

**U.S.
LEADERSHIP
IN POLITICAL TIME
AND SPACE**

PATHFINDERS, PATRIOTS, AND
EXISTENTIAL HEROES

JON JOHANSSON



US Leadership in Political Time and Space

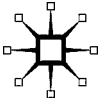
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Jon Johansson

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*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, mid-winter 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.² 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.

PART I

Americans as Free Artists of Themselves

CHAPTER 1

US Leadership in Political Time and Space

Adapting to Change: Introducing Political Time

The passage of time between President George Washington and President Barack Obama reveals how the ebb and flow of American politics has always involved a process of order and change. Presidents, like the citizens they lead, are embedded within this history. Occasionally presidents, when the situation is malleable, become the initiator of change; most other times they respond to change phenomena occurring elsewhere. During the revolutionary era—before the duly created constitutional architecture and the government institutions solidified into a workable, then resilient, political system—leadership was vital to make the constituent parts of a new American democracy work. Thus every act of President George Washington’s was a first, and he was hypervigilant about the precedent-creating potential of his every action, so the general’s “judicious and restrained hand” guided his nascent country, allowing the new Constitution to bed in with a constitutionally respectful, and bounded, president at the helm.¹

The result was that an American tyrant did not replace a British one. The founders, in their construction of the presidency, may have relied too much upon the general’s discretion in forging the office, but their confidence in him was not misplaced. Washington, in this essential sense, became an order-creating president. Twelve years after Washington’s inauguration, however, America’s third president, Thomas Jefferson, would prove to be an order-shattering one, the first in the nation’s history. By repudiating his Federalist inheritance, Jefferson transformed what was meant by legitimate democratic government.²

Relationships between the three branches of government were still extremely fluid, however. Jefferson, as president, was able to make the Louisiana Purchase without appropriate congressional appropriation and then structure the new territory as he saw fit, without attracting any constitutional rebuke.

For Obama and his successors, these very same constitutional ingredients have matured and then rigidified over more than two centuries of practice and experience, through constitutional amendment and statute law, and by surviving periodic national tests and upheavals. Thus, while change is the only constant in politics and society, the political system's ability to respond to it has become more difficult over time as sophisticated decision-making systems and institutions of ever greater complexity have complicated presidential leadership, most especially in the domestic sphere.³ Economic and social forces are never static, even when they appear so, because they continually evolve at different speeds and intensities as they respond to external shocks, internal contradictions, destructive forces as well as technological or other forms of innovation. American-style democracy thereby offers a competitive and dynamic system that requires leadership to adaptively respond to change stimuli, whether large or small.⁴

Historical progression is, therefore, accompanied by a rhythm. The beat of this rhythm changes as different situations occur and as resulting leadership responses either change the direction of politics or confirm paths already taken. We can label this beat political time. From the perspective of presidents, political time is their construction of their moment in history.⁵ According to Yale presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek, political time offers presidents different opportunities or constraints depending on whether they are affiliated with or opposed to the dominant regime and whether the underlying received commitments are resilient or vulnerable. These variables help to locate presidents during their moments in history. Each different beat imposes different demands, so Skowronek's concept of political time is very insightful because it reinforces the extent to which a president's agency is influenced by situational variables as well as deeper historical currents. When presidents have great scope to effect change, they nonetheless still need help to do so, as we shall discover in this study. Individuals and groups in Congress or in communities form part of the leadership process that then ensues. When a president has limited or no scope to effect change, then other Americans have even greater opportunity to force change, whether locally or on a national scale. Political time, therefore, reinforces crucial relationships between

different levels of leadership flowing through the political system, but to what end?

Long-term historical trajectories in the physical realm and social, economic, and international environments, as well as technological and intellectual changes that impact on these variables, all run on different arcs so historical progression is a hugely dynamic and unpredictable process. These very same dimensions are defined here as “political space.” It is the interaction between political time and the resulting changes in the shape of political space that is one of the primary interests in this study, which analyzes leadership phenomena occurring at levels below that of presidents. An underlying foundation for the case studies that follow is, therefore, the notion that American-style democracy is an inherently leadership-driven system and also that it is an open, self-correcting system. While most American leadership studies focus, not unnaturally, on the president as the major agent of change, this study has a more open mind about where leadership may emerge from. Sometimes presidents effect big change, most especially in foreign policy or in the exercise of war making, where few constraints exist to restrict presidential choice or when situational crises send power flowing upward to the president. However, presidents are often limited in their effective action, especially in the domestic sphere. In these circumstances, leadership does not cease to exist, just the location of its origin and expression will change.

