

Thinking Like a President: Thomas Jefferson and the Creation of a New Republican Order

“The people are more moderate, and susceptible of proper impressions,” wrote John C. Ogden, an Episcopalian clergyman of Connecticut who had graduated from the College of New Jersey, to Vice President Thomas Jefferson in February, 1799.¹ Within the same early days of that month Jefferson was referring to the national political horizon as having gone through “a wonderful & rapid change.” The public mind would be “returned to it’s republican soundness” if “the knolege of facts can only be disseminated among the people.”² One year and ten days later, on 17 February 1801, that wonderful change was effected in the election of Thomas Jefferson as the nation’s third president. This morning I propose to use that "wonderful & rapid change" as the background for exploring the transformation of Thomas Jefferson into a chief executive. How did a long and varied career in the nation's service prepare him for executive leadership? How did the four years immediately before 1800 influence the election, the creation of a new government, and Jefferson's interpretation of the events? When and how did Jefferson begin to "think like a president?"

Few men entered into the office with the experience that Jefferson did. In 1769 he was elected from Albemarle County to the Virginia House of Burgesses, where he learned the craft of legislating and being a legislator. Six years later he served in the Second Continental Congress, established his credentials as a supporter of the Revolution and republicanism, and put his stamp on the Declaration of Independence. His supporters could make good use of his association with the document to establish his pedigree as a true republican and a hero of the revolution. On 1 June 1779 Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia and served for two perilous years in the state’s history. An invasion in early January 1801, led by Benedict Arnold, moved across the state from the coast, through the low country, to Richmond, and then to Williamsburg, the capital. In an attempt to save the capital from advancing troops, it was relocated to Charlottesville; the British army followed, and Governor Jefferson was chased from Monticello. We could say that from serving as governor Jefferson gained firsthand experience in being an executive, but we might also conclude that his temperament and interests were not suited

to executive posts or to being a leader. Indeed exactly these criticisms were directed at him in the political campaigns of 1796 and 1800.

It may be that the government service which best taught Jefferson how to think like a president and how to work effectively with a cadre of executive officers was his participation in Washington's cabinet as Secretary of State. After his election in 1788 Washington sought out the best available talent for this critical first republican executive team. He asked Jefferson, who had been in Paris since summer 1784 serving as America's minister to France and in November 1789 arrived back in the U.S. presumably for a visit, to serve as Secretary of State. The obvious choice for Secretary of the Treasury was Hamilton. Jefferson, who distrusted executive power and told John Adams in 1787 that the president proposed by the new Constitution was a "bad edition of a Polish king," was not reassured by his experience in the Cabinet. The Secretary of State fumed about monarchists, Tories, courtly trappings, British finance, and corruption. He sent impassioned letters to Washington criticizing Hamilton's vision for the country. At the same time, he gained an appreciation for a strong executive in so far as he saw the powers that were necessary to a president to govern the country effectively. Jefferson's appreciation for a strong, even commanding, executive was real, even if complicated. The traditional interpretation of Jefferson and presidential power has been that he came into the presidency a strict constructionist on constitutional powers and a believer in legislative supremacy and that once in office his actions belied his principles, making him inconsistent, hypocritical, and opportunistic. He "out-Hamiltoned Hamilton," it is said. It would be more accurate to say that Jefferson approved of a leadership that could be active, but must constantly be guided by republican goals, values, and vision. This he set out to do.

While the very early years of Washington's administration saw a fair degree of harmony between the two men, by 1792 the rivals were seeking Washington's ear and support and politicking behind the back of the other. The president begged them to get along with each other, and tried to explain each to the other. Both Hamilton and Jefferson begged Washington to serve a second term for fear the country would be torn asunder without his leadership and aegis. By the end of 1793 Jefferson felt that he had had it, was dismayed by the triumph of Hamiltonian ideas, and submitted his letter of resignation.

Washington accepted it on New Year's Day, 1794. At this point Jefferson claimed that he would never return to politics and wanted only to enjoy Monticello and his family. But in early 1797 he returned to Philadelphia, this time to serve as Adams's vice president.

Political discourse became yet more acerbic in the final year of Washington's second term and under the Adams administration. Debates in Congress took place against a backdrop of bitter partisan rivalry, characterized most famously by the near-brawl on the floor of the House in January 1798 between Matthew Lyon and Roger Griswold after the Irish-born Lyon from Vermont spit in the face of the Connecticut Federalist Griswold. Jefferson referred to the President John Adams's 19 March 1798 Address to Congress as "almost insane," and Madison dubbed Adams's politics as "heretical." Jefferson disapproved wholeheartedly of measures taken by the Adams administration. The augmentation of the army and the creation of a navy, the arming of merchant vessels, the appointment of Washington as a commander of the new provisional army (and Republican fears that Hamilton was effectively the commanding officer behind the protective shield of the revered General Washington), and the raising of taxes to sustain these measures consumed the attention of Congress. These preparations for war moved forward in the aftermath of Adams's making public the XYZ dispatches, which he finally transmitted in full to Congress on 3 April 1798. They had arrived at the State Department on 4 March, and the delay in forwarding all of them to Congress led Republicans to accuse the Administration of concealing the peaceful intentions of the French government—the Directory—and provoking an unnecessary war with France.

