



By **JAMES CAMPBELL**
 editor@leaderonomics.com

LEADERS often learn to base how they view themselves on models of behaviour and virtue they hold in high esteem. This idea that we seek models against, which to take the measure of our character and against whom we can view our actions, is far from novel. Yet, having the discipline to follow through and possessing the good sense and background to know what model to hold in high esteem is, of course, another issue.

Currently, we are witnessing the unfolding of the American Presidential race and we are being bombarded with all the sound and fury of candidates whose main claim appears to their capacity to say anything in an effort to “lead” the American Republic.

Ambition and a sense of entitlement are the order of the day and no statement nor revelation is too sordid or too scurrilous in this battle for power and position.

Is the current example before us really an example of leadership in action? Has leadership in the American Republic always been based on nothing more than a raw grab for power and position? Against what standard ought we as interested observers judge the claims to leadership? Is there any model from within the history of the American republic and the Presidency against which we can judge or measure current contenders?

THE STORY OF THE FIRST POTUS

I would like to suggest that a better and more appropriate measure that we should judge current applicants for power lies in the example of George Washington. Washington provides us with a standard against which our current crop of presidential candidates is found wanting. The example of George Washington is a cardinal measure contemporary aspirants to the Presidency can be judged. Washington’s life and his achievements provide a clear demonstration of civic virtue and leadership. What crowns his leadership was not a rapacious desire for power and position. Instead what characterises his leadership is something quite contrary: his “will and capacity to put the public interest over the private.” This basic characteristic, a

PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP: FOUNDATIONS TO JUDGE AGAINST

genuine capacity and essential disposition to put the private interest in subordination to the public interest, is his true mark of leadership.

Consider for a moment the fact that after leading the revolutionaries to victory in the War of Independence, George Washington proceeded to go back to the country and retire as a farmer. King George III, upon hearing that Washington planned to retire after winning the revolutionary war, is said to have remarked to Benjamin West; “If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world.” Not only did Washington give up power after the War of Independence, he did so again after two terms as President when it would have been more than possible for him to have stayed on in the position.

Washington set the standard of leadership which is not understood by how much power you can grab or how long you can hold on to it but rather by the leader’s capacity and willingness to understand limitation, duty and restraint. For these characteristics are also the characteristics of genuine leadership.

THE IDEAL LEADER

Gertrude Himmelfarb has ably defined the classical idea of “virtue” as “the will and capacity to put the public interest over the private.” George Washington embodied that ideal. Leadership without virtue is no leadership at all.

In a letter to Benjamin Rush, John Adams wrote: “The History of our Revolution will be one continued lye from one end to the other. The essence



of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin’s electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington.” However Washington’s character and virtue, his leadership qualities despite Benjamin Franklin’s electrical rod did not spring out from nowhere. As Gary Wills reminds us in regards to Washington: “His life verged on legend, even as he lived it, because he had models he was trying to live up to; and he came close enough for others to accept him as a literal fulfilment of the age’s aspirations” John E. Ferling also draws our attention to the way in which Washington was perceived in his time. He writes:

“Others used public life for private gain, or abandoned office altogether to seek greater rewards in private endeavours, but Washington, serving without a salary, was constant. Come pain or travail or disappointment, he was there. The public thought him above the improbity and the treachery it perceived in others, and in him it saw a man whose character matched the ideals of the American revolutionary identity.”

George Washington—the Cincinnatus of his era—shows us what true Presidential leadership is. Washington’s example is so far removed from what Peggy Noonan describes as the “grubby poseurs” who represent what the title of her Wall Street Journal piece strikingly characterise as “America’s Decadent Leadership Class” that it would be comic if it were not so shameful. Not only did George Washington set the gold standard in civic virtue and leadership with his capacity to concede private interest to the public interest, he was also the only slave owning Founding Father to free his slaves which he did in his 1799 Will and Testament.

There are examples of leadership that we can see in America’s history. George Washington who, in Gary Wills words, was the “embodiment of stability” and who spoke “for fixed things in a period of flux” is our touchstone and against this example I shall let readers decide for themselves how our current situation compares.

Like this article?
 Follow us
 @Leaderonomics on
 Facebook, Twitter
 and Instagram.



PDF

This article is
 available at www.leaderonomics.com, where you
 can download the
 PDF version.

■ James Campbell is
 a writer and lecturer
 at Deakin University.
 To engage with him,
 e-mail us at editor@leaderonomics.com.