Political Space and Time

Political space can also be conceived of as the realm of human activity relating to politics, as well as the material resources with which that activity interacts.⁶ Political space also includes the representation of this human activity in the mind. It is, in this sense, both temporal and an expression of human imagination; so it is both mountain and metaphor. As an illustration, Meriwether Lewis’s story (chapter 4) canvasses different dimensions of political space, which include the *physical* space that was represented by Lewis’s great western traverse, codified through the cartography of Lewis’s co-leader, Captain William Clark, which was created by *territorial* space purchased by the United States from France, as well as by *imaginative* space—a Jeffersonian “empire of liberty”—that would grow over the centuries, greatly expanding upon the *intellectual* space of Thomas Paine (chapter 1) who coined, during the War of Independence, an idea called “The United States of America.” In chapter 6, by way of a further example, when looking

at the leadership efforts of the first black baseballer to break the race barrier, Jackie Robinson, political space is concerned with one moment in political time in a, by then, 171-year struggle for equality, otherwise known as the *civil rights movement*, attempting to carve out an equal share of the personal and national space guaranteed to all Americans in the Declaration of Independence and to black Americans through constitutional amendment.

Political time is uninterrupted, but it has rhythms, and these rhythms can repeat themselves across time as historical cycles. It takes the wild card of human imagination to give this structure and its components their name. That is why political leaders are embedded in political time and space. And there is no escape for them from its effects. While those effects are variable there is latitude for human creativity to vary the trajectory of political time and with it the shape of political space. While it is impossible to escape political time it is possible, if sufficient skill exists, to borrow it from time to time and exploit it for adaptive purposes. Political space and time can be, however, deceptive. The Bush–Obama transition is a good example of this. Take this statement by Obama’s chief political strategist David Axelrod:

I think there’s no question that a verdict has been rendered on the policies of the past eight years and in many ways extending back to the governing philosophy that we’ve had for 30 years . . . and in 1980, the New Deal–Great Society epoch came to an end and it launched another era that I think history will say lasted for 28 years.⁷

Axelrod rightly looked at the collapse of the Bush presidency and the healthy mandate, underpinned by a 40-year surge in electoral participation, which swept Obama into office, as a sign that political space had opened up after the preceding 28-year direction of it had been repudiated. While it remains finely balanced, the first six years of Obama’s presidency suggest that the previous political space—seen as malleable and open to the possibilities of transformative leadership—was more resilient than it appeared at first blush.

Space can also disrupt the ability of political leaders to exploit political time by imposing limits upon their effective action. While political time waxes and wanes, or may even be in perpetual wane, sometimes it does afford opportunity to lead change. Sometimes it demands imagination to create more adaptive effects. Sometimes political time demands courage to prevent worse, maladaptive things from taking place. Sometimes it matters not whether action is taken, because

nothing can withstand forces too large to combat, however heroic it might be to try. Leadership, in these different ways, is an instrument of social adaptation—comprising word or action—to create greater possibilities than those inherited. The working definition of leadership in this study, therefore, is this: leadership exploits political time to grow, defend, or defy political space. A successful leader can recognize their opportunities to alter political space in adaptive ways and possess the skills to exploit those opportunities. However, inertia is a constant force that if left unchecked produces entropy. Inertia builds up over political time. Political space can then become so cramped that it has the effect of making political time stand still. In these circumstances any creative response has little if any effect. And thus, when high-level leadership cannot change political space, adaptive cultural traits can serve as effective guides for leaders and individual citizens in their attempts to expand political space once more.