After the full contents of the dispatches were revealed, it was clear that Jefferson had been too optimistic. His desire for an honest and well-disposed government made it difficult for him to see the reality. Talleyrand, through one of his agents, had offered "base propositions," and Adams's provision for national defense was not inappropriate.³ On 25 June Adams signed the Alien Friends Act, which originated in the Senate. This legislation permitted the president to order out of the country any alien judged to be "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States."⁴ Jefferson described it as "worthy of the 8th. or 9th. century," and two days after the Act was signed, he left Philadelphia, three weeks before the close of the session of Congress. Earlier in the month Congress had passed the Naturalization Act, which required a fourteen-year

residence prior to establishing citizenship. And in the weeks following Jefferson's departure for Monticello, Congress passed the Alien Enemies Act and the Sedition Act.

The vice president spent the remainder of the summer and fall at Monticello, in theory detached from politics, returning to Philadelphia on Christmas Day. Sometime in the early fall, no later than 4 October, he penned resolutions against the Alien and Sedition Acts, resolutions that were adopted by the Kentucky legislature and that we now know as the "Kentucky Resolutions." Jefferson kept his authorship secret, but his correspondence made it clear that he genuinely feared for the future of the nation. As he wrote to his close Virginia friend John Page, "two years more of such measures as we have had lately will ruin us beyond recovery."⁵ Michael Beran is insightful when he writes of Jefferson's "deepening sense of prophetic vocation." This American prophet "became startlingly--one had almost said demonically--productive."⁶ To the Jeffersonian Republicans, the nation needed warning, and Jefferson saw it as his duty both to alarm and to lead the country not just away from disaster but toward a new framework of government and governed. In his capacity as prophet, utterly jeremiads, Jefferson was working toward an ideology that would become his republican presidential creed. And he was productive to a frenzy.

Jefferson was Adams's vice president, but at the same time he was increasingly acknowledged as the leader of the opposition. He was cautious, distrustful, some would even say paranoid, fearing that the Federalists scrutinized his actions and monitored every word from his pen. He swore off sending political letters through the mail--"A want of confidence in the post office deters me from writing to my friends on subjects of politics," he confessed to Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York⁷--and he used private conveyances whenever he could. According to his Summary Journal of Letters, in fact, he wrote no letters to his most valued and trusted political partner James Madison between 22 November 1799 and 4 March 1800. Jefferson was also circumspect in who he saw and how he acted. On James Monroe's advice he decided not to pay a call on Madison at Montpelier on his way to Philadelphia in December 1798 to attend the first session of the Sixth Congress. He was dissuaded from the visit, he explained to Madison, because of "the espionage of the little wretch in Charlottesville, who would make it a subject of some political slander."⁸ In January 1800 he reported to Monroe a conversation

with “113,” code for Aaron Burr, who had made a “flying trip” to Virginia to report on the Republican prospects in the New York state elections.

This is the context in which Jefferson began to move toward being both a president and a party leader. He was anxious, circumspect, and secretive. He believed the nation had reached a low point in its history, when such close French friends of his as the Comte de Volney left for France for fear of being expelled and Republican newspaper editors were facing fines and imprisonment under the Sedition Act. On the other hand, Jefferson felt some optimism as he received reports from acquaintances in several states. The combination of fear and hope shaped Jefferson's development of a style of leadership in 1799-1801.

In writing about the American presidency, Yale political scientist Stephen Skowronek argues that John Adams's presidency "ruptured the political regime and shattered the previously dominant governing coalition."⁹ This is an accurate assessment. Without impugning the overall record of John Adams's presidency, I think few would disagree that at least the final two year's of his one term were a political disaster for his popularity and for the future of the Federalists. However great and statesmanlike Adams may have been in sending a second diplomatic mission to France rather than be goaded into war, he divided his administration, intensified Alexander Hamilton's personal crusade to get him out of office, and provided abundant fodder for Jeffersonian-republican journalists to pillory him. From Adams's own perspective many years later and from historical hindsight, the blame lay not on his shoulders but on the Federalists, who "killed themselves and the national President...at one shot, and then...indicted me for murder."¹⁰ Jefferson, according to Skowronek, “forged a new regime, one that would stand as the font of political legitimacy for decades to come.”¹¹ Politically astute, smart enough to learn from his close loss in 1796, and innovative and determined in his strategies to build a political network state by state, county by county, person by person, Jefferson consciously became the leader of a political party. But he took on the party mantle as the best way to build a new regime and become the leader of a nation, a nation whose fundamental values were those that he insisted were the true beliefs of the American people. It is not an accident that presidents most widely hailed for their mastery of politics immediately follow those judged to be politically incompetent.

Jefferson and the Republicans took full advantage of Federalist incompetence by widening their circle to embrace disaffected Federalists and urging them back into their "natural home" of traditional republican principles. In January 1799 he wrote a lengthy and moving letter to Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts. Gerry, one of the three envoys sent by Adams to France to negotiate, had been severely criticized by his fellow Federalists for lingering in France trying to reach an accommodation with the Talleyrand government. Jefferson, encouraging the dispirited Gerry to "come forward independantly, to take your stand on the high ground of your own character, to disregard calumny, and to be borne above it," hoped to detach him from the Federalists and bring him into the true Republican fold.¹²

Jefferson began to prepare in earnest for reconstructing the national government well over a year before the end of the Adams administration. Over the course of that year, Jefferson and his supporters actively, consciously, and systematically constructed a framework of "republican soundness" on that foundation of moderation that Ogden had observed. They were certain that the temper of the country had shifted since 1796: Americans were returning to their senses; the frenzy of the Alien and Sedition Acts was passing; and solid Whig principles, for which the Revolution had been fought, would once again be the underpinning of the national government. The Republicans were greatly aided in their optimistic march toward restoring republicanism by events outside their control. As Peter Onuf has pointed out, it was French willingness to resume negotiations that gave the Republicans a "new lease on political life. Once begun, this turnaround revived Jefferson's faith in the possibility of popular enlightenment and republican self-government."¹³ Disseminating "facts" and encouraging "proper impressions" were two of the primary tasks Jefferson set for himself in 1800 as he looked ahead to important state elections in the spring and summer. At least a full year before election, then, he was, in the very broadest sense, "preparing to be president." His final year in office as John Adams's vice president saw him develop more and more into a presidential leader himself. Not just a candidate, but a prospective leader. He had learned a lot since 1796, about government, leadership, and just plain politics. He was very much on the road to the White House.

