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**Heirs of the Revolution:
The Founding Heritage in American Presidential Rhetoric
Since 1945**

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MA MLitt**

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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

The history of the United States' revolutionary origins has been a persistently prevalent source of reference in the public speeches of modern American presidents. Through an examination of the character and context of allusions to this history in presidential rhetoric since 1945, this thesis presents an explanation for this ubiquity. America's founding heritage represents a valuable – indeed, an essential – source for the purposes of presidential oratory. An analysis of the manner in which presidents from Harry Truman to Barack Obama have invoked and adapted specific aspects of this heritage in their public rhetoric exposes a distinctly usable past, employed in different contexts and in advancing specific messages. Chapters devoted to the references of modern presidents to the Declaration of Independence, to the Constitution, and to four of the nation's Founding Fathers, demonstrate that distinct elements of the founding heritage can be invoked in different ways. In sum, however, they reveal that allusions to this history have served three, sometimes overlapping, purposes in modern presidential discourse. Firstly, and most commonly, this history has proved an essential source on the numerous occasions in which presidents have reflected upon and reaffirmed the enduring character of American national identity. Secondly, such is the prominence of the founding heritage in the collective memory of Americans that presidents have been able to invoke elements of this familiar history pertinent to their discussion of a diverse range of contemporary concerns. Finally, and most significantly, this rhetoric has very often been applied for more pragmatic and partisan reasons. Given the veneration of the founding heritage in American culture and the acceptance that the democratic ideals then established remain essential to the purpose and direction of the nation, this thesis argues that presidents have found political value in implying their own inheritance of the Founders' incontestable legacy. In speeches delivered across the shifting contexts of the post-war period, presidents have explicitly aligned their policy goals with the values and vision of the nation's first leaders, interpreting and adapting the Founders' words in a manner supportive of their public message.

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I dedicate this work to the memory of my grandfather. His yellowing map of the United States has hung above my desk for the past four years, a reminder always of a forebear truly worth emulating.

Note on Sources:

A project of this scope would not have been possible without access to *The American Presidency Project*, the only online resource that has consolidated and coded into a single searchable database the ‘Public Papers of the Presidents’. Established in 1999 at the University of California, the archive contains the vast majority of the president’s public messages, statements, speeches, and news conference remarks, collated from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, various dates).

Every presidential speech cited in this thesis is drawn from *The American Presidency Project* database. To include a long website address for every individual speech cited would have resulted in extremely cumbersome footnotes. In each case, therefore, I have included simply the author/speaker, and the title and date of the speech as it appears in the online archive.

Every presidential speech cited was accessed via the search function in the ‘Public Papers of the Presidents’ section of the website:

John Woolley and Gerhard Peters ed., ‘The Public Papers of the Presidents’, *The American Presidency Project* (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/#axzz2gVQdSVpU>) [1999-2013].

Individual speeches can easily be retrieved through searching ‘By Month and Year’, or by performing specific word or phrase searches.

I. Modern American Presidents and the Founding Heritage

1. Introduction

On the afternoon of July 4, 2013, the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, D.C. was a lively scene. Several hundred military personnel and their families had been invited to the president's official residence to celebrate the 237th anniversary of American independence. Children ran between the red, white and blue tables on the grass; smoke rose from a barbecue; the uniformed members of the Marine Band readied themselves to perform. President Barack Obama, emerging on the south portico to address the crowd, did not intend to speak for long. 'I don't want to keep you from the food', he said. He wanted though to explain, especially to the children listening, what was 'so special' about the day, what made it more than 'an excuse for some hotdogs'. What followed was a summary of the nation's origins familiar to all Americans:

On July 4, 1776, a small band of patriots declared that we were a people created equal, free to think and worship and live as we please; that our destiny would not be determined for us, it would be determined by us. And it was bold and it was brave. And it was unprecedented; it was unthinkable. At that time in human history, it was kings and princes and emperors who made decisions.

But those patriots knew there was a better way of doing things, that freedom was possible, and that to achieve their freedom, they'd be willing to lay down their lives, their fortunes, their honor. And so they fought a revolution. And few would have bet on their side, but for the first time of many times to come, America proved the doubters wrong.

The president offered more than a history lesson. He emphasised that America's revolutionary birth established a sense of direction and purpose that has guided the nation ever since:

And now, 237 years later, this improbable experiment in democracy, the United States of America, stands as the greatest nation on Earth. And what makes us great is, not our size or our wealth, but our values and our ideals and the fact that we're willing to fight for them. A land of liberty and opportunity, a global defender of peace and freedom, a beacon of

hope for people everywhere who cherish those ideals.¹

For a foreign listener unfamiliar with the pattern of American presidential rhetoric these lofty words might appear striking. While citizens of any country can take patriotic pleasure in believing their nation superior to others, only in the United States is this belief consistently rooted in the abstract sense of identity articulated by Obama. His words could have been spoken by any American president in the last two centuries: the United States' superiority and continued identity is based, he suggested, on the circumstances of the nation's origins and the sustained commitment of the people to the democratic ideals in the name of which the American Revolution was waged.

The scholar of political communication, Roderick Hart, has suggested that Europeans observe the 'American penchant for brandishing national values' with bemusement. Indeed, Europeans might 'decry a leader' who, in citing the history of the Revolution, appears to waste 'his and his listener's time telling a story that any seven-year-old in the United States could have told.' Certainly there is nothing comparable in British political discourse. As the social historian Peter Laslett wrote in the 1980s, this persistent reiteration of history – this sense that 'the outcomes of the past are part and parcel of [American] citizenship' – is alien to British politics: 'nothing in British history weighs like this' upon us.² As this thesis will demonstrate, however, in the United States the history of the founding era is a consistently prominent and meaningful source of reference in the rhetoric of the nation's political leaders. As Hart implied, it is easy to dismiss the frequent allusions of American presidents to revolutionary origins and founding ideals as hollow platitudes. Yet these words are not empty vessels. On the contrary, through an analysis of presidential speeches since 1945, I will argue that the United States' founding heritage has represented a distinctly usable past in the public rhetoric of modern presidents, invoked in specific contexts and for particular purposes.

This heritage resonates with Americans. The mythologised and celebrated status in American culture of the political leaders who established the nation, the founding documents they produced, and the events in which they participated is roundly accepted. Indeed, several scholars have followed Robert Bellah in deeming the veneration of the

¹ Barack Obama, '490 - Remarks at an Independence Day Celebration, July 4, 2013', *The American Presidency Project* (See 'Note on Sources', p. 5).

² Roderick Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: presidential communication in the modern age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 37-8; Peter Laslett quoted in Michael Foley, *American Political Ideas: Traditions and Usages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 228.

Founders and their work the central component of a civil religion.³ The ‘Founding Fathers’ are recalled as more than historical figures; they are saint-like national icons. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, meanwhile, are the most precious relics of the nation’s past. As Pauline Maier has observed, the display of the founding documents at the National Archives resembles a religious shrine in which the American public are encouraged to file by, ‘looking up reverentially’ at the Founders’ texts as if they had been ‘handed down by God or were the work of superhuman men’.⁴ In a vast quantity of artwork and literature, produced in every corner of the country over the course of two centuries, the central figures and events of the founding era have been depicted and celebrated, retold and reimagined. So entrenched is the founding heritage in American culture that it is not in the least surprising that One World Trade Center, the defiantly towering skyscraper due to open in 2014 on the site of Ground Zero in New York, will measure 1776 feet in height.⁵ There could scarcely be a more symbolic statement of the nation’s endurance and continuity.

Crucially, the prominence of this heritage in the public consciousness is sustained by a belief that the democratic values established by the Founders remain essential to the purpose and direction of the United States. Although the notion of ideological consensus advanced in mid-twentieth century scholarship has since been challenged, most scholars continue to accept that the core principles of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism and democracy articulated in the founding documents lie at the root of American national identity.⁶ It has always been in terms of a shared commitment to these founding principles – to what Gunnar Myrdal first called the ‘American Creed’ – that citizens have been

³ Robert Bellah first popularised the concept of the American civil religion in his 1967 essay, ‘Civil Religion in America’, *Daedalus* 96:1 (1967), pp. 1-21. See also, Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975) in which Bellah discussed America’s ‘myth of origins’ further, defining the civil religion as ‘that religious dimension’ through which a people ‘interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality.’ (p. 3). The notion has reappeared in numerous studies as historians have sought to illustrate the quasi-religious reverence with which Americans regard the Founding Fathers and their work. See, notably, Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976) and, for a more general overview of the relevant scholarship: Phillip E. Hammond, Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley and Jonathan D. Sarna, ‘Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited’, *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 4:1 (1994).

⁴ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 215.

⁵ *One World Trade Center* (<http://onewtc.com/>) [10/08/13]; For a definitive overview of the status of the Revolution in American popular culture, see Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978). Discussing primarily art, poetry, drama and historical fiction, Kammen demonstrates that the founding era is at the ‘core’ of America’s ‘sense of tradition’ and essential to ‘the definition and development of national character’. (Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, pp. 15, 256, 108.)

