated crisis, when it is forced to act? It is addressing this latter question that drives this four-part study into American-style leadership. In the following pages, the subjects are either nonpoliticians or individuals who are less than optimally positioned to lead change. None possess the preeminent strategic placement of a president.

The 12 subjects in this study—introduced in Part I under three quintessentially American leadership archetypes: pathfinders, patriots, and existential heroes—come from a number of different domains—revolutionary pamphleteering, military leadership, baseball, civil rights, and politics. Some subjects worked near centers of power, like the explorer Meriwether Lewis and Civil War General Ulysses S. Grant; others nowhere near it, like baseballer Jackie Robinson and civil rights activist Rosa Parks. Some subjects were strategically located close to information, like the analyst Daniel Ellsberg; others operated in a vacuum from it, like Civil War General William T. Sherman during his march to the sea; while others, again, created it, like revolutionary firebrand Thomas Paine, when he published *Common Sense*. In each case presented the president is there, in the shadows, but the focus remains firmly located on the individuals who offered leadership through their words or actions when a president could not or would not act.

Part II, encompassing chapters 2–4, showcases an exemplar of each leadership archetype, drawn from the revolutionary era to ground this work in the forge of America’s creation phase, while also establishing the foundation of American-style leadership. In Part III, embracing chapters 5–7, nine further case studies of pathfinding and patriotic leadership, alongside that exhibited by existential heroes, are examined during two main types of moral crises—civil rights and war. Part IV, or chapter 8, will draw together findings to show how individuals
across American history have exploited their moment in history to lead in adaptive ways, enriching the quality of the American experience for their fellow citizens in the process.

It is fashionable for people to talk of the American experiment in government as being in crisis or that the nation is in mortal decline, soon to be eclipsed by a rising China. This study, in contrast, unashamedly mirrors the optimism (and challenge) that President John F. Kennedy laid out in Profiles of Courage: “For, in a democracy, every citizen, regardless of his interest in politics, ‘holds office’; every one of us is in a position of responsibility; and, in the final analysis, the kind of government we get depends upon how we fulfill those responsibilities.” The study which follows therefore examines 12 examples of American “office-holders” who offered their individual leadership in pathfinding and patriotic ways or by standing alone.