In 1799 and 1800, Jefferson undertook a number of concrete political actions to accomplish republican goals. In Virginia he and other leaders of the Republicans developed an elaborate network of committees to distribute political pamphlets. He sent a pamphlet by George Nicholas defending the Kentucky resolutions to his son-in-law, John Wayles Eppes, asking him to pass it along to his father. He sent a dozen copies of the pamphlet to James Monroe, asking that he disseminate them where they would have the most effect. And, he warned: "do not let my name be connected with the business." Jefferson dispatched one to Madison, and one to Archibald Stewart, his agent. Jefferson also arranged for circulating the writings of Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper on political economy, to enlighten, inform, and, ultimately encourage those "proper impressions" of which Ogden had written.¹⁴ This informal exchange of printed materials was hardly a new technique of persuasion; it was one of the primary ways of influencing public opinion in the eighteenth century. But that Jefferson himself was taking the initiative and doing it on a large scale--twelve copies was a lot for him to be sending off--was a departure for Jefferson. On the one hand, he still preferred to engage in this kind of political activity quietly and anonymously. On the other hand, however, Jefferson as candidate for office had taken a major step toward more active leadership.

The Jeffersonian Republicans keenly appreciated the importance of newspapers. Jefferson supported James Callender's published criticisms of John Adams (though Jefferson denied his payments had been supporting Callender's journalistic endeavors and were merely charitable contributions to the man). Jefferson also tried to convince his friends to establish their own newspaper that could be a counter to John Ward Fenno's Gazette of the U.S. and circulate nationwide. Jefferson's strategy while Secretary of State and as vice president was to encourage others to contribute right thinking columns and editorials to newspapers.¹⁵ He saw the press as a good way to inform the people, influence an election, and guarantee the spread of that "republican soundness" which he hoped would return to the people.

As we focus on these few years of Jefferson's long career, it seems clear to me that he was thinking more and more like a president and enjoying more and more grappling with what executive leadership entailed. One particular contrast between 1796 and 1800 will highlight this. On 28 December 1796, only days after the news of Adams's

victory over Jefferson was quite certain, Jefferson penned a friendly and conciliatory letter to Adams ruminating on the election results: he "never for one single moment expected a different issue"; he "never wished" the presidency, though "I know I shall not be believed"; he, Jefferson, preferred "the society of neighbors, friends, and fellow laborers of the earth, than of spies and sycophants. No one then," the losing candidate concluded, "will congratulate you with purer disinterestedness than myself." Undecided at some level as to whether he really ought to send this epistle, Jefferson sent it unsealed to Madison, with the request that he read it and forward it to Adams.

Madison, much more politically astute and far sighted than Jefferson at this point, declined to send the letter on to Adams and provided reasons for his decision. What Madison explained to Jefferson in his January 1797 reply could be described as a political primer for a leader-in-training. Madison saw the importance of nurturing the "zealous and active promoters" of Jefferson's candidacy, many of whom had "deeply committed themselves, and probably incurred the political enmity" of the president elect and his party. Madison also clearly saw, or at least was willing openly to confront the likelihood, that they would be an opposition political party that Jefferson would lead: "Considering the probability that Mr. A.s course of administration may force an opposition to it from the Republican quarter, and the general uncertainty of the posture which our affairs may take, there may be real embarrassments from giving written possession to him, of the degree of compliment and confidence which your personal delicacy and friendship have suggested."¹⁶ Madison understood the nuances of politics and leadership better than Jefferson did in 1796, but Jefferson was quick to learn and he became a master at it.

The election of 1800-1801 came at the end of at least five years of intense partisan antagonism and was hotly contested. It has been called "one of the country's two most critical presidential elections, second only to the election of 1860."¹⁷ Caucuses, careful organization, publicity, and monitoring state by state are more the stuff of today's competitions than they were of the first four elections of the new republic. As historians are right to insist, it is premature to talk of mature political parties and fixed political loyalties. While it is fair to say, as Joanne Freeman tells us, that "partisan mobilization and popular politicking had reached new heights" compared with previous elections, an "added personal dimension" to the election points to the "period's distinctive political

dynamic."¹⁸ The intensity of the 1798-1801 period to which Jefferson was reacting is the context of that dynamic, and the way in which he reacted reveals the paths of his thinking about leadership and planning to be a leader. In 1796, Jefferson's letters contained no comments on the election in progress. We know what charges his political opponents were directing at him--that he had abandoned his responsibilities as governor of Virginia when the British invaded in 1781, that he had resigned as secretary of state when the nation was in peril, and that he was deeply in debt to the citizens of a foreign nation.¹⁹ Virginia Republicans defended him against these charges, but Jefferson himself remained silent. In 1800, in contrast, he both wrote and received information on the election. In a way that neither of America's first two presidents did, Jefferson guided and advised his political allies strategically, even as he was being informed and guided by them. His involvement was personal and direct.