⁶ The debates within the study of American political ideology are discussed further below. Helpful summaries can be found in Samuel P. Huntington, ‘Paradigms of American Politics: Beyond the One, the Two, and the Many’, *Political Science Quarterly* 89:1 (1974) and Michael Foley, *American Credo: The Place of Ideas in US Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

encouraged to understand their common identity.⁷ More than a celebrated historical moment then, the founding era is considered, as Obama suggested in his Fourth of July address, the source of the political ideals that continue to define and guide the nation.

When presidents allude to the founding heritage they can, therefore, be confident of the resonance of their words. There is no better foundation on which to build the reflections on national identity and purpose so frequently expected of presidential oratory. As numerous examples over the course of my thesis will illustrate, it is in these discussions of national values that the founding heritage has most commonly been invoked in the speeches of presidents since 1945. I suggest, however, that this history has served two further purposes in modern presidential rhetoric. Firstly, so familiar are the American public with the popular history of the founding era that presidents have been able to invoke elements of this heritage pertinent to their discussion of contemporary concerns. The Founding Fathers, the writings they produced, and the key events in which they took part have specific associations in the collective memory of Americans that presidential speechwriters have been able to exploit in addressing related issues.⁸ These efforts are nonpartisan, found in the speeches of Democratic and Republican presidents alike on occasions in which the words and experience of the Founders represent an apposite source of reference or comparison. I will argue, though, that presidential allusions to the founding era have very often been applied for more pragmatic and partisan reasons. Such is the veneration of the founding heritage and the accepted virtue and necessity of the ideals then established that there is political value for a president in implying their own inheritance of the Founders' celebrated legacy. In numerous public addresses across the last seven decades, American leaders have aligned the policy goals of their administration with the vision and values of the Founding Fathers. Finding support and sanction for their arguments in the words of these venerated figures, presidents have sought to legitimate and promote their political agenda.

⁷ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944). Myrdal's conception of this ideological basis for national identity was echoed in several subsequent studies (see below). As Philip Gleason put it, to be an 'American', 'A person did not have to be of any particular national, linguistic, religious, or ethnic background. All he had to do was commit himself [*sic.*] to the political ideology centred on the abstract ideals of liberty, equality, and republicanism.' Philip Gleason, 'American Identity and Americanization' in *Concepts of Ethnicity* ed. by William Petersen, Michael Novak and Philip Gleason (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1982), p. 62.

⁸ The concept of 'collective memory' is well established: many scholars have applied the phrase, as I do, in discussing the place and perception of national history in the public consciousness. I follow in essence the definition offered by Barry Schwartz: 'Collective memory...refers to the social distribution of beliefs, feelings, and...judgments about the past'. Barry Schwartz, 'Collective Memory and Abortive Commemoration: Presidents' Day and the American Holiday Calendar', *Social Research* 75:1 (2008), p. 76. See also Amos Funkenstein, 'Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness', *History and Memory* 1:1 (1989) and Mitch Kachun, 'From Forgotten Founder to Indispensable Icon: Crispus Attacks, Black Citizenship, and Collective Memory, 1770-1865', *Journal of the Early Republic* 29:2 (2009).

This approach has been adopted in presidential rhetoric across the party divide, with regard to diverse issues and in changing contexts. Consequently, it has been necessary for presidents to interpret and present the founding heritage in a manner suitable to the nature of their arguments and the circumstances in which they speak. I will argue that it is the inherent adaptability of this heritage that has allowed its employment in quite different contexts and on behalf of disparate, sometimes contrasting, arguments. Familiar to every American, the founding era is nevertheless a cloudy, mythologised history, defined by abstract ideals, ambiguous politics and remote but revered figures. Presidents can therefore emphasise the aspects of this history most applicable to and supportive of their public message.

My analysis of allusions to this usable eighteenth century past in the speeches of modern presidents reveals, in broad terms, a picture of permanence: a ubiquitous discourse employed by every American leader since 1945. However, by considering the manner in which specific elements of the founding heritage – namely, the founding documents and the legacy of individual Founders – have been cited in post-war presidential rhetoric, it will become clear that references to these distinct elements have served different purposes depending on the motives of the president and the context in which they speak. I will expose the patterns of usage that have emerged as presidents have spoken in comparable circumstances or in advancing similar political policies; I will consider the differences in interpretation that have allowed the same language to be applied in support of contrasting arguments; and I will discuss the effect that changing contexts have had on the value of citing specific aspects of this history. The result will be a new and detailed picture of the uses, recurring associations and continued adaptability of the founding heritage in modern presidential rhetoric.

In locating and analysing presidential allusions to the founding era I have mined the speeches of every president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama. I believe there is particular value in examining the post-1945 era. President Roosevelt, with his rousing rhetoric and regular ‘fireside chats’, did much to establish the prominence of presidential oratory during the 1930s. Moreover, he presided over a significant expansion in the White House public relations machine. In altering the manner in which speeches were produced, delivered and received, Roosevelt’s administration was, as John Tebbel and Sarah Watts have explained, a ‘bridge between past and future’.⁹ Truman’s presidency, inheriting these

⁹ John Tebbel and Sarah Miles Watts, *The Press and the Presidency: from George Washington to Ronald Reagan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 437.

changed conditions, thus represented the beginning of a new era during which the role and reach of presidential rhetoric would continue to grow. From the moment Truman delivered the first televised address from the White House on October 5, 1947, to the instant access that the internet offers Americans to the president's words today, the volume of presidential speeches has increased and with it so too the coverage and scrutiny of an expanding media.¹⁰ My project therefore offers a comprehensive analysis of what can truly be deemed 'modern' presidential rhetoric. By extending my focus to include the first decade of the twenty-first century, moreover, we will see that the founding heritage remains a key source for presidents today.

In acknowledging this expansion in media attention, I will, on occasion, cite newspaper reports in which presidential addresses were analysed specifically. However, the reception of individual speeches is very difficult to gauge. Any polling data on audience response, compiled by individual administrations, is hard to access and sufficiently complex that it could form the basis of a research project in itself. For the purpose of my contentions, the sheer ubiquity of presidential allusions to the founding heritage is sufficient evidence that presidents and speechwriters *believe* it to be a valuable source of rhetoric. They have employed this language persistently and in myriad diverse contexts throughout the post-war period.

The seven decades since 1945 represent, of course, an era of significant change in the United States. Politically, the progressive-liberalism of Roosevelt's New Deal continued to characterise the administrations of his Democratic successors, culminating in the 1960s with the 'Great Society' programme of Lyndon B. Johnson and the passage of civil rights legislation. Richard Nixon's inauguration as president in 1969, however, marked the beginning of more than two decades of Republican dominance in the White House. A new conservatism, born primarily in opposition to the expansion of federal power inherent in Johnson's domestic agenda, grew within the Republican Party during the 1970s before finding its most decisive voice in the leadership of Ronald Reagan. The latter's emphasis on limited government during the 1980s has remained a central strand of Republican policy in the decades since, a period in which the political map of America has become an uneasy balance of 'red and blue states', ideologically divided between the two central parties.¹¹

¹⁰ Harry S. Truman, '202 - Radio and Television Address Concluding a Program by the Citizens Food Committee, October 5, 1947'.

¹¹ Philip John Davies, 'The end of the American century: the shape of the closing quarter' in *An American Quarter Century: US Politics from Vietnam to Clinton* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1-2; Jonathan Reider, 'The Fractious Nation?' in *The Fractious Nation? Unity and Division in Contemporary American Life* ed. by Jonathan Reider (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 1-5.

Economically, meanwhile, the post-war period is a fluctuating picture of rise and fall. In the broadest terms, the economic boom in the wake of World War II saw a sustained period of growth before a rise in inflation, energy shortages, and the slowing of business activity combined in the ‘stagflation’ of the 1970s and the recession of the early 1980s. There followed a return to economic expansion, reaching its height during the administration of Bill Clinton in the 1990s as new industries and trade opportunities in an increasingly global market boosted profits and employment figures. The first decade of the new millennium, however, witnessed a slowing of the economy before the financial crisis of 2007-8 plunged the nation into a deep economic downturn from which it is still emerging.¹²

Perhaps, though, the most significant contrast between the latter half of the twentieth century and the decades prior to 1945 related to the United States’ position in the world. America emerged from World War II as the leading democracy on earth, assuming the responsibilities on the global stage that this new status demanded. In the early years of the Cold War, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower positioned the United States as the world’s foremost defender of democracy, establishing in opposition to the threat of communism a foreign policy rhetoric that has broadly endured since. Military intervention in Korea in the early 1950s established a precedent that found its most decisive expression a decade later in the Vietnam War. The prolonged and deeply divisive conflict in Vietnam and the ultimate failure of the American forces had a significant effect on national morale, compounded in 1974 by the resignation of President Nixon in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Chastened by a decade of war abroad and division and protest at home, it was not until the 1980s that commentators perceived a recovery in the nation’s sense of unity and confidence.¹³ Reaffirming America’s critical role in the world, President Reagan’s resolutely optimistic and patriotic language once more emphasised the nation’s responsibility to defend and encourage the spread of democracy. Only in the last decade, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the contentious invasion of Iraq during the administration of George W. Bush, has America’s role on the world stage again

¹² Gary M. Walton and Hugh Rockoff, *History of the American Economy* (Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning, 2010), pp. 486-555.