Political time and space are not dissimilar to their namesakes in the physical universe. When thinking about America, one might say that its big bang was on July 4, 1776. The special alchemy that created the conditions for America exploding into life was its repudiation of an intolerable status quo and a confidence to ignore limits, defy history, and create something new. After its birth, America experienced a rate of rapid expansion and then, over time, the chaos and fluidity of the earliest phases gave way to ever greater order, while the seeds of future rigidity were also established. In this way, the political realm, and the laws that both drive and shape politics, has structure, much like the solar system we live in. The structure is not always clear to us, but it is a structure, nevertheless: there are strong and weak forces (i.e., the economy versus local ballot initiatives, or, say, campaign finance versus electoral participation); gravitational movement, such as the action and reaction of policy initiatives; long-established relationships between different celestial bodies (i.e., Democrats and their constellation of orbiting interests, and the Republicans and their equivalents); black holes of maladaptive or misdirected action (i.e., slavery, segregation, the Vietnam and Iraq wars); and political voids (such as entitlement reform), and so on.

So, for a president, political space creates the boundary conditions for calculations about political time and how to exploit it. In Skowronek's theory of structure and action, two order-affirming or two order-opposing types of political space emerged according to the dictates of political time.⁸ Each suggested different leadership strategies for presidents to be successful. The conception of political space offered here can also serve as a chain or liberator for a president—that is, it also creates their

boundary conditions—but space is more expansively conceived than in Skowronek’s formulation. Thus, while the citizenry are bounded by political time, they are, also, part of a much wider leadership system—one called American democracy—and they, like their president, may also in the right contexts, and depending on their strategic location within the whole, have opportunities to disturb political space in adaptive ways.

Therefore, it is not just presidents who forge new worlds or remake old ones. It is all Americans and any American. Leadership has frequently emerged from the presidency, most especially during times of national or international crisis, but it can also be forged through the purposeful actions of suboptimal political actors or nonpolitical actors, particularly for those who reach into the deep cultural foundations of their country or those who exploit favorable situational dynamics. They can, through word or deed, lead in political time by breaking through blockages that political elites cannot surmount, for whatever constraining reasons. Suboptimal political actors or nonpolitical actors can also lead during political time by acting in ways not predicted by political elites to create a new political space. They can also lead by executing their political elites’ plans beyond that which was originally envisaged, or they can also come to embody political time through their actions, even if failure then ensues, to serve as an adaptive marker for later generations to learn from. We now turn to these three archetypes of individuals.

Pathfinders, Patriots, and Existential Heroes

In the United States the tradition of ignoring limits, to push ever outwards to forge new space, has been a cultural strength throughout its history. A *pathfinder* is therefore defined as someone who discovers a new path or way, a pioneer or explorer, in other words. Someone is also a pathfinder who seeks out or promulgates a new idea or an experimental or novel plan that changes political space in adaptive ways.⁹ The earliest notable pathfinder in prerevolutionary America was Benjamin Franklin. New ideas attributed to him include bifocal lenses, the lightning rod, most of the key terms now used in electricity, the Franklin stove, and the odometer. Franklin was also hugely influential in establishing the University of Pennsylvania, was at the forefront of demographic research, and was the first president of the American Philosophical Society. During his years as postmaster, Franklin essentially created America’s nascent communications network across its vast space and disparate communities.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume described Franklin as America's first philosopher, while biographer Walter Isaacson thought Franklin "laid the foundation for the most influential of America's homegrown philosophies, pragmatism." Franklin's practical wisdom was an essential ingredient during the constitutional convention and the debates over the constitution, so "compromisers might not make great heroes, but they do make democracies."¹⁰

The pathfinding instinct first seen in Franklin has long driven American development and innovation. Meriwether Lewis (in chapter 4), in contrast, represents an exemplar of the explorer in American history, a discoverer of new spaces (and species). In a country still testing its limits inside its territorial boundary east of the Mississippi River, in the early 1800s, Lewis set out into the unknown—akin to astronauts in our advanced, technological age—adrift from his lines of support and communication, moving further away from each with every step, to seek a new path west and to discover, on behalf of his mentor President Thomas Jefferson, what was out there. Wanderlust is not enough, on its own, to produce a successful pathfinder, so the tangible strategies and skills that underpin pathfinding leadership will be revealed in the details of Lewis's epic traverse.