Between November 1799 and May 1800 Jefferson sat four times for his portrait. Young Rembrandt Peale painted him in Philadelphia during Jefferson's final residence there. Charles Peale Polk came to Monticello and in two days captured a likeness of the vice president. Gilbert Stuart painted him in oil. Edward Savage prepared a mezzotint. These were copied and circulated as engravings, prints, and frontispieces of Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia. No single year of Jefferson's presidency saw as many life portraits of the statesman as did the months when he was actively planning to be a president. He was conscious of his image and, we can speculate, of the nation's need and desire to see what he looked like. The representations of Jefferson were an important and symbolic part of his responsibility as a leader. Nineteenth-century Americans looked at these distinguished portraits and saw President Thomas Jefferson. By the end of his second term prints of these portraits were extremely popular. To the "public mind in an age before photography, this was Jefferson."²⁰

The election of 1800 is more accurately a series of critical legislative elections in the states that took place over several months. Neither the Federalists nor the Republicans could count on victories in these contests. Jefferson's correspondents were exact and prompt with their reports on what was occurring in the states, and especially on the important struggles in New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. In May the Republicans, thanks largely to the determined and pioneering efforts of Aaron Burr,

captured the New York state legislature, which would select the state's twelve electors. This absolute turnaround in New York politics (the Federalists had won all of the votes in 1796) bolstered the Republicans' optimism. Prospects in Pennsylvania were clouded, as a deadlock between the two branches of the legislature rendered it possible that the state would cast no electoral votes. In early December, however, a compromise was reached giving the Republicans Jefferson and Burr one more vote each than the Federalists Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. By the end of November Adams and Jefferson were tied at 65 votes each, and South Carolina had not been heard from.²¹ Jefferson was in no way in the dark about what was happening and about the politicking that was going forward. Letters were dispatched to him as quickly as news was available; he absorbed the news and relayed it to others.

From Columbia, South Carolina, the newspaper publisher Peter Freneau informed him on 2 December that at “one oClock this day” the election for electors had concluded, with eight votes for Jefferson, seven for Burr, and one for George Clinton. “You will easily discover why the one Vote is varied.”²² From Jefferson's endorsement on the letter itself and from his Summary Journal of Letters, we know that he received Freneau's congratulatory note on 12 December; on that day he also received Charles Pinckney's fuller account of events in South Carolina. With Freneau's and Pinckney's letters in hand, Jefferson immediately began to repeat the tale to others, writing first to Thomas Mann Randolph, husband of his oldest daughter Martha, that the election was “now decided.” And as Jefferson was sitting at his correspondence desk spreading the good news of the election, he drafted other letters too. It was almost as if the news freed him, released him in some psychological way, to turn back to other business that he had neglected while preoccupied with national politics. Jefferson replied to two routine business letters from October that had lain unanswered on his desk because of other matters “more immediately urgent.”²³ On December 14 Jefferson also made his first exploratory and tentative effort to assemble his heads of the executive departments, that is, to invite men to join his Cabinet. From the moment the South Carolina votes were reported, Jefferson stepped up his level of thinking like a president.

Jefferson's first foray into selecting a Cabinet was his 14 December invitation to Chancellor Livingston of New York, inventor of the steamboat, to become Secretary of

the Navy.²⁴ The letter was a failure in that Livingston declined the post, but it was a brilliantly crafted appeal that reveals Jefferson's strategy of playing on shared values, appealing to personal loyalty and common interests, and offering a larger vision and purpose to gather around. This approach of cajoling, persuading, and bringing men into his orbit became a fundamental component of Jefferson's leadership style, one that he fashioned and developed in his years in the White House, by carrying on conversations, hosting dinner parties, and drafting bills for Congress. I am reminded of a phrase that James McHenry of Maryland used to describe Benjamin Franklin's final speech to the Constitutional Convention on 17 September 1787 in Philadelphia. He called Franklin's words "plain, insinuating, Persuasive."²⁵ This strikes me as grudgingly complimentary, by implying a certain calculating and "political" aspect as well as a persuasive one. Jefferson would probably not quarrel with the description, and he achieved the results he wanted time after time.

He opened his letter to Livingston not with a discussion of politics and the election or an immediate request to join the administration but with a friendly mention of their common interests: Livingston's invention of the steam engine, about which they had earlier communicated, the American Philosophical Society, of which they were both members, and the recent discovery of bones "supposed to be of the Mammoth," a subject of strong interest to Jefferson. In an informal and understated tone, Jefferson's way of operating was to reinforce at the most friendly and personal level their mutual involvement in the pursuits of natural philosophy as a platform for getting to the "important subject" of his letter.

After conveying the news that a Republican victory was fairly certain, Jefferson sketched out the important next steps to be taken. To put the nation back on her "republican tack," he wrote, "will require all the skill, the firmness & the zeal of her ablest & best friends...it is essential to assemble in the outset persons to compose our administration, whose talents, integrity and revolutionary name & principles may inspire the nation at once with unbounded confidence, impose an awful silence [on] all the maligners of republicanism." Unfortunately, Jefferson went on to say, not many of these inspiring figures of Revolutionary fame were still around: "so few are they, that your's, my friend cannot be spared from among them without leaving a blank which cannot be

filled." Jefferson appealed to Livingston as a man of talent, as a leader of the Revolutionary era, and as "a friend." Jefferson's reasons for wanting Livingston to head the Navy Department were also highly practical and pragmatic. He needed somebody who could understand the navy, but not (though he refrained from saying it), someone who would be too enamored of navies. He also wanted a Republican from a northern state, and, as he lamented, "republicanism is so rare in those parts which possess nautical skill, that I cannot find it allied there to the other qualifications. Tho you are not nautical by profession, yet your residence, and your mechanical science qualify you as well as a gentleman can possibly be." He hinted that he already had other members of his Cabinet in mind and that, "if I can obtain for the public the aid of those I have contemplated," the country could safely be steered back to its republican track.

