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[Introduction to] Presidential Leadership and African Americans: "An American Dilemma" from Slavery to the White House

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PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

"An American Dilemma" from Slavery
to the White House

by George R. Goethals

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INTRODUCTION

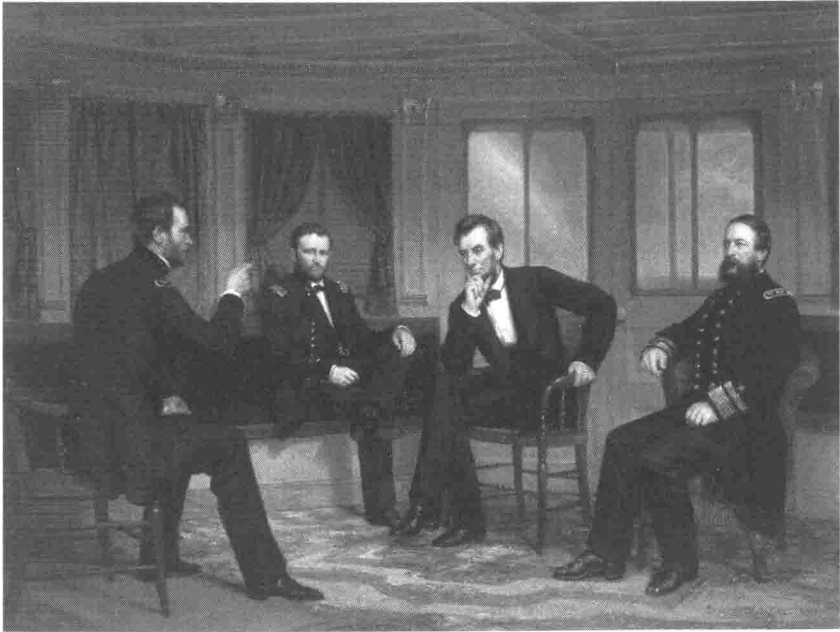## Presidential Leadership and the American Dilemma: Psychological Dimensions

Figure 0.1 On the *River Queen* at City Point, Virginia, in 1865, Abraham Lincoln discussed lenient terms for the South after the Civil War with General William Tecumseh Sherman, General Ulysses S. Grant, and Admiral David Porter.

George Peter Alexander Healy, "The Peacemakers," 1868, oil on canvas. The White House, Washington, DC. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In August of 1864, the prospects of Union victory in the Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln's prospects for re-election in November, were at an all-time low. In May of that year, hopes had been high. In Virginia, the Army of the Potomac, now directed by the most successful Union general, Ulysses S. Grant, would finally make good on the cry, "On to Richmond." Further south, General William

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T. Sherman was preparing to leave Chattanooga, Tennessee, with the object of capturing Atlanta, thereby severing crucial rail connections in the heart of the Confederacy. By August, such high hopes had turned bitter. Both Grant and Sherman were stalled by their Confederate counterparts, Robert E. Lee and Joseph Johnston. People in the north were appalled at the mounting casualties. Many had reluctantly come to believe that the carnage was too great, the costs too high, and that peace would have to be negotiated. On the South's terms. The Civil War was lost, and the Confederate States of America would gain its independence.

The Southern strategy was clear. While it was not going to be possible to defeat the massive Northern armies or break the strangling Union blockade of Confederate ports, if the war had reached a stalemate, Lincoln would lose the election and the Democratic candidate, most likely former Union General George B. McClellan, would make peace and give the South its independence. In this context, rumor and propaganda flourished. The so-called Copperhead Democrats in the North, long opposed to the president's war efforts—especially his Emancipation Proclamation—sought to defeat Lincoln by claiming it was only his insistence on "the abandonment of slavery" that prolonged the war. If only Lincoln would retract his Proclamation, the South would peaceably return to the Union. Perhaps the Copperheads feared Northern victory and free blacks more than Southern independence. Regardless, they repeated the false story that only Lincoln's "abolition crusade" stood in the way of peace and reunion. However, Lincoln and most Republicans knew that the South would never return of its own volition to the Union. Only total defeat would save the United States of America. And loyal voices attempted to paint Confederate President Jefferson Davis's insistence on independence as the stumbling block to peace. There was, in effect, a contest of causal attribution.[1] Was it Lincoln's insistence on emancipation or Davis's insistence on independence that prolonged the war?