In chapter 6, America's pathfinding instinct will be explored in the domain of race and the maelstrom of the twentieth century civil rights movement. Two pathfinders, born six years apart, in neighboring states in the Deep South, forged two very different paths as they sought to prize open the door of opportunity for their fellow black Americans. Jackie Robinson, athlete extraordinaire, broke the racial barrier in professional baseball and presents one nonpolitical face of the movement. But as the first, he, like Lewis's "Corps of Discovery," had to face at times novel as well as harrowing experiences where his physical skills alone could not carry him forward. Mental fortitude, too, characterized the third pathfinder in this study, the indomitable Rosa Parks. She was not the first, in the manner of the pathfinders discussed here, but hers was also a novel journey as she laid a foundation from which civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., would build upon to help create a powerful new instrument in the fight against injustice, that is, the use of nonviolent resistance in the form of economic boycott.

A second historical strand of American-style leadership is patriotism. *Patriotism* is often conceived in negative terms because so-called blind patriotism can lead to maladaptive hypernationalistic behaviors when compared to a more adaptive, "constructive patriotism" that allows for the questioning of one's own nation and the choices its leaders make.¹¹

In chapter 3, a case drawn from the revolutionary era—General Henry Knox as the exemplar of a patriot—will be examined because Knox’s support for the cause, freely given, during the lengthy War of Independence, when survival was not assured and every small act could have life or death consequences, established the character of an American-style patriot. Knox was not a blind patriot, although his devotion to General Washington was near absolute. A working definition for a *patriot* in the American context is, accordingly, “a person devoted to his or her country and a person who is ready to support or defend their or their country’s rights and freedoms.”¹² The crucial aspects in this definition are the words “devoted,” “support,” and “defend.” The patriot’s *devotion* is to the most comprehensive unit to which that individual is a member; hence, in chapter 5, which looks at the patriotic leadership of, respectively, Confederate General Robert E. Lee and two Union Generals, Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, the patriotism of Grant and Sherman to the Union is differentiated from the more confined, sectional loyalty of Lee.¹³

A crucial second dimension to the notion of a patriot in this study is their *support* for a strategically better placed actor than themselves, in Knox’s case his commander-in-chief. For Knox, it was his unwavering support for General Washington that defined his patriotism. Knox performed an amazing feat of logistics in the worst conditions imaginable—retrieving 120,000 pounds of heavy artillery from Fort Ticonderoga in Upstate New York during the height of a New England winter—because he understood that Washington couldn’t do everything and be everywhere at once, so Knox resolved to do something about it to help Washington evict the British from Boston. Likewise, when studying the patriotic leadership of Grant and Sherman, there is an underlying narrative about their leading the defense of the Union in ways their president could not but sorely needed his generals to. President Lincoln had enough burdens during the Civil War, complex ones, and so Grant and Sherman’s actions, too, provided decisive support for the achievement of Lincoln’s war aims.

The third aspect of the definition that links Henry Knox with his successors is that each was called upon to *defend* political space during conditions of war. For General George Washington, his countrymen’s patriotism to the cause of American independence was not guaranteed. He well understood patriotism’s limits because his rebel army suffered from constant desertions and turnover that frequently left the Continental Army completely exposed. Under crisis conditions such as Washington faced, the defense of the 13 colonies was achieved only through a highly

unlikely combination of long endurance interspersed with occasional inspiration and luck. Knox's "noble train" of artillery was one of those inspirations. In contrast, in the bloody Civil War, the means by which the Union was defended form part of patriotism's price. Lincoln may have very effectively fused patriotism with high moral ends—the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery—but in Grant and Sherman we will see two cases where the means employed to achieve victory were brutal beyond imagination, but nevertheless necessary for the defense of their nation.¹⁴

The last American leadership archetype introduced is the highly unpredictable existential hero. The president has been described as the "wild card" between the realm of ideas and the material condition; so too, can our existential hero function as a creative source of energy to provoke or precipitate adaptive change.¹⁵ Conversely, they might fail to wrestle with forces much too powerful to change, but through an existential act or acts of defiance, they offer a marker for the future; they embody a leadership idea or effect that offers others the opportunity to learn from their doomed efforts. This strand of existential heroism is sympathetic to Machiavelli's advice, if not at all with his chosen metaphor, that in the face of an inexorable state of affairs it is nonetheless heroic to boldly wrestle with Lady Fortuna.¹⁶ The definition of an existential hero is elegantly simple, therefore; it is a person who chooses to "stand alone in defiance of a majority because they feel compelled to act, or they stand alone by virtue of their disposition.