Jefferson next wrote to Madison letting him know that he had sent Livingston a "confidential" letter and also that the person "proposed for the T. is not come yet," that is, Albert Gallatin for the Treasury Department.²⁶ An agreement, in conversation most likely, had already been reached that Madison would become Secretary of State. Although he had never been in Europe, he had been one of the founders of the Republican Party and led the opposition to the Jay Treaty in the House of Representatives. Madison was requested to arrive in Washington a day or two before 4 March so that he could be on hand to reassure members of Congress (his former colleagues and friends) that the victory of the Jeffersonians would not lead to severe disruption or a revolution. (Jefferson later agreed with Madison, however, that arriving in advance of the inauguration would be inappropriate.) Jefferson enjoyed this burst of a day or so of "thinking like a president," but even by 15 December he was slightly less certain that he could count on being president. He confided to Aaron Burr that they had "badly managed" things. By 18 December he was even more worried, alerting John Breckinridge of the "dilemma [of] the probable equality" of votes for Burr and himself. By the 21st he knew for sure that he and Burr were tied, and he expressed his concern to Caesar Rodney that the Federalists might "make the most of the embarrassment [of] this occasion, by preventing any election by the H. of Representatives."²⁷ Jefferson retreated to silence and did no more planning, at least on paper, for his Cabinet until after 17 February. On that day, the deadlock was broken in the House of Representatives, with Jefferson being

elected president and Aaron Burr his vice president. The news was announced by a dramatic broadside: "By Express from the City of Washington! This moment the election is decided. Morris, from Vermont, absented himself, so that Vermont was for Jefferson. The four members from Maryland, who had voted for Burr, put in blank tickets. The result was then ten for Jefferson."

Once the election had been decided, the president-elect moved quickly. On the 18th he wrote Madison again. He wrote to Henry Dearborn of Massachusetts requesting that he head the War Department. Levi Lincoln, also of Massachusetts, was asked to become Attorney General. Both of these appointments reflected Jefferson's good grasp of the importance of geographical diversity and bringing into the Republican fold the New England states. One could dismiss these appointments as merely "political," but they demonstrated Jefferson's good grasp of the importance not just of building a national political party but of building a national government. Gallatin, who agreed to head the "T.," was important not just for his fiscal understanding but because he was an important Pennsylvania Republican who had led the party in the House of Representatives after Madison's departure from Congress in March 1797. Henry Adams, the first historian of the Jefferson administration, wrote of the Jefferson-Madison-Gallatin triumvirate that "three more agreeable men...were never collected round the dinner-table of the White House."²⁸ The choice of men for the two most important government posts with whom he could work and with whom he felt personally comfortable, was very much a mark of the way Jefferson chose to lead. Secure in their loyalty and ability, he could safely branch out to others like Dearborn and Lincoln whom he did not know as well but who filled important, if subordinate, niches in the overall plan. He made one important "personal" appointment, soliciting Meriwether Lewis, a distant cousin and future co-leader of the Lewis and Clark expedition, to become his private secretary, offering him room and board, a small salary (covered by Jefferson out of his own funds), and the opportunity to be "one of my family."²⁹

In short, the qualities that Jefferson sought for his Cabinet appointments were personal loyalty, administrative background and ability, a smart political sense, and geographical diversity. Because he was secure in his sense of victory and in the rightness of his cause, Jefferson displayed a real freedom in those he chose to appoint. He was far

less constrained, for example, than John Adams had been.³⁰ The sore thumb in the group was Samuel Smith of Maryland, who with reluctance took on the secretaryship of the navy that Robert Livingston declined. (Livingston went off to Paris as Minister to France.) The Cabinet that took office in March 1801 represented the first time that a complete change in the heads of the executive department had taken place in American government.

Jefferson's success with his Cabinet, at least during his first term, was intensely personal. Richard Neustadt's observation that a president's "logic and charm" can reinforce his formal authority is particularly appropriate for Jefferson. By appointing department heads with whom he could feel comfortable and by capitalizing upon his "towering public prestige and impressive professional reputation," Jefferson successfully forged personal allegiances that functioned as working administrative and political alliances within the government. He consulted with members of the Cabinet, usually individually rather than collectively in Cabinet meetings, and in this way was able to gather all viewpoints. In the process of collecting information and opinions to inform his decisions, however, he was also creating a consensus, the collective backing that would sustain his programs. He declined to have weekly cabinet meetings, reserving assembly of the whole group for important matters of political or constitutional significance. According to Robert Johnstone, Jefferson "was willing to accept advice and he trusted the judgment of his principal advisers, but he was not to be denied in any policy matter on which his mind was formed."³¹ Or, to phrase it a slightly different way, Jefferson "opted to lead without appearing to lead; to instruct while appearing only to suggest, to guide while seeming to defer."³² No bills of any significance made it through Congress without his recommendation or tacit approval, an achievement unequalled by any president after Jefferson until Woodrow Wilson.