Under tremendous pressure from an ever-larger chorus of criticism, Lincoln was twice tempted to test Davis's willingness to make peace if the slavery issue were put aside. Although he had several times declared that the promise of emancipation "once made, must be kept," Lincoln edged toward exploring the possibility of reunion without abolition. On August 17, he drafted one letter saying, "if Jefferson Davis wishes . . . to know what I would do if he were to offer peace and reunion, saying nothing about slavery, let him try me."[2] If such a letter were made public, the freedom African Americans longed for would likely be forever lost. But Lincoln reconsidered and resisted that dangerous temptation. Still, a week later, he drafted a second such letter to be carried to Richmond by negotiators trying to assess Davis's position on both reunion and slavery. In this one, Lincoln proposed "that upon the restoration of the Union and the national authority, the war shall cease at once, all remaining questions to be left for adjustment by peaceful modes."[3] Again, it seemed that Lincoln might be willing to break the promise, to sacrifice the cause of freedom—which had done so much to transform the war and to potentially transform the nation—for peace.

By the next day, Lincoln had again changed his mind. He would not give up the struggle for "a new birth of freedom."[4] If he lost the election, so be it. He reaffirmed first principles. As he wrote the previous year: "[A]nd the promise being made, must be kept."[5]

Fortunately for Lincoln and the nation, the military situation, "upon which all else chiefly depends,"[6] Lincoln asserted later, soon turned dramatically for the better. On September 3, Lincoln received a cherished telegram from Sherman: "Atlanta is ours, and fairly won."[7] Shortly thereafter, Union General Philip Sheridan won decisive battles in the Shenandoah Valley, and Lincoln's war strategy prevailed. He defeated McCellan decisively in the November election.

Psychological Dimensions of Presidential Leadership

The pressures that Lincoln was under, and his apparent temptation to sacrifice the cause of African Americans for peace, are but two examples of the cross-currents of opinion, context, and stress that have challenged presidential leadership in America since the administration of George Washington. Such conflicting forces have often involved black Americans. In combination with the psychological resources of American leaders, they have produced decisions that made conditions better or worse for our countrymen. In this book, we tell the story of those contingencies and how a number of American presidents have responded to them at crucial turning points in US history. How did those presidents think, feel, and act as the external forces that pressed upon them interacted with their own motives, values, goals, and beliefs?

There are a number of perspectives that guide our exploration. First, while presidential decision making, or what Fred Greenstein called "the presidential difference," provides the framework as we go forward, it is far from the only piece to the puzzle.[8] What presidents think and do has been immensely important, but seldom do their actions simply reflect their attitudes and aspirations. Their policies exist and evolve in the midst of the turmoil of events. Other actors' behavior affects their actions and thus American history at least as much as their own. Importantly, as we explore presidential decision making regarding African Americans—from questions of slavery, emancipation, suffrage, segregation, and equal protection of the laws to civil rights and voting rights—the actions of individual African Americans and groups of African Americans weigh heavily. We shall see for example that Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, was shaped, perhaps indeed forced, by what slaves and other blacks did for themselves. Lincoln was well aware of this, as he said in a famous letter, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."[9]

We will also see that the decisions and actions of both black Americans and American presidents unfold in a society that, like many others, has a consistent history of racial prejudice and racial exploitation. The history of slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow, and civil rights, for example, reflects deep strains of racism.

This is true both for the events in these struggles and in the telling of them. Race prejudice, at times in the background and at times at the forefront, has strongly influenced the course of American history and the history of presidential leadership. It matters greatly.

These considerations underline the importance of several lines of social psychological research on the way human beings understand each other. Studies on what is called the "fundamental attribution error" show that observers of behavior have a tendency to attribute what they see to something about the person performing the action, even when the behavior they observe is very likely caused by something in the situation or the environment.[10] For example, a politician states that she is strongly opposed to raising taxes while another declares that he opposes the death penalty. We make the attribution that their positions reflect their values and dispositions. But we may be wrong. Though their statements could reflect what the office seekers really believe, their true attitudes, it's just as likely that they reflect the prevailing political pressures. These instances of the fundamental attribution error reflect something called "the correspondence bias."[11] We have a strong tendency to see behavior as corresponding to an underlying trait or disposition. We do not consider the circumstances.