¹³ Many scholars have recognised the significant impact that Vietnam and Watergate had on national morale in the 1970s, and the subsequent efforts of Reagan to restore national confidence. See, for example: Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 645-662; Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 67-8; John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

become a prominent source of debate and uncertainty.¹⁴ For the most part, during the almost seventy years since 1945, the United States has embraced its responsibilities as a global superpower, offering leadership in international politics.

It was in these shifting political and economic contexts that the presidential speeches studied in this thesis were delivered. Focusing on this long period of modern American history has allowed me to consider the effect that changing (and recurring) circumstances have had on the manner in which presidents invoke the founding heritage in their public rhetoric. We will see, for example, the purpose that allusions to the Declaration of Independence served for Truman and Eisenhower as they addressed the perceived threat of communism in the years after World War II; we will hear the words of reassurance and optimism that Gerald Ford and, later, Ronald Reagan produced in recalling the Revolution after a decade scarred by Vietnam and Watergate; and we will consider numerous examples in which presidents have invoked the Founders' legacy in promoting a variety of partisan policies, from the welfare legislation of Johnson in the 1960s to the deregulation proposals of Reagan and George H.W. Bush in the 1980s. Correspondingly, it will become clear that in different contexts presidents have been able to utilise the aspects of this history that best support their public messages.

In seeking to demonstrate the manner in which the founding era has represented a usable past for modern presidents and their speechwriters, I build on a significant volume of existing scholarship. My conception of the 'usability' of history follows on the ideas established by Van Wyck Brooks in the early twentieth century and developed in the work of Henry Steele Commager and, later, Michael Kammen. Brooks sought in the American past experiences, legacies and traditions that could inform and colour, in his case, the work of contemporary writers. There are elements of history, he suggested, that a people can 'elect to remember', that are 'important' to them and in which they can root a sense of identity and continuity.¹⁵ In Kammen's assessment, Americans have demonstrated a notable propensity to look to their history in this way, for sources of inspiration and purpose. Writing in his 1991 monograph, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Kammen explained that a 'usable past has been needed to give shape and substance to national identity'.¹⁶ As several historians have noted, the history of the Revolutionary era served this purpose as Americans strove to establish a sense of unity in the decades after independence. Lacking

¹⁴ See Jonathan Reider, 'Into the Unknown: Unity and Conflict after September 11, 2001' in Reider ed., pp. 265-277; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2011), pp. 264-268.

¹⁵ Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial* 64 (1918), p. 340.

¹⁶ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, p. 6.

the cultural, ethnic and historical ties with which nationalism is traditionally sustained, it was necessary for Americans to create their own common identity. ‘Nothing in the history of American nationalism’, wrote Commager in the 1960s, ‘is more impressive than the speed and the lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past’. The Revolution provided ‘a veritable cornucopia of heroic episodes and memories’ and a host of unifying ‘symbols’, from the Declaration of Independence to the Liberty Bell. These became the ‘insignia’ – the ‘insistent manifestations’ – of a shared past upon which American nationalism could be built. Crucially, as Warren Zelinsky explained, once established, this mythologised history of the nation’s founding continued to ‘brighten the collective memory’.¹⁷ It was an essential component of the American civil religion described in the work of Robert Bellah, Catherine Albanese and others; the ‘sacred’ founding documents and the revered leaders of the Revolution lay at the centre of a ‘myth of origins’, self-consciously cultivated in the years after independence and maintained thereafter.¹⁸

Indeed, underpinning my contentions regarding the resonance of presidential allusions to the founding heritage is an understanding that this ‘myth of origins’ did not dissolve but rather remains prominent in the public consciousness and a critical feature of American nationalism. Countless studies have acknowledged the connection between American national identity and the circumstances of the nation’s birth. Citizenship in the United States has consistently been defined in terms of a shared commitment to the republican principles advanced during the Revolution and enshrined in the founding documents. As Myrdal established in the 1940s, the ideals of ‘equality’, ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution became ‘the highest law of the land’, appealed to and ‘elaborated upon by all national leaders, thinkers, and statesmen’.¹⁹ Despite the gap between these principles and the realities of society, Americans continued to frame a sense of national purpose in terms of the effort to preserve and expand their founding ideals. The work of Daniel Boorstin, Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz in the mid-twentieth century did much to establish our understanding of these concepts.²⁰ So too did the later contributions of Samuel Huntington, Seymour Lipset,

¹⁷ Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp. 13-15; Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 241.

¹⁸ Albanese, pp. 182-3; Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, p.3.

¹⁹ Myrdal, p. 272.

²⁰ Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953); Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: and the men who made it* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954). In highlighting ‘the universality of the

Sacvan Bercovitch and others.²¹ Indeed, despite the effort in more recent years to complicate the idea promoted by Hartz and his successors of a homogenized national character, most scholars continue to accept that the broad democratic values established during the nation's founding remain essential to American self-understanding. As Rogers Smith emphasised, 'multiple traditions' have shaped the political culture of the United States; the inequalities and diversity in society have been critical to the American experience.²² Yet even scholars such as Richard Ellis, Michael Foley and Jonathan Reider, who have followed Smith in stressing the elements of 'fracture' and 'dissensus' in the United States, have conceded the continued presence, as Foley put it, of 'an intuitive conformity to a fixed repertoire of values'.²³ As my thesis will demonstrate, so ingrained in political discourse is the idea that the founding era represents the source of these core values that modern presidents have consistently invoked this history in reiterating the democratic principles that continue to define and direct the course of American politics.

Given the accepted virtue of these founding ideals and the necessity perceived in upholding them, I suggest further that presidents have found value in aligning their own administrations with the Founders' political legacy. In this, again, my approach is informed by existing scholarship. Perhaps of greatest relevance is the work of Garry Wills and Pauline Maier on the Declaration of Independence, and of Merrill Peterson on the legacy of Thomas Jefferson. Their engaging studies demonstrated that Americans have been able to reinterpret, adapt and distort the Declaration and the memory of its primary author in line with changing contexts. Importantly, they touched too on the merit that different groups could find in aligning contemporary causes with this heritage during the nineteenth century and beyond.²⁴ This notion that an association with the Founders' legacy can confer

liberal idea' in the United States, Hartz established a notion of ideological consensus that dominated the scholarship of the mid-twentieth century (Hartz, p.6).

²¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1981); Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996). Both Huntington and Lipset considered further the concept of the American Creed, noting the importance of ideas of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism and justice in the framing of national identity. Recognising the gap between these founding ideals and the realities of American society, Huntington argued that American identity had in fact been defined as much by the effort to narrow this gap between 'ideals and institutions' as by the ideals themselves. Bercovitch, meanwhile, has written at length on the United States' 'ideological dependency' and the mythology of national origins. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 356 and 'The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual and the Ideology of American Consensus' in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* ed. by Sam B. Girgus (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981).

²² Rogers S. Smith, 'Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: the Multiple Traditions in America', *American Political Science Review* 87:3 (1993), pp. 549-566.

²³ Foley, *American Credo*, p. 6; Reider, 'Into the Unknown', p. 253; Richard J. Ellis, *American Political Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. viii.

²⁴ Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Double-Day & Co, 1978); Maier, *American Scripture*; Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (Oxford:

a sense of legitimacy on political positions and arguments remains a feature of twenty-first century scholarship. Jill Lepore, R.B. Bernstein and Francis Cogliano are among those who, in recent years, have noted the continued resonance of the founding heritage in American political culture. As Lepore explained in her study of the Tea Party movement, there remains a belief among Americans that the Founders' words are essentially 'incontrovertible'. Consequently, in seeking examples from history with which to compare and advance contemporary arguments, 'nothing trumps the Revolution'.²⁵

It is therefore well established that the founding era has, since the earliest days of the United States, represented a usable past: in seeking to define their common identity and legitimate their political arguments, Americans have turned to the founding heritage, exploiting the prominence that this quasi-mythic history enjoys in the collective memory. Where my thesis diverts most distinctly from existing work is in focusing specifically on presidential rhetoric. This study is the first to consider the manner in which the founding heritage has represented a persistently valuable source in the speeches of modern American leaders. As the chief articulators of both national values and national policy, it is in their employment of this history that its 'usability' and resonance in American political culture is most sharply exposed.