Political scientists Richard Neustadt, Fred Greenstein, and others have noted the importance of the president's ability to organize, "to forge a team and get the most out of it."³³ The phrase has a modern ring to it and sounds much more twentieth century than nineteenth, but the concept fits Jefferson without a doubt. From his first letter of request through his successful leadership of a Cabinet over two terms, Jefferson was helped in this task by his first-hand experience. He knew a lot about cabinets, about the most

effective relationship between the chief executive and his department heads, and the factors that could undermine an executive's use of his most important appointed advisers. From his time as Secretary of State serving alongside his greatest rival for Washington's ear, Alexander Hamilton, or, as Jefferson sometimes called him, the "evil genius," Jefferson developed a clear sense about the ideal relationship between a president and the heads of the executive departments. From Washington Jefferson gained a healthy respect for the "unifying authority of the president." The president was in charge, and the authority of the Department heads was derived.¹ And from serving in the Adams administration Jefferson saw all that could go wrong between a Cabinet and the chief executive when the loyalties of Adams's ministers were to Hamilton rather than to the president. In a well-forged team with the executive in charge, there is harmony between president and ministers. But as cabinet ministers are potentially rivals of the president, Jefferson knew—or intuited—that he must be in charge. Not until too late did Adams take the assertive decision to remove Henry Dearborn and Timothy Pickering.

These experiences informed Jefferson's formal instructions to his Cabinet, his "Circular to the heads of departments, and Private," as he titled it. Dated 6 November 1801, the memorandum laid out, as Jefferson understood them, the procedures followed by presidents Washington and Adams. The president-elect was certain that he could state "with exactness" how Washington handled executive business. If communications came addressed to himself, he referred them to the proper department. If letters came to one of the secretaries and required no answer, the secretary communicated it to the president "simply for his information." If an answer was required, the secretary sent the letter and the suggested reply to the president. "Generally they were simply sent back, after perusal, which signified his approbation...if a doubt of any importance arose, he reserved it for conference."

Continuing his memo, Jefferson could not resist the opportunity to get in a dig at Adams, whose "long & habitual absences from the seat of government, rendered this kind of communication impracticable, removed him from any share in the transaction of affairs, & parceled out the government in fact among four independent heads, drawing sometimes in opposite directions."³⁴ Jefferson proposed to adopt Washington's procedures as vastly the better strategy. Having firmly laid down the rules for his

administration, Jefferson returned to the diplomatic language of friendship, collegiality, and trust. His "confidence in those whom I am so happy as to have associated with me, is unlimited, unqualified & unabated....if I had the Universe to choose from, I could not change one of my associates to my better satisfaction." And then in phrases that grounded his leadership in its fundamental and final source, the people, he summarized his motives and made it clear that discussion or comment was not particularly required. He concluded, "my sole motives are those before expressed as governing the first administration in chalking out the rules of their proceeding; adding to them only a sense of obligation imposed on me by the public will, to meet personally the duties to which they have appointed me. If this mode of proceeding shall meet the approbation of the heads of departments, it may go into execution without giving them the trouble of an answer."

Gallatin correctly interpreted these directions to mean that "before a decision takes place every letter on which judgment must be exercised and also every one which contains useful information" should be brought to the attention of the president. On the one hand this indicated that the president did not need to exercise his authority on every routine decision; on the other, it meant that a great deal of paper did indeed pass through Jefferson's hands.³⁵ The method by which Jefferson communicated with his department heads and received information and opinions from them, gave them autonomy and some latitude for running their departments. It also gave the president the final say and the controlling hand. Crudely put, it prevented their building ties to one another or to the collective Cabinet group over their loyalty to the president.

Jefferson worked to build relationships not simply with individuals in the Cabinet, but also with the Congress. Here too he was both executive and partisan leader, and it was his ability to build a strong national political party that has often won him the description of prefiguring the modern presidency. He frequently entertained members of Congress when Congress was in town (only three months a year, however). In his typical small hand and methodical style Jefferson began in the fall of 1804 to keep a complicated list of his dinner guests and maintained it until two days after he left the White House in 1809. He wanted to entertain every member of Congress, and some came more than once. On the one hand he was bridging the social gap between the executive branch and the

legislature. On the other he was cementing important working relationships, bringing together in a highly calculated and effective way people who would have to make legislative decisions. During one 110-day stretch Jefferson kept track of 47 dinners for 153 people, half of whom were invited twice. In the spring of 1804 he found that 651 individuals had dined with him since 1 December and that they had consumed 207 bottles of champagne.³⁶ Diplomats attended, and apparently once a year members of the court. (This is the only time John Marshall was there.) The dinner list is an important key to what was going on in Government. On a given Wednesday early in the 8th Congress, for example, he was entertaining several members of the Pennsylvania and Rhode Island delegations (Frederick Conrad, William Findlay, and John Smiley) as well as Nehemiah Knight and Joseph Stanton of Rhode Island). Sometimes, as on that occasion, there will also be a “fam 4” noted, showing that four members of his family were also present.

Jefferson kept in close touch with members of Congress—especially those who agreed with him. This raises the question for us of whether he was a “real” leader or a partisan leader. A conventional way of appraising his leadership in regard to the Congress has been to see him as a party leader, or partisan leader like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, or Franklin Roosevelt. He encouraged the creation of a caucus; he created a floor leader as his representative. In his first term very successfully and in his second term with considerably less success he dominated the decisions of the House. Ralph Ketcham has labeled leadership a “muted partisanship,” one which used the party but never made it the only key to his leadership.³⁷ Jefferson indeed built and championed the Republican Party, but he did not see it as a part of his role to arrange for the organizational strength of the Republicans. He was perfectly prepared to court “moderate” Federalists (as he did with Elbridge Gerry earlier) and write off dissident Republicans like John Randolph of Roanoke. Jefferson was a brilliant leader, and although the Federalists might not have agreed, he would argue that it was not party but republican leadership.