The archetype envisaged here is no replica of the hero depicted in existential philosophy or literature, although it does share an emphasis on the freedom of individuals to choose their path or course.¹⁷ Rather, the existential hero, through their actions, reinforces their singularity, their mark as "irremediably different"; in other words, what we may also label as their "individuation."¹⁸ Individuation here equates to their being a marker for others; they come to represent an authentic embodiment of a cherished societal value, whether it is genius, prudence, defiance, conscience, loyalty, or whatever adaptive quality is displayed. A final dimension of our existential hero archetype is that through their actions they come to serve as an emblem for society's great richness and vibrancy, as a leader and as a vital member of the citizenry or as one of the so-called mundane followers described in much of the leadership literature. Here the value that is most treasured is "more life."¹⁹

The existential hero frequently fails in what they set out to do but occasionally they succeed in spectacular ways that could not have been predicted. The exemplar of the existential hero in this study is the

revolutionary-era pamphleteer, Thomas Paine. He captures much of the wild quality found in the existential hero. Writer Norman Mailer, contemplating the odds of his receiving a written response from Jacqueline Kennedy—who, after asking Mailer whether it was possible to write “impressionistic” accounts of history, was told that he did hope to one day write a biography on the Marquis de Sade and the “odd strange honour of the man”—conceded, “it is the small inability to handicap odds which is family to the romantic, the desperate and the insane.”²⁰ This same inability to handicap odds, aided by a wild intensity, saw Paine’s great pamphlet *Common Sense* make conscious what was previously only latent in most Americans’ minds—it was time to part from Britain.

The other “Wildman” in this study, Daniel Ellsberg (in chapter 7), also captures some of the character-related intensity (and unevenness) of this variant of the existential hero. Ellsberg went through a conversion from being a Vietnam hawk to virulently antiwar and, having achieved this metamorphosis, he then chose to leak the *Pentagon Papers*, a study into the history of decision making in Vietnam since 1954. Ellsberg was driven, one suspects, by both his very rational intellect and an unconscious “existential curse,” in the sense associated to the Danish existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who believed his family was doomed after his father cursed God on a Jutland heath.²¹ Oregon Senator Wayne Morse, one of only two dissenting votes against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized the expansion of the Vietnam War, provides an example of an existential hero laying down an adaptive marker to succeeding generations. He stood alone to challenge the logic of a situation that President Lyndon Johnson manipulated for his own domestic political purposes.

The final two examples of the existential hero, also contained in chapter 7, suffered none of the character volatility of Paine, Ellsberg, or even Morse. The first term Pennsylvanian Congresswoman, Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky (as she was then called), provided President Bill Clinton with his 218th and decisive vote to pass his 1993 economic plan. She stood alone as other, more electorally safe Democrats deserted their young president out of their perceived self-interest. Her vote cost Margolies-Mezvinsky her seat, but her individuation, her marker, was that of a party loyalist providing crucial support for an embattled president. For Californian Democrat, Barbara Lee, standing alone doesn’t even come close to describing her isolation at the moment she registered the only dissenting vote in a 420–1 House vote authorizing President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror.” She piggybacked the example of Morse in 1964 and offers a further example of questioning, in the

most extreme crisis conditions imaginable—the September 11 terrorist attacks—the efficacy of giving any president a blank check.

The 12 cases of leadership described in the following pages will be examined to see how each individual interacted with political time; the rhythm of their historical moment; what each leader achieved in terms of growing, defending, or defying political space; what skills it took to do so; how situations were exploited to advance a domain; and how sometimes even in the face of overwhelming forces Americans can rise to their challenge and if not overcome it, then be defined across political time by their words or actions.