When the president speaks, the public and the press listen. Much has been written on the symbolic status of the presidency and the responsibilities demanded of the position. The American people, wrote James David Barber, look to the president for words of 'reassurance', 'progress' and guidance; in order to be successful, the president must simultaneously be a voice of clarity, helping the public to 'make sense of politics', and a 'symbolic leader...who draws together the people's hopes and fears for the political future.'²⁶ In fulfilling these expectations the president relies on public oratory. Essential to my thesis is an understanding that speechmaking is central to the role and authority of the

Oxford University Press, 1960). As a statement of 'vague' national principles, wrote Wills, the Declaration has represented 'something of a blank cheque for idealists of all sorts to fill in as they like', cited, for example, by civil rights protestors in the 1960s (Wills, pp. xxiv, 357-8). Maier concurred, describing the elevation of the document into something quite different from that envisaged by its authors. Regarded as a 'powerful statement of national identity', the Declaration became 'a prize worth capturing on behalf of one cause after another' (Maier, p. 154). Peterson, meanwhile, highlighted the efforts that different groups made in the nineteenth century to claim Thomas Jefferson as their ideological forebear, from Jacksonian Democrats to the 'free-soilers' of the 1840s (Peterson, pp. 50-70, 226).

²⁵ Lepore, pp. 14-16; R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009); Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

²⁶ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 4-9. See also: Michael Novak, *Choosing Our King: Powerful Symbols in Presidential Politics* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1974); Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (London: H. Hamilton, 1957); Fred Greenstein ed., *Leadership in the Modern Presidency* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Jon Roper, *The American Presidents: Heroic Leadership from Kennedy to Clinton* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

modern presidency. As Richard Neustadt first established, the primary influence of the president lies in their ‘power to persuade’ the public and other politicians of the virtue and value of their political agenda.²⁷ Certainly since the mid-twentieth century it has chiefly been through their speeches that presidents have sought to achieve this. In recent decades the subject of presidential communication has correspondingly become a thriving and engaging area of scholarship, the output of which has had an important influence on my work. Many have built on the arguments of Jeffrey Tulis whose 1987 study, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, established public rhetoric as ‘a principal tool of presidential governance’. Illustrating the increasing weight that was placed on the president’s words over the course of the twentieth century, Tulis in fact perceived a danger in the growing ability of American leaders to shape the direction of policy through their public speeches. It is a concern that several scholars have shared since, among them Roderick Hart and, most recently, Elvin Lim.²⁸ Most important for my purposes is the acceptance that presidential rhetoric can have a genuine impact on the public perception of the president and the policies of their administration. The fact that presidents have so frequently employed the history of the United States’ origins in their speeches is therefore significant; allusions to the founding heritage represent an effective rhetorical tool with which presidents can advance their agenda.

As I approached this project in the first instance from the perspective of an historian, the work of Tulis and his successors did much to sharpen my understanding of political communication in the United States. I am grateful also to those scholars who have introduced us to the world of presidential speechwriting. The contributions of Martin Medhurst, Robert Schlesinger, Theodore Windt and others give valuable insight into the production of speeches in the White House and the different approaches favoured by the post-war presidents on which I focus.²⁹ Deserving of particular note, however, are three

²⁷ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), pp. 30-32. Neustadt’s influential study was first published in 1960.

²⁸ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 4, 178-187; Hart, *The Sound of Leadership*, pp. 1-17; Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). All three noted, as Tulis put it, the ‘surfeit of speech’: ‘it is increasingly the case that presidential speeches themselves have become the issues and events of modern politics rather than the medium through which issues and events are discussed and assessed.’ (Tulis, pp. 178-9.) While Tulis feared that presidential oratory was constraining political debate and deflecting attention from the practice of governing, Lim was more concerned with an increase in platitudinous rhetoric that says ‘very little that contributes constructively to public deliberation’. (Lim, p. x.)

²⁹ Several excellent essays on twentieth century presidential rhetoric and speechwriting can be found in Martin J. Medhurst ed., *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996) and Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst ed., *Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and beyond* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003). Valuable monographs pertaining to specific presidents and periods include Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., *Presidents and Protesters:*

studies produced in the last decade, all of which trace the connection between presidential rhetoric and American national identity. Vanessa Beasley, Mary Stuckey and, together, Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson studied the priorities and impact of presidential oratory, noting the persistent requirement of presidents to frame their discussions of contemporary problems and future goals in terms of established national values and traditions. As Stuckey explained, American leaders ‘must unite contemporaneous occasions with appropriate traditions...so that enough of us will continue to see ourselves...reflected in the national mirror of public discourse.’ Speechwriters work, writes Beasley, with an understanding of the American public’s perception of nationalism: ‘presidential discourse subtly reinforces the audience’s presumed collective identity’ through allusions to a ‘nostalgic and idealized vision’ of American political culture.³⁰ It was Campbell and Jamieson, however, who most distinctly considered the pragmatic value that presidents can find in tying current contexts to historical traditions. By ‘venerating the past’, American leaders imply that these traditions ‘continue unbroken’ with their own administration. Moreover, by ‘retelling’ history they can ‘imprint their conception of it on the nation’, emphasising the ‘principles’ and lessons most ‘salient’ to their message ‘at that moment’.³¹ Campbell and Jamieson restricted their focus, as Beasley did, to the major speeches of modern presidents, finding in the epideictic oratory of Inaugural and State of the Union addresses the most frequent allusions to national identity and inherited values. In analysing the references of presidents to the founding heritage, across the spectrum of presidential speechmaking, from national addresses to town hall remarks, I will demonstrate that it is with this specific rhetoric that presidents have most persistently sought to emphasise the continuity in American politics and the merit of their own political arguments.³²

Political Rhetoric in the 1960s (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990) and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945-1955* (Westport: Praeger, 2002). For the best analysis of presidential speechwriting, drawn from the testimonies of former practitioners, see Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and their Speechwriters from FDR to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

³⁰ Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 2; Vanessa B. Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.

³¹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 37-42, 137-140.

³² Throughout the thesis, I will follow the convention of Campbell and Jamieson among others in attributing the content of presidential speeches, by and large, to the presidents themselves. I recognise of course that the majority of presidential remarks in this modern period have been composed primarily by speechwriters. Their contributions are noted on occasion in subsequent chapters. However, in delivering speeches, presidents claim ownership of their language. The aims of presidential rhetoric and the messages therein are those of the president (and their administration). Moreover, as Robert Schlesinger made clear, speechwriters go to great lengths to reflect the voice of the president: ‘to assume that Kennedy (or any other president) was a vessel for someone else’s words underestimates the efforts required of [speechwriters] who were writing not in a

It is upon this broad base of scholarship that the chapters ahead will build. I begin, in Chapter 2, by introducing several of the themes that will recur throughout the thesis. In considering, first, the manner in which presidents have responded to contemporary challenges by calling for a renewal of the Founders' values, we will gain an immediate impression of the resonance perceived in this rhetoric. With the value of this language thus established, the remainder of the chapter will introduce some of the key political issues with regard to which the founding heritage has repeatedly been invoked. By offering examples of the more general allusions that American leaders have made to the nation's origins in their speeches, the merit they have found in positioning themselves as inheritors of the Founders' legacy will become clear.

The remainder of the thesis is divided into two parts in which I consider presidential allusions, first to the founding documents and second to the Founding Fathers themselves. Chapter 3 focuses on the Declaration of Independence, a document memorably described by Archibald MacLeish as 'the most precisely articulated statement of national purpose in recorded history'.³³ It is certainly in these terms that American leaders have most commonly cited the text, invoking the Declaration's memorable second paragraph in reminding audiences of the ideals that continue to guide and define the nation. With the document understood as a statement of immovable and infallible national principles, however, presidents have found further value in pledging their own loyalty to it. Given the abstract and timeless nature of the ideals espoused in the text, presidents have been able to apply and adapt its language on behalf of quite different agendas.

In considering the employment of the Constitution in presidential rhetoric, Chapter 4 will offer something of a contrast. There are significant similarities between the two founding texts: the Constitution is also recalled with reverence as a cherished statement of guiding principles and a marker of the United States' celebrated political origins. However, as a sober, practical charter that continues to govern the nation's politics, its adaptation is more problematic. On the one hand, lacking the rousing language of the Declaration, the Constitution has tended to be invoked in idealised terms with little reference to the specifics of its content. More significantly though, American leaders in recent decades

vacuum but in a specific style and cadence.' Indeed, perhaps the most highly regarded writer of presidential rhetoric, Theodore Sorensen, insisted that the words of President Kennedy, for whom he wrote, should be considered the president's own. Writing in 2006, Sorensen maintained 'with good reason that John F. Kennedy was the author – in the true sense of that word – of all of his speeches.' (Schlesinger, pp. 142-3.) See also Campbell and Jamieson, p. 18.

³³ Quoted in Russell Blaine Nye, *This Almost Chosen People: Essays in the History of American Ideas* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966), p. 167.

have been forced to respond to the contentious issue of constitutional interpretation. While presidents in the first half of my period were largely happy to present the Constitution as a living document, adaptable in response to changing circumstances, the popularisation of the original intent debate in the 1980s ensured that subsequent leaders either rejected or avoided this previously established rhetoric. Those supportive of an originalist reading of the Constitution have found value in stating the loyalty of their policies to the original intent of the document's framers; for others, I suggest, the Constitution has become a rather less comfortable source.

Having established the uses of the central texts of the founding heritage, Part III will consider the era's primary protagonists. Only the memory of Abraham Lincoln shines as brightly in the affections and adulation of Americans as that of the Founding Fathers.³⁴ They are national icons, venerated heroes of the Revolution, whose biographies are wrapped up in the mythology of that era. Their familiar names therefore resonate deeply with the American public. Very often, presidential speeches have alluded to the Founders as a collective, offering reminders of their achievements and citing the continued relevance and vitality of the democratic principles they established. Within this group, however, individuals have represented distinct sources for presidential speechwriters, invoked for different purposes and in diverse contexts. Consequently, it is my intention to focus on the four men whose employment in the speeches of post-war presidents has best encapsulated the varying uses of the Founders' legacy in presidential rhetoric.

Chapter 5 will focus on George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, three men whose names and legacies have been cited by modern presidents in quite different ways. Washington, the revered 'Father of the Country', exists above all as a symbol, recalled by presidents in abstract terms as an emblem of the nation's origins, values and endurance. Franklin, in contrast, is perhaps the most accessible of all the Founders. Familiar to the public, his name evokes associations that speechwriters have been able to exploit in addressing specific issues. While the employment of Washington and Franklin in presidential rhetoric has remained broadly constant, Paine's use has changed across the post-war period. Ultimately, the adaptability of his memorable words and the ambiguity of his political legacy have rendered Paine, in isolated but striking instances, a valuable source for presidents of both parties.

³⁴ For a consideration of Lincoln's place in the collective memory of Americans, see Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

The usable facets of these three men combine, I suggest, in the shape of Thomas Jefferson, with whom my sixth and final chapter is concerned. For the purposes of presidential speechwriting, Jefferson has proved comfortably the most usable of all the Founders. In addressing diverse issues, presidents have drawn on his varied and memorable writings. More significantly though, exploiting the malleability of his political legacy, presidents across the party divide have sought to claim Jefferson's inheritance, emphasising the aspects of his political thought most applicable to their own partisan agenda. It is ultimately in my analysis of Jefferson's employment in presidential rhetoric that the arguments threaded throughout the thesis coalesce. Embedded in the public consciousness, inseparable from the values deemed critical to American national identity, and a rich font of adaptable and appealing language, Jefferson, like the founding heritage more broadly, has been a consistently valuable and meaningful source in the speeches of modern presidents.

2. Heirs of the Revolution

All of us are, in a sense, the children, the heirs of the American Revolution.

President Ford, April 15, 1975

There was little to envy about Gerald Ford's ascendancy to the White House. Charged with restoring dignity to an executive office poisoned by Richard Nixon's role in the Watergate scandal and still tainted by the military failure in Vietnam, Ford's task was a demanding one. Yet he and his advisers could celebrate one happy coincidence of his predecessor's premature departure: Ford led the nation during the Bicentennial of American independence. During 1976 he delivered more public speeches in one year than any president prior to Bill Clinton as he travelled the country reminding audiences of the enduring legacy of the Founding Fathers. This was, wrote Robert Schlesinger, 'the high point of his rhetoric and statesmanship'.¹ Previously saddled with a reputation for poor oratory and an uneasy public image, Ford seized the opportunity afforded by the Bicentennial to speak repeatedly on a subject with which all presidents are comfortable.

Allusions to the circumstances of the nation's origins and the heroism, virtue and democratic values of the era's celebrated leaders are all but guaranteed to evoke positive and patriotic reactions among American citizens. There is no readier source for the presidential speechwriter than the United States' founding heritage, no easier platform on which to build the reflections on national identity and purpose so common to their writing. Reiterating ideas and a history with which the American public are familiar, presidents can be confident of the resonance of their words. Thus, when Ford told an audience in 1975 that each generation were 'heirs of the American Revolution' he was reiterating a standard theme in presidential rhetoric.² Presidents have consistently sought to emphasise that the values and traditions established during the founding era continue to direct the character and direction of American politics. There have, however, been instances in which this theme has been conspicuously prominent, when presidents have employed this rhetoric in distinct contexts and in advancing specific messages.

When Ford addressed Americans in the 1970s he did so aware of the damage that the Vietnam War and Nixon's resignation had inflicted on national morale. His Bicentennial speeches consequently aimed at more than a patriotic reflection on the

¹ Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and their Speechwriters from FDR to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 262.

² Gerald R. Ford, '186 - Address at the Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 15, 1975'.

nation's origins; the president repeatedly suggested that Americans should draw confidence and faith from the spirit and achievements of the Founding Fathers. 'We must', he told one audience, 'revive the cherished values of the American Revolution'.³ It is clear that Ford and his writers identified in the founding heritage a valuable source with which to address the problems of the day. Indeed, as the opening section of this chapter will reveal, in the face of contemporary challenges, presidents have frequently invoked the nation's origins, promoting in their speeches a renewal of the Founders' spirit. That American leaders have consistently turned to the founding heritage in such circumstances clearly indicates the resonance they have perceived in allusions to it.

This perception is sufficiently rooted, in fact, that presidents have regularly invoked this history for more pragmatic purposes. With the founding era firmly established as the source of America's defining political principles, it is in the interest of presidents to stress their own inheritance of the Founders' values. As subsequent chapters will relate, to this end American leaders have very often appropriated and adapted specific elements of the founding heritage in their public rhetoric. Most common, however, are more general references to the period, to the circumstances of the Revolution and the collective legacy of the Founding Fathers. In analysing these examples first we will see emerging some of the patterns that have consistently characterised presidential allusions to the founding era. While the founding heritage represents a usable past for all presidents, the manner and context in which they employ it can vary significantly.

Renewal

Since the earliest years of the American republic presidents have turned in their public rhetoric to the values of the Revolution for words of guidance and reassurance. When Thomas Jefferson attained the presidency in 1801 following a fiercely divisive election, the unity of the young nation was fragile, already threatened by the quarrels of party politics at home and a mighty European war abroad. Jefferson himself had endured stinging attacks on his character and intentions and the idealistic rhetoric of the Revolution appeared to have faded. Yet Jefferson made it the purpose of his Inaugural Address to restate the political principles that had defined that period, offering them as an enduring antidote to the division and uncertainty that had emerged in the years since. 'We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists', he proclaimed memorably. What would continue to unite all

³ Ford, '51 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Virginia General Assembly in Williamsburg, January 31, 1976'.

Americans, he stressed, was a commitment to upholding the principles of liberty, justice and representative government enshrined in the nation's founding documents:

These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civic instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or of alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety.⁴

Jefferson could not have known the extent to which his message would be echoed by those who succeeded him in the White House. His presentation of America's founding principles as an unalterable blueprint for governance and society has been repeated consistently by presidents in the two centuries since. Just as Jefferson introduced the message in response to the political divisions that attended his election, it has very often reappeared as a rhetorical tool with which to address contemporary problems.

Some brief examples from post-war State of the Union addresses are illustrative. Harry Truman inherited a series of significant challenges, not least the management of U.S. relations with the Soviet Union in the wake of World War II. Reflecting on the task of maintaining peace while fulfilling America's new role as the world's leading democracy, the president explained in his 1950 State of the Union address that, 'Our surest guide in the days that lie ahead will be the spirit in which this great Republic was rounded'. Seven years later, with the Cold War at its height, President Eisenhower offered a similar message: 'The State of the Union, at the opening of the 85th Congress, continues to vindicate the wisdom of the principles on which this Republic is rounded.' Invoking the statement of individual rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, he continued, 'As we gaze back through history...it is clear that our nation has striven to live up to this declaration...Today we proudly assert that the government of the United States is still committed to this concept, both in its activities at home and abroad.'⁵

Those assembling in the House of Representatives each winter can expect this theme to reappear in some form. As Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson have suggested, State of the Union addresses require the president to assume the role of 'national historian, keeper of the national identity, and voice of national values.' This role

⁴ Thomas Jefferson, 'Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801'.

⁵ Harry S. Truman, '2 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 4, 1950'; Dwight D. Eisenhower, '8 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union. January 10, 1957'.

very often demands an acknowledgement of the origin of these values and reassurances that, as Jefferson intended, they continue to guide the direction of American politics. Thus, for Richard Nixon in 1972, ‘faith in our founding purposes’ remained central to the progress of the country; for George H.W. Bush almost two decades later, affirming ‘our allegiance’ to the nation’s defining principles, to ‘this idea we call America’, was essential to the maintenance of American influence in the world.⁶

Although conspicuously prominent in both State of the Union and Inaugural addresses, references to the prescience of the United States’ founding heritage can be found across the public rhetoric of the president. Each example serves to reinforce the message that the democratic values enshrined in the founding documents remain ‘the creed’ of the nation’s ‘political faith’, the instructive ‘text’ from which the government and public alike should derive a sense of purpose and direction. In the face of contemporary challenges, however, reminders of this guiding faith have been particularly audible. As the following examples will illustrate, there have been distinct periods in the last seven decades in which presidents have found it necessary to reinforce the enduring virtue and strength of these shared values. First in response to the threat of communism in the 1950s, then later in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, American leaders turned to the nation’s founding heritage in their public speeches, encouraging a renewal of the spirit and the principles that defined that era.

In his final State of the Union address in 1953, President Truman devoted the bulk of his message to a recognition of the threat posed by communism to America’s democratic ideals. Positioning the United States and Soviet Russia in an ideological conflict between ‘freedom’ and ‘tyranny’, he described the contest between ‘the free world and the communist domain’ as the greatest ‘challenge...in the history of our Republic’. Success would come, however, if Americans retained ‘faith’ in their founding principles, aware that they were ‘heirs of the American Revolution, dedicated to the truths of our Declaration of Independence’. It was an avowal he had made often during a presidency dominated, certainly as regarded foreign policy, by the uncertainties of a world riven by the global conflict of the 1940s and the onset of the Cold War. Truman made frequent reference to the ideological differences between American democracy and communism. ‘The principles of the Declaration of Independence’, he affirmed in a national address in the summer of

⁶ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 163; Richard Nixon, ‘14 - Address on the State of the Union Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress, January 20, 1972’; George H. W. Bush, ‘Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 31, 1990’.

1951, 'are the right principles.' Discussing the year-old conflict in Korea, the president assured the public that these principles 'are sound enough to guide us through this crisis as they have guided us through other crises of the past.'⁷

Later that year Truman dedicated a new display of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution at the Library of Congress with a speech affirming the necessity for the founding documents to remain 'a living force' in the lives of Americans. The ideas they express gave 'hope', he explained, in contrast to the 'fear' engendered in Russian citizens by the language of the Soviet government. His efforts were noted by the contemporary press. Reporting the ceremony the following day, the *Christian Science Monitor* noted the way in which Truman had 'used the occasion to make a direct contrast between American democracy and Soviet dictatorship'. Portraying the speech as an effort to emphasise the superior virtue of the former, the newspaper described how the president had shown America's founding values to be as 'living, dynamic and explosive as anything Moscow has to offer.'⁸ There can be little doubt that his rhetoric on these and other occasions was calculated to instil confidence in the endurance of America's political principles. What is significant is the worth that Truman and his writers clearly saw in using invocations of the nation's origins as a tool with which to achieve this. Drawing his final State of the Union message to a close, Truman left the public with a clear indication of the value he perceived in approaching contemporary challenges bolstered by the memory of the nation's history:

Let all of us pause now, think back, consider carefully the meaning of our national experience. Let us draw comfort from it and faith, and confidence in our future as Americans.⁹

Deriving a sense of national self-confidence from the recollection of past achievements is an established theme in presidential rhetoric. The focus overwhelmingly has been on the triumph of the Revolution. Its history, of course, so familiar to American citizens, is replete with celebrated episodes of endurance and heroism: Paul Revere's ride through Massachusetts, warning of the British advance; George Washington crossing the freezing Delaware River on Christmas Day, 1776; he and his troops surviving the harsh

⁷ Truman, '366 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union. January 7, 1953'; '144 - Address at the Ceremonies Commemorating the 175th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1951'; For a discussion of the communist threat perceived by Americans in the decade after World War II, see John Lewis Gaddis, 'The insecurities of victory: the United States and the perception of the Soviet threat after World War II' in *The Truman Presidency* ed. by Michael J. Lacey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 235-272.

⁸ Truman, '225 - Address at the Constitution Day Ceremonies at the Library of Congress, September 17, 1951'; Richard L. Strout, 'Truman Says American Constitution "More Revolutionary" Than Russia's'. *Christian Science Monitor*, September 17, 1951.

⁹ Truman, '366 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union. January 7, 1953'.

winter that followed a year later at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. In the face of contemporary crises, presidents have often reminded the public as Truman did in January 1952, that the founding generation overcame ‘far greater obstacles’. The memory of Washington and his men struggling through the successive winters of 1776 and 1777 have been invoked most frequently. For Truman, a replication of the resilience and optimism displayed by the Revolutionary army was required if the United States were to repel the threat of communist expansion:

In the darkest of all winters in American history, at Valley Forge, George Washington said: “We must not, in so great a contest, expect to meet with nothing but sunshine.” With that spirit they won their fight for freedom. We must have that same faith and vision.

As we will see, the endurance and sacrifice displayed by Washington and his citizen army at Valley Forge and Morristown has been a recurring reference point as presidents have encouraged a renewal of the same spirit in the face of contemporary challenges. Few moments in America’s history better evoke the themes of national strength and unity so pertinent to the president’s message in such circumstances. Indeed, in Truman’s case, his allusion to Valley Forge allowed him to tie the international exigencies of the 1950s directly to the goals of the Revolution. The ‘contest’ with communism, he affirmed in closing, was ‘just as important for this country and for all men, as the desperate struggle that George Washington fought through to victory.’¹⁰

Truman’s successor approached the communist threat with similar rhetoric. Exposing again the differences between the political principles of America and the Soviet Union, Eisenhower encouraged the public in one speech to ‘reaffirm our devotion to the values on which this Republic rests’. Indeed, he told another audience in May 1954 that the memory of the Founders’ legacy was essential to the preservation of the nation:

I thoroughly believe, as long as all Americans are anxious to claim kinship ...by spirit, by admiration, by closeness of feeling with those men who did those great deeds, then indeed is America safe.¹¹

Explicit in Eisenhower’s words was the sense that the nation’s continued progress and security relied on the loyalty of contemporary Americans to the values of the Founding Fathers. In suggesting too the ‘closeness’ that citizens could feel for those historic figures,

¹⁰ Truman, ‘5 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union. January 9, 1952’.

¹¹ Eisenhower, ‘151 - Remarks at the Cornerstone-Laying Ceremony for the Extension of the United States Capitol, July 4, 1959’; ‘114 - Address on Freedom Celebration Day, Charlotte, North Carolina, May 18, 1954’.

he demonstrated how deeply ingrained an appreciation of the Founders' legacy is among the American public. For both Eisenhower and Truman, therefore, allusions to the values and the achievements of the founding era provided a valuable addition to their public rhetoric as they sought to encourage a sense of patriotism and optimism in response to the emerging tensions of the Cold War. Significantly, several of their successors were to approach the challenges of later years in the same way.

Few, if any, events in the second half of the twentieth century affected American morale and confidence more than the Vietnam War. The military failure in Southeast Asia, compounded later by the Watergate scandal at home, rendered the 1970s a decade of much national soul-searching. 'What ails the American spirit?', asked the cover story of *Newsweek* on July 6, 1970. It was a question typical of the era.¹² When Nixon assumed the presidency in January 1969, he acknowledged the opposition and uncertainty provoked among Americans by the prolonged conflict in Vietnam. In his Inaugural Address, he spoke of a nation 'rich in goods but ragged in spirit' and 'torn by division'. The following morning the press recognised that Nixon had responded to a genuine national feeling. A report in the *Chicago Tribune* praised the president's appreciation of the public's desire for 'peace and reconciliation and spiritual dedication'; the *Los Angeles Times* noted Nixon's invocation of Franklin Roosevelt's first Inaugural during the Great Depression, finding similarities in their optimistic rhetorical response to the crises of the day.¹³ Of course, the war in Vietnam was to continue during Nixon's presidency but from the outset he sought to encourage in his public speeches a renewed sense of unity and shared purpose. To this end, he turned again to America's founding heritage.

According to his chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, Nixon liked slogans: 'the colourful phrases that become quoted and repeated'.¹⁴ A favourite among his first term speeches was the 'Spirit of 1776'. Initially employed in July 1969 as the president launched the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, the phrase became a regular fixture in the

¹² *Newsweek* cited in Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 67; Robert Bellah described the Vietnam War as a 'third time of trial' for the American civil religion, after the Revolution and the Civil War. For Michael Kammen, Vietnam and Watergate had such an impact on national morale that American society in 1975-6 'desperately sought to separate itself from the recent past': Americans strove to restore 'a cleansed sense of national self'. See Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96:1 (1967), p. 16 and Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 239. See also Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, 'The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions', *Political Science Quarterly* 98:3 (1983), pp. 382-3.

¹³ Nixon, '1 - Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969'; 'Angels, Devils, and Presidents', *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 1969; 'Nixon Borrows Phrases, Ideas from Bible, 4 Presidents, Poet', *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1969.

¹⁴ Schlesinger, p. 199.

many speeches during which Nixon reflected on the need to restore the values of the founding era. Speaking on the eve of Independence Day in July 1971, Nixon declared that ‘the American Revolution was not something that happened two centuries ago; it is something that is happening today...Behind it is a spirit of adventure, a spirit of compassion, a spirit of moral courage - the "Spirit of '76." Americans must, he said, ‘rededicate ourselves to the principles set down in [the founding] documents’. Against the backdrop of on-going opposition to the Vietnam War, the rhetoric of Nixon’s re-election campaign in 1972 exploited this theme of renewal, promising a restoration of national confidence in the endurance of America’s founding ideals. In a radio address in October of that year, he spoke of the ‘hope that motivated the Founding Fathers in 1776, the same hope that has motivated generation after generation of new Americans ever since.’ He recognised a decline in such optimism, an atmosphere in the country of doubt and scepticism:

Today there are those who say that that spirit is dead - that we no longer have the strength of character, idealism, and faith we once had. They say that we have become a sick society, a corrupt society...Well, those who say these things are wrong. Those who say these things do not know the real America.