Much has been written about Jefferson's removal of Federalists from office and replacing them with loyal Republicans who had suffered under the Adams administration. Well in advance of the final determination of the election, congratulatory epistles, both straightforward and subtle, began to pour in. Charles Pinckney warned from South

Carolina that "much unfounded & pretended friendly information may be transmitted to promote applications to You and to deceive."³⁸ Jefferson could not afford to ignore these requests. A principal resource for his leadership was patronage and appointments to all levels of the executive branch--clerks in the state department, the treasury department, the auditor's office, the war and navy departments; lighthouse keepers; and customs collectors. The rhetorical promise of his first inaugural address was that partisan divisions would be overcome--"We are all republicans; we are all federalists."³⁹ Jefferson himself said time after time that patronage issues were the worst part of being president, the "dreadful burden of appointments." He received a variety of opinions: get rid of all Federalists, and quickly; be moderate, removing only those found to be incompetent in office; strive for a balance between Federalists and Republicans. One thing we do know. Jefferson took the job of removals and appointments extremely seriously. Pages upon pages in his own handwriting reveal lists of possible candidates, notes on the letters of recommendation that came in for them, and lists of Adams's appointments that could be removed. The lists contain pithy comments in some cases: "removed for non residence & drink"; "extortion in office"; "not renewed for malconduct, & his brutal & odious deportment generally."⁴⁰

Definitions of leadership perhaps are in the eye of the beholder. John Marshall observed that Jefferson would weaken the presidency at the expense of his own popularity. Jefferson would claim that the popularity underwrote his leadership and gave strength and power to the presidency and to the nation. Surely one of his greatest contributions to the presidency was his notion of the presidency as a popular office, sustained by the people and responsive to its will. The circular to the Department heads, the first inaugural address, and his correspondence time and again stress the importance of listening to the popular will. Beran muses that Jefferson listens "carefully!" to "his soul gabble."⁴¹ I think what made him singular as an American president that he could listen to an extraordinary cacophony of individual gabble. And write to him, offer him gifts, ask him for cash, unrestrainedly praise him, unashamedly vilify him, "gabble" at him they did.⁴²

Jefferson "humanized the presidency," wrote Forrest McDonald. And, at least while Jefferson occupied the post, there is little indication that bombardment of requests

diminished his faith that "a free government is of all others the most energetic," that the people can be trusted, that even though at times misled, they would eventually "recover their true sight," that government will be returned to true principles. This idea of leadership and this Jeffersonian faith "marked an important departure from the immediate past." It was one of the third president's greatest contributions, and one that had explosive potential as an agency for constructive change.⁴³ For Jefferson, the "followers" were an important part of the equation. He claimed that the French Revolution was not the success that the American Revolution was, "not because the French lacked leaders but because they lacked discerning followers." The American people, Jefferson reasoned, responded to revolution in a way that led to a free republic, while the French responded to their revolution in a way that led to an imperial dictatorship.⁴⁴

One way of judging leadership is to measure the leader's ability to handle the unexpected, the surprises, and the out-of-the-blue opportunities. Another way to put it is to say that the interaction between the person and the events determines success or failure and a place, or not, in history. What is true of Lincoln in a big way is true of others in smaller ways. For Jefferson these touchstone events are the Louisiana Purchase and the Embargo. In the first he displayed a shrewd and wise flexibility. As a disciple of John Locke, argued Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in The Imperial Presidency, Jefferson was a "realistic executive" who knew without a doubt that there were times the president would need to lay the law and the constitution aside. What I find even more convincing in Schlesinger's analysis of the Louisiana Purchase is his insistence that Jefferson did not in fact act independently of Congress. Members of Congress were accomplices: they confirmed the envoys, ratified the treaty, passed the statutes that authorized the president to receive the territory, and established the laws and government for it.⁴⁵ The months following the Louisiana Purchase saw Jefferson at the height of his popularity. In an action of true leadership, Jefferson redefined the role of the president as "spokesman and agent for the people's own best interests."⁴⁶

In the second test of leadership by the flexibility standard, Jefferson just hung on, unable to give up something that was not working. Even if Garry Wills is correct in arguing that the Embargo was Madison's idea, and Jefferson was only the implementer, Jefferson did not have the determination or clarity of thinking to abandon it. There was a

long tradition of an American belief in the usefulness of economic coercion, and Jefferson's faith in it was reinforced in the 1790s. Gallatin, on the other hand was skeptical, preferring "war to a permanent embargo."⁴⁷ As the Embargo grew more and more difficult to enforce, Jefferson grew more severe and more rigid. By the final months of his second term he had virtually abandoned his leadership. While the result of the failure of this economic policy and the very real disaffection of large pockets of New England Republicans (not to mention all of the Federalists) did not immediately affect his popularity, the failed policy, concludes Johnstone, did serve to "drain away the president's store of accumulated influence and contributed to a decline in his power prospects for the future."⁴⁸ It was Madison who paid the price.

James MacGregor Burns wrote that Jefferson's main strategy of leadership was "simply being Jefferson." Amazingly, this worked quite well, both for his own leadership and as a model for future presidents--at least those who could pull it off.

¹ Ogden to TJ, 7 Feb., 1799, in Jefferson Papers, 31:17.

² Jefferson to Archibald Stuart, 13 Feb., 1799, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Princeton, NJ, 2004), 31: Future references to this work will be cited as Jefferson Papers.

³ Jefferson to Madison, 6 April, 1798, Jefferson Papers, 30:250.

⁴ Jefferson Papers, 30:324n.

⁵ Jefferson to John Page, Jefferson Papers, 30:641.

⁶ Michael Beran, Jefferson's Demons: Portrait of a Restless Mind (New York, 2003), p. 136.

⁷ TJ to Robert Livingston, November ??, Jefferson Papers, 31:

⁸ TJ to James Madison, 22 Nov. 1799, Jefferson Papers, 31:240. The "little wretch" was John Nicholas, the clerk of Albemarle County, who had published a letter in the newspapers criticizing TJ.

⁹ Stephen Skowronek, The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 8.

¹⁰ John Adams to James Lloyd, 6 Feb., 1815, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., The Works of John Adams, 10 vols. (Boston, 1851-56), 10:115.

¹¹ Skowronek, Politics, p. 8.

¹² Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 26 Jan. 1799, Jefferson Papers, 30:649.

¹³ Peter Onuf, Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood (Charlottesville, 2000), p. 101.

¹⁴ the letters to Madison, Monroe, etc.

¹⁵ See Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic, (Charlottesville, 2001), p. 154. Pasley's is a richly detailed and innovative study of the press in partisan politics of the early nineteenth century. See also Jefferson's correspondence with Tench Coxe, 31:

¹⁶ For a textual and editorial analysis of this correspondence see Jefferson Papers, 30:234-7, 247-51, 263-5. See also Joanne B. Freeman, Affairs of Honor (New Haven, 2001), pp. 224-6.

¹⁷ James Roger Sharp, American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis (New Haven, 1993), p. 226.

¹⁸ For a good overview of the election see Freeman, Affairs of Honor, chap. 5, where she characterizes the election as "An Honor Dispute of Grand Proportions."

¹⁹"Documents Relating to the 1796 Campaign for Electors in Virginia," Jefferson Papers, 29:193-99.

-
- ²⁰ Jefferson Papers, 31:vii-viii, xli, xliii-v; Freeman, Affairs of Honor, p. 208.
- ²¹ Sharp, American Politics, pp. 233-5.
- ²² Freneau to Jefferson, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 32, forthcoming.
- ²³ Jefferson to James Currie and to Thomas Lieper, both of 14 December 1800, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 32, forthcoming.
- ²⁴ Jefferson to Livingston, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 32, forthcoming.
- ²⁵ See Barbara Oberg, "'Plain, Insinuating, Persuasive': Benjamin Franklin's Final Speech to the Constitutional Convention of 1787," in Reappraising Franklin: A Bicentennial Perspective (Newark, Del., 1993), pp. 175, 190.
- ²⁷ Jefferson's letter to Madison, Dec. 1800, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 32, forthcoming.
- ²⁸ quoted in Leonard D. White, The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History (New York, 1961), p. 8.
- ²⁹ Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, 23 February 1801, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 33, forthcoming.
- ³⁰ Robert M. Johnstone, Jr., Jefferson and the Presidency Leadership in the Young Republic, (Ithaca, 1978), p. 102.
- ³¹ Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, Dilemmas of Presidential Leadership from Washington Through Lincoln (New Brunswick, NJ, 1989), p. 68.
- ³² Fred I. Greenstein, The Presidential Difference (Princeton, NJ, 2004), p. 195.
- ³³ Johnstone, Presidency, p. 85.
- ³⁴ The Circular is in the Library of Congress, Jefferson Papers. On Adams's attendance at the Senate when he was vice president and therefore the presiding officer, see Jefferson's "Memorandum on Attendance of the Vice President, Jefferson Papers, 31:280-83, forthcoming. According to Jefferson's calculations, Adams was absent from the Senate at the close of the session an average of 14 2/3 days and Jefferson averaged 9 1/3 at the close of sessions.
- ³⁵ Gallatin to Jefferson, 10 November 1801. See Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., The Process of Government under Jefferson (Princeton, NJ, 1978), p. 28.
- ³⁶ Dumas Malone, Jefferson the President: First Term (Boston, 1970), pp.374-5.
- ³⁷ Ralph Ketcham, Presidents above Party: the first American presidency, 1789-1829 (Chapel Hill, 1984), p. 111.
- ³⁸ Charles Pinckney to Jefferson, 5 December 1800, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 32, forthcoming.
- ³⁹ Barbara B. Oberg, "Decoding an American Icon: The Textuality of Thomas Jefferson," Tex: An Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies 15 (Ann Arbor, 2002), 1-17.
- ⁴⁰ "Officers Commissioned by John Adams," [1801], Library of Congress.
- ⁴¹ Beran, Jefferson's Demons, p. 138.
- ⁴² For a sampling of these letters, gathered for a general readership, see Jack McLaughlin, ed., To His Excellency Thomas Jefferson: Letters to a President (New York, 1991).
- ⁴³ Jefferson to John Dickinson, 6 March, 1801, Jefferson Papers, Vol. 32, forthcoming. Johnstone, Presidency, pp. 54-5.
- ⁴⁴ Garry Wills, Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders (New York, 1994), p. 15.
- ⁴⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Imperial Presidency (New York, 1973), pp. 34-5. See also Johnstone, Jefferson and the Presidency, p. 41, who observes that the leader must change with circumstances and be able to reject outdated views.
- ⁴⁶ Johnstone, Presidency, p. 75.
- ⁴⁷ Gallatin to Jefferson, 18 December 1807.
- ⁴⁸ Johnstone, Presidency, p. 313.