In considering presidential decisions affecting the lives of African Americans, it is easy to fall into the trap of attributing either racist or unusually egalitarian attitudes to the president, depending on whether his action advanced or impeded the welfare of black citizens. However, in many cases, the decision will be affected by a whole range of pressures and circumstances. This does not imply that their actions are forced or beyond their control or that they do not bear responsibility for them, only that what they do is affected by much more than their own preferences, beliefs, and morality.

Closely related to the fundamental attribution error is a bias toward attributing group success or failure to the leader, especially the leader's personality and abilities. When groups do well, we think they have been led well and that the leader is the responsible party. This bias is called "the romance of leadership."[12] But it applies to cases of group failure as well as success. We praise or blame the leader for the group's outcomes. People have "leader schemas" or "implicit leadership theories" that encapsulate their knowledge or beliefs about what leaders are like, how they act, and what role they play in influencing or determining events and outcomes.[13] The "romance of leadership" is part of those schemas or theories. It is the common belief that what leaders do causes their groups to win or lose, or succeed or fail. This bias can affect thinking about such questions as how much of the march to Jim Crow segregation and oppression in the early twentieth century is attributable to the leadership of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson and how much Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were responsible for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Pointing out these biases does not make students of leadership immune to them. In each case of presidential leadership, he or she makes the best assessments

possible considering as much of the relevant circumstance and personal character and capacity as possible. One difficulty is while we can be aware of, if we choose to look, the external pressures acting on a president, we cannot get inside their heads, nor could we even if they were alive, to study the conflicting internal pressures with which they wrestled. George Washington's decisions about slavery reflected not only the political and constitutional constraints on the actions he contemplated. They also balanced his financial interests, his need for control, his feelings about his wife Martha, his sense of responsibility to other family members, his abiding concern with his reputation, and his place in history all against what he believed at the time about the morality of slavery. Abraham Lincoln weighed the goals of union, peace, and ending the war's blood-letting against his public promises and his own sense of right and wrong. In both cases, their decisions reflected multiple external pressures and often conflicting internal considerations.

The different internal impulses decision makers must weigh underline an important distinction between moral thought and moral behavior.[14] In considering the former, we note that different presidents arrive at different points along a scale of moral development. Lawrence Kohlberg's[15] studies of moral development, and its closely related counterpart cognitive development, led him to propose "post-conventional morality" as the most advanced stage of moral thinking. At this level, individuals make moral judgments based on carefully thought-out ethical principles based on universal values such as freedom and justice. Both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln had life experiences that prompted moral development to higher levels than many other presidents. Washington, a slave owner in a society dominated by and constructed for slave owners, had experiences with African Americans that disturbed and challenged the values and beliefs with which he was raised.[16] Lincoln's wartime experiences, and his contact with individual African Americans such as Frederick Douglass, also set in motion moral thinking that would not have otherwise taken place. Presidents' differing levels of moral development, both generally and with respect to slavery and black people, were significant factors in their public behavior.

But, as noted above, moral thought is not the same as moral behavior. For many years, psychologists have noted the discrepancy between attitudes and behavior. Often people do not do what they know is right and engage in behaviors that they feel are wrong. Some individuals connect their attitudes and values more clearly to behavior than others;[17] their capacity for self-regulation seems more developed and more consistent.[18] We will see significant variation among presidents in their capacity to do what they know is right.

The inconsistencies that do occur raise their own fascinating questions about how people feel, think, and ultimately act. Most relevant here is Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, a social psychological theory that has become increasingly influential outside its discipline.[19] Dissonance theory argues that the inconsistency of thoughts, or "cognitions," creates uncomfortable psychological

arousal—cognitive dissonance is the name for that negative or aversive psychological state—which pushes the person experiencing such dissonance to make it go away, to reduce it in some way. Those ways include changing one of the inconsistent thoughts, diminishing their importance, or simply forgetting them.[20] These routes to dissonance reduction are similar in many ways to the ego-defense mechanisms described by Sigmund Freud at the end of his long career.[21] Repression, denial, and, in particular, rationalization are hallmarks of dissonance reduction. We will see that presidents differ in their dissonance reduction strategies. In general, those who were not very good at reducing dissonance ended up doing what their moral commitments dictated more than those possessing what e. e. cummings described as "comfortable minds." A number of historians place Thomas Jefferson in the latter category, suggesting that he was comfortable overlooking how his behavior contradicted his eloquently articulated arguments against slavery. While his case is more complicated than a simple instance of good dissonance reduction, it does illustrate the concept.