The inference, of course, was that Nixon did. The ‘real America’, he maintained, was one still motivated by the hopeful vision of the Founders. During his last two years in office he returned often to the theme, going so far as to rename the presidential aircraft ‘Spirit of ‘76’, as he looked forward to the approaching Bicentennial. It would be, he reminded the public in March 1974, ‘a chance to rekindle the spirit that in two hundred years built thirteen small dependent colonies into the strongest nation in the world.’¹⁵ It was a chance, however, that Nixon would not be allowed to enjoy.

Public confidence in the ability and virtue of the government had been shaken by failure in Vietnam, and it was undermined further still by the Watergate scandal. Nixon’s complicity in the cover-up that followed the attempted burglary of the Democratic National Committee’s offices forced his resignation in August 1974. He hoped in leaving office that he had ‘hastened the start of that process of healing which [was] so desperately needed in America’. The following day, in his first speech as president, Ford declared that the United States’ ‘long national nightmare is over’. Yet he remained cognizant throughout his short

¹⁵ Nixon, ‘220 - Remarks of the President, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and Speaker of the House Carl Albert at a Ceremony Opening the American Revolution Bicentennial Era, July 3, 1971’; ‘380 - Radio Address: "One America", October 28, 1972’; ‘74 - Radio Address About the American Revolution Bicentennial, March 10, 1974’.

presidency of his obligation to restore confidence both in the role of the president and in the virtue and endurance of the nation's political values.¹⁶

As the Bicentennial approached, Ford presented in his numerous public speeches more regular invocations of the founding era than any president before or since. His message was consistent: renewing America's founding values would be the most effective antidote to the malaise permeating the country in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. Reflecting in a speech in April 1975 on the 'genius of the Founders', he explained:

No other country can point to two centuries dedicated to expanding and perfecting a continuing revolution in a free society...That is why, although our experience in Indochina has been one of...great disappointments, I am convinced that we can and will emerge from this ordeal stronger and wiser as a nation, just as we have from others even greater in the past.

Ford reminded audiences of the tougher challenges overcome by the founding generation. Their success had required 'character', he said, and a commitment to 'the moral imperatives and political ideals that were expressed with such eloquence by Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson and with such clarity by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison.' Speaking in Philadelphia, Ford recognised that the country needed 'a renewed sense of national purpose'. That purpose, he stressed consistently, was defined by the nation's Founders. 'In this Bicentennial Year', Ford affirmed in Williamsburg in January 1976, 'we must do much more than maintain the treasured structures of our national legacy. We must revive the cherished values of the American Revolution'. This was the president's central message as he travelled the country in the months before the historic anniversary. It was clear to the contemporary press that the circumstances were doing his public image no harm. Apposite recollections of the nation's origins were a fertile source of rousing, patriotic oratory; several newspapers recognised the fact. The entire occasion, of course, benefitted the president. Nine months prior to the Bicentennial, *The Baltimore Sun* had noted its likely impact:

President Ford stands to gain from the fact that he is there in the office on the 200th birthday. He will be at every ceremony and in every parade, riding just ahead of the float with Betty Ross whipping up the American flag. As identity exposure, that cannot be matched.¹⁷

¹⁶ Nixon, '244 - Address to the Nation Announcing Decision To Resign the Office of President of the United States, August 8, 1974'; Ford, '1 - Remarks on Taking the Oath of Office, August 9, 1974'.

¹⁷ Ford, '186 - Address at the Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 15, 1975'; '51 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Virginia General Assembly in Williamsburg, January 31, 1976'; 'U.S. sticks to center politically', *The Baltimore Sun*, October 25, 1975.

There was personal gain then in presenting himself at the centre of the national celebrations. The extent to which this was true will be discussed further below. However, politically valuable or not, the Bicentennial presented an obvious opportunity for Ford to rally the people behind the principles of the Revolution, those defining national ideals that many felt had been obscured beneath the shadow of Vietnam and Watergate. He wanted, he said, to restore ‘confidence in ourselves, in our government, and in our nation’. The occasion of the Bicentennial could not help but facilitate this. Reflecting on its impact in September 1976, Ford asked an audience in Alabama, ‘How many of you felt better on July 4th when we celebrated our 200th anniversary? I know I did.’¹⁸

Such affirmations of the comfort that attends any reflection on the nation’s origins are not uncommon. Writing at the end of the 1970s, both Sacvan Bercovitch and Robert Bellah expressed their concerns that the ‘myth’ of ‘consensus’ based, as the former put it, upon Americans’ shared commitment to their founding values was fragmenting. The ‘civil religion’ described by Bellah, the contract between government and people established after the Revolution, had been ‘betrayed’ in the Vietnam and Watergate crises.¹⁹ Yet as President Ford’s words implied, reaffirmations of the United States’ founding heritage and identifying values remained a central rhetorical tool with which to confront the nation’s fragile self-confidence. Indeed, in the assessment of the historian Jack Greene, ‘the mood and circumstances of post-Vietnam and post-Watergate America’ actively demanded ‘a reconsideration of the relevance of the principles and values on which the country was originally founded’.²⁰

It was precisely this sense of re-evaluation that Jimmy Carter encouraged as he succeeded Ford in the White House in 1977. In fact, his most famous speech as president directly addressed a perceived ‘crisis of confidence’ among the American people. It was, he told a national audience on July 15, 1979, ‘a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.’ Carter concluded that several events in the nation’s recent history had contributed to the current

¹⁸ Ford, ‘995 - Remarks at a Rally in Houston, Texas, October 30, 1976’; ‘817 - Remarks in Mobile, Alabama, September 26, 1976’.

¹⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, ‘The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual and the Ideology of American Consensus’ in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* ed. by Sam B. Girgus (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), p.35; Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p.142.

²⁰ Jack P. Greene, ‘Value and Society in Revolutionary America’, *The Bicentennial Conference on the United States Constitution*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), p. 43.

malaise, citing the assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the divisive failure in Vietnam, and the damage inflicted on the presidency by the Watergate scandal. The restoration of ‘confidence’ and faith in the United States’ future ‘progress’ was essential; this was ‘the idea which founded our Nation and has guided our development as a people’. The president’s motives were not entirely idealistic. Much of his speech strove to tie his call for renewed unity, confidence and morality to his administration’s plans to tackle the energy crisis that was plaguing his presidency.²¹ However, it appears the public recognised the truth in Carter’s message. A poll published by the *New York Times* three days after his address revealed that the public ‘overwhelmingly’ agreed with ‘his warning...that the nation face[d] a “crisis of confidence”’. Returning to the theme in a speech in Atlanta two months later, the president asserted his hope that the country would emerge from its ‘spiritual crisis’ with an ‘awakening’ similar to that experienced by the nation following the American Revolution. The ‘real’ Revolution, he explained in quoting the words of John Adams, had been the ‘radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people’. Motivated by similar goals, Carter suggested, the nation could enter the 1980s with ‘a new sense of awakening and a new pursuit of more fulfilling ways to live and to work together as Americans.’²²

With such language Carter built on his predecessor’s efforts to establish a rhetoric of national renewal. However, the task was much more explicitly pursued with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. Much of the latter’s campaign rhetoric had in fact sought to portray Carter as negative and defeatist. To speak of a ‘spiritual crisis’, suggested Reagan, was to undermine the inherent virtue, strength and potential of the American spirit. Far from encouraging a revival of first principles, Carter’s Democrats, warned Reagan at the Republican Party Convention in July 1980, were ‘eroding our national will and purpose’. Reagan made clear in such speeches that as president he would lead the reaffirmation of values needed in order to introduce a fresh period of positivity and confidence. Americans must, he declared in his Inaugural Address, ‘begin an era of national renewal’. Establishing the lofty and patriotic rhetoric that was to define his presidential oratory, he rejected any suggestion of ‘inevitable decline’. Instead, the public

²¹ Jimmy Carter, ‘Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals: "The Malaise Speech", July 15, 1979’; For discussions of the context and character of Carter’s speech, see Robert A. Strong, ‘Recapturing Leadership: The Carter Administration and the Crisis of Confidence’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16:4 (1986) and Dan F. Hahn, ‘Flailing the Profligate: Carter’s Energy Sermon of 1979’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 10:4 (1980).

²² Adam Clymer, ‘Speech Lifts Carter Rating to 37%; Public Agrees on Confidence Crisis; Responsive Chord Struck’, *New York Times*, July 18, 1979; Carter, ‘Atlanta, Georgia Remarks at Emory University, August 30, 1979’.

must ‘renew our faith and our hope’, unafraid to ‘dream heroic dreams’. He implied that such faith was rooted in the founding era. Invoking the words of the Boston Patriot Joseph Warren, he affirmed that Americans were now ready to ‘act worthy of ourselves’, working to secure ‘happiness and liberty’ and reinstating the nation as ‘an exemplar of democracy’. Why should his audience be confident of these successes? Because, he stated in closing, ‘We are Americans.’²³

Following Carter’s tendency for self-criticism, observed the historian and former presidential speechwriter Ted Widmer, Reagan offered ‘a nostalgia bath of optimism’.²⁴ Throughout his presidency, he returned to the memory of the Revolution, celebrating the uniqueness of the nation’s origins while presenting the Founders’ vision as an enduring guide. ‘We have to revive the spirit of America, the American Revolution’, he told a Los Angeles audience in discussing his plans for the economy early in his first term. Reflecting on the governmental system envisioned by the framers of the Constitution some months later, the president spoke of passing ‘the torch of freedom on to the new generation’. In doing so, America ‘will have kept faith with Madison and those other remarkable men we call the Founding Fathers.’ Such rhetoric persisted in the years that followed. In his second Inaugural Address, indeed, he strove to portray the successes of his first term both as a ‘New Beginning’, yet also ‘a continuation of that beginning created two centuries ago’ during the nation’s founding. Speaking with characteristic boldness, Reagan hoped that his presidency would be remembered as a period of triumphant renewal: ‘Let history say of us: “These were golden years - when the American Revolution was reborn”’.²⁵

Reagan’s fondness for allusions to the founding bordered on a preoccupation. No other post-war president has invoked the theme with such persistence. In Widmer’s summation, the period had always held a particular draw for the ‘Great Communicator’:

He regarded the founding in much the way that Woodrow Wilson did, or Abraham Lincoln, or Walt Whitman – as a unique moment in the history of the human species, not entirely unlike the Nativity, that had created a model for how people should live. He returned to that theme over and over in his long career as a speaker, recreating the founding in rhapsodic language... In 1974, he said, “We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so. The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago in that little hall of Philadelphia.” It might have come as a

²³ Ronald Reagan, ‘Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit, July 17, 1980’; ‘Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981’.

²⁴ Ted Widmer, *Ark of the Liberties: America and the World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), p. 291.

²⁵ Reagan, ‘Remarks in Los Angeles at the Luncheon of the Central City and California Taxpayers’ Associations, June 25, 1981’; ‘Remarks at the Dedication of the James Madison Memorial Building of the Library of Congress, November 20, 1981’; ‘Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985’.

surprise to many of the Founders, or to Louis XVI or George III, that the United States had become the leader of the free world in 1776, but what matters more is that Reagan believed it, and believed it intensely.²⁶

Of course, Reagan and his advisers would have been aware that this was an appealing belief for the American public too. He may have been one of the loudest advocates but every president since Washington has sought to maintain the idea that the United States is a special nation, possessing an inherent and indeed defining commitment to political liberty established during its founding. Reagan's call in 1985 for the American Revolution to be 'reborn' was well-received. Indeed, reporting on his second Inaugural the following day, *The Washington Post* noted that many Democrats had shared the Republican president's sentiment. 'It was optimistic, exciting', remarked Senator Joseph Biden, 'He said we're not abandoning the past but we're setting out on a new course.' Californian senator Alan Cranston, meanwhile, believed the president's 'inspirational' address had 'restated America's mission'. In the opinion of the article's author, 'Symbols of the past...mean so much to [Reagan]'. The 'inspirational' references to American history allied with the prospect of future greatness were typical 'Reaganisms'.²⁷ And so they were. Though opponents were to criticise the failures of his administration, Reagan retained credit for his rousing, optimistic oratory.²⁸ By celebrating America's past, reciting the nation's founding values and speaking boldly of a Revolution 'reborn', he succeeded in creating a sense of optimism and novelty in the 1980s after the uncertainty and tension of the previous two decades.

Such a concerted effort to encourage an atmosphere of renewal has not been replicated since, despite the inevitable efforts of subsequent presidents to enter the White House with a message of fresh optimism. However the language with which Barack Obama assumed the presidency illustrated that the maintenance of the United States' founding values remains a central message during periods of challenge. Throughout the 2008 election campaign, candidates across the political spectrum recognised both the threat of the looming economic crisis and the effect that evidence of growing anti-Americanism abroad was having on national morale.²⁹ Acknowledging these challenges in his Inaugural

²⁶ Widmer, p.292.

²⁷ Lou Cannon, 'Reagan's Speech Draws on Past Images of Golden Future', *The Washington Post*, January 22, 1985.

²⁸ David Mervin, *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency* (London: Longman, 1990), p. 217; Robert Underhill, *The Bully Pulpit: From Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan* (New York: Vantage Press, 1988), pp. 421-8.

²⁹ See for example: Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks to the Newspaper Association of America's Annual Conference in Washington, DC, April 15, 2008'. The contemporary press noted the effect that low national

Address in 2009, Obama turned as Truman had to the memory of the Revolutionary War. Recalling the hardships faced by Washington's army, Obama recited the morale-boosting words of Thomas Paine that had been read aloud to the troops during the winter of 1776:

“Let it be told to the future world...that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive...that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it].”

With similar determination, Obama continued, the United States would overcome the problems facing it today: ‘America, in the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words’. Just as Truman had invoked the memory of the nation's first conflict in response to the uncertainty of the years after World War II, it represented an equally pertinent source for Obama. The message of hope and endurance embodied by the survival of Washington's army and captured in Paine's language is, as Obama suggested, ‘timeless’. In essence, the same is true of every lesson that presidents have attempted to draw from the history of the founding era. It is this sense of persistent relevance and adaptability that has rendered it such a usable past for speechwriters. Firmly established as the fixed source of America's defining values, it is to the founding heritage that presidents consistently turn in emphasising the continuity in the nation's direction and sense of purpose. Obama was therefore repeating a familiar theme when he added that the United States would overcome the challenges of the early twenty-first century as they had the crises of the past, by remaining ‘faithful to the ideals of our forebears and true to our founding documents.’³⁰

With these words, Obama joined his predecessors in reiterating precisely the same message asserted by Thomas Jefferson upon his inauguration: the survival and progress of the nation relied upon the continued commitment of Americans to the democratic principles enshrined in the founding documents. It is a persistent paradox in American political discourse that future progress is so often promoted through invocations of a distant past. Americans, however, have forever been accustomed to such language. It is clear from the examples discussed thus far that presidential speechwriters have regarded the founding heritage as a source of patriotic and unifying rhetoric, capable of reflecting and responding to the national mood and current circumstances. By promoting a renewal of the Founders' spirit, presidents have addressed contemporary challenges with words of

morale was having on voters in 2008. One writer in the *New York Times* alluded to ‘a fraying of America's very sense of itself’. See Kevin Sack, ‘Voters Show Darker Mood Than in 2000’, *New York Times*, January 24, 2008.

³⁰ Barack Obama, ‘Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009’.

reassurance and optimism. This established idea of continuity has, however, allowed presidents to invoke the founding era for more pragmatic political purposes. In stating the commitment of the country to upholding and reviving its founding ideals, American leaders imply too their own loyalty to these cherished principles. Positioning themselves, therefore, as the inheritors of the Founders' legacy, they lend legitimacy to their own administrations.

Inheritance

During his famous Inaugural Address in 1961, John F. Kennedy laid out a bold agenda, pledging America's commitment to assuring 'the survival and the success of liberty' throughout the world. Tying this sense of mission to the principles established during the nation's founding, he warned his generation not to 'forget' that they were 'the heirs of that first revolution'. As we have seen, this notion of continuity could be an inspiring rhetorical response to contemporary challenges. However, there was further value in Kennedy's rhetoric. In aligning the ideological priorities of his new administration with the revolutionary principles of the founding era, he implied his own inheritance of the Founders' revered legacy.³¹

During an inauguration, it is clearly in the interest of a new president to pledge their loyalty to America's established values. As Campbell and Jamieson observed, this emphasis on continuity and inheritance is a central element in the 'ritual' of the Inaugural Address: 'presidents must demonstrate their qualifications for office by venerating the past and showing that the traditions of the presidency will continue unbroken with them.'³² However, this effort at legitimation is not confined to inaugural speeches. As the examples below will introduce, presidents, throughout their terms in office, have sought sanction for their policies by aligning them with the vision and values of the Founding Fathers. In some instances, the focus of this rhetoric is essentially nonpartisan: leaders of both parties have found value in framing foreign policy objectives in line with the principles of the Revolution. However, most striking are the numerous occasions in which presidents have appropriated the founding heritage in support of distinct, partisan policies. Subsequent chapters will delve more deeply into this practice. Here, however, in introducing some of the consistent themes with regard to which presidents have claimed inheritance of the

³¹ John F. Kennedy, '1 - Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961'.

³² Campbell and Jamieson, p. 37.

Founders' legacