

CHAPTER 4

A NOBLE PRESIDENCY

Constitutional Convention delegate Pierce Butler wrote of the struggle to define the American presidency that he did not believe the powers of the president “would have been so great had not many of the members cast their eyes towards General Washington as President and shaped their ideas of the powers to be given to a president by their opinions of his virtue.”

The founding fathers saw their beloved general and leader as the model of all they wanted the American presidency to embody. Noble, principled, fair, brave, proud and competent—these were some of the qualities that set George Washington above his peers. And it was those peers who, according to Butler, defined the most important office in the land with him in mind.

There have been no equals among the many generations that have followed Washington’s presidency. Nor can we honestly expect them. But we ought to expect that our presidents emulate his integrity and his unfailing commitment to govern all Americans thoughtfully and with a profound and humble wisdom.

Presidents create the tone for America during their time in office. John F. Kennedy famously declared, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” After leading America out of a period of depressing malaise Ronald Reagan, in a popular campaign metaphor following his successful first term, stated that “It’s morning in America.” Both presidents are remembered as exceptional leaders—sensible, engaged and noble successors to George Washington’s legacy.

Nobility may be an overlooked and “old fashioned” characteristic in these times but it is still worth seeking in those who would lead us.

Just ask those who did so first.

DAY 43

JOSEPH STORY

"A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government. A feeble execution is but another phrase for a bad execution; and a government ill executed, whatever may be its theory, must, in practice, be a bad government."

Commentaries on the Constitution, 1833

Today Justice Story might write:

A weak president is a sign of a weak government. Weakness is just a synonym for incompetence. And an incompetent government, no matter how sound the theory might be, will inevitably prove to be a bad government.

DAY 44

THOMAS JEFFERSON

"A free people [claim] their rights as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate."

Pamphlet, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," 1774

Today Mr. Jefferson might write:

The rights of a free people are given by nature's law, not as a gift from the head of their government.

DAY 45

GEORGE WASHINGTON

"The executive branch of this government never has, nor will suffer, while I preside, any improper conduct of its officers to escape with impunity."

To Gouverneur Morris, December 22, 1795

Today President Washington might write:

This administration never has and never will allow inappropriate conduct by my appointees to be exempt from due justice—not while I'm the president.

DAY 46

THOMAS JEFFERSON

"An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens."

To John Melish, 1813

DAY 47

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION DELEGATES

"...he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed..."

The United States Constitution. Article 2, Section 3

Today the Convention delegates might conclude that:

[The president] must make sure that the laws are enforced as they were written...

DAY 48

GEORGE WASHINGTON

"I give my signature to many bills with which my judgment is at variance.... From the nature of the Constitution, I must approve all parts of a bill, or reject it in total. To do the latter can only be justified upon the clear and obvious grounds of propriety; and I never had such confidence in my own faculty of judging as to be over tenacious of the opinions I may have imbibed in doubtful cases."

To Edmund Pendleton, September 23, 1793

Today President Washington might write:

I sign a lot of bills that I disagree with. ...Our Constitution demands that I either approve or reject the whole bill. A rejection can only be justified when it's clearly and obviously right to do so. I've never thought so highly of my own judgment to stubbornly impose my conclusions on legitimately debatable issues.

DAY 49

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

"In unfolding to my countrymen the principles by which I shall be governed in the fulfillment of those duties my first resort will be to that Constitution which I shall swear to the best of my ability to preserve, protect, and defend."

Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825

Today President Adams might say:

I'd explain to my fellow Americans that the standard I'm committed to following in carrying out my responsibilities is, first and foremost, to rely on the Constitution, which I will swear to preserve, protect and defend to the best of my ability.