Even though presidential leadership affecting African Americans has been consequential—sometimes more so, sometimes less so—throughout American history, the lives and administrations of only some of its chief executives are considered in detail here. What basis can there possibly be for selecting them? A number of criteria seem relevant. One is to consider widely known and highly significant presidents who took action, or failed to take action, with great consequence for African Americans. Abraham Lincoln and his role in ending slavery during the Civil War is an obvious example. Another is Woodrow Wilson, who allowed segregation of federal departments during his eight-year presidency. A second criterion is to study presidents who made, or failed to make, great efforts on behalf of African Americans, even though this aspect of their presidencies is less well-known. Ulysses S. Grant is one who made such efforts. Theodore Roosevelt is one who might have done much more. A third approach is to consider presidents of major importance to American history whose actions outside their presidencies were consequential for African Americans. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are relevant here.

Another consideration is the 2009 C-SPAN survey of presidential leadership. Like the previous C-SPAN survey done in 2000, it asked a large group of historians to rank the presidents and also to rate them on "individual leadership characteristics." One of those dimensions was "Pursued Equal Justice for All."[22] The names near the top and bottom of this list help map the territory. For the most part they are unsurprising. The top three are Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon Johnson, and Harry Truman. They are followed by Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and John F. Kennedy. Their ratings, and those of most others near the top, are almost identical to the year 2000 ratings. An interesting new entrant to the 2009 Top Ten is the ninth ranked, Ulysses S. Grant, who was eighteenth in the 2000 survey. No one moved up on this dimension more than Grant. In light of the criteria above and these rankings, Lincoln, Johnson, Truman, and Grant will be studied in some depth here.

In direct contrast to Grant, Woodrow Wilson fell from twentieth to twenty-seventh between the two surveys. The fact that presidents are reassessed over time and move in various rankings is not particularly surprising. New scholarship, particularly on the Founders and on Lincoln, appears regularly. However, factors other than new scholarship may account for the rating changes of Grant and Wilson. They may reflect changes in the knowledge, values, and political perspectives of the historians in the two surveys. Or, it may be, with the election of Barack Obama, a new awareness of and focus on what presidents have done with respect to racial and equal justice issues.

All these considerations, as well as my own personal interests and perspectives, have led to the inclusion in detail of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Harry S. Truman, and Lyndon B. Johnson. These presidents served at crucial turning points, and their lives and administrations arguably had the biggest impact. Other presidents will be discussed in less but varying levels of depth. Almost all will be mentioned, although some very briefly.

In considering these presidents, several criteria for evaluating them as well as describing their actions are important. Most central is simply whether their leadership advanced or set back the freedoms, rights, and welfare of African Americans. Did they move the needle forward or let it slip backward? In assessing that question, the familiar issues of whether they were simply men of their times becomes important. Appraisals of all presidents' leadership with respect to African Americans must address that issue. Were some presidents notably ahead of the curve? Did they lead beyond where the country or their party or the prevailing governmental regime stood at the time? Did individual presidents simply "go with the flow," paddle upstream against it, or race to move the country more rapidly in the direction it was tentatively heading? In a word, could they have done more?

It is also important to consider whether different presidents' moral development progressed in response to the circumstances and experiences they faced. Were they prodded to move forward psychologically, and did they actually do so? Then, did they act on their moral principles, and if so, were they successful? Finally, what can be said about the nature of their struggles with the external and internal conflicts they confronted? What of their own sense of the rightness and wrongness of their actions? What did they do with the cognitive dissonance that may have resulted from actions inconsistent with their evolving beliefs?

We begin with George Washington, for the obvious reason that he was the first president and that everything he did set a precedent. He made decisions early in his presidency that failed to challenge slavery. Those choices reflected both his priorities—establishing and maintaining the new constitutional government—and his sense of what was possible. They set a direction for presidential action from which there was never really a departure until Abraham Lincoln took office. Privately, Washington freed his slaves in his will, a culmination of over fifteen years of struggling with what to do in general with regard

to this "species of property" and then more specifically with the human beings whom he held in bondage. In doing so, Washington set a direction, but, unfortunately, none of his slave owning successors followed. Nevertheless, the story begins with him.

Notes

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21 Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1936, 1991 edition).
22 See http://legacy.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Pursued-Equal-Justice-For-All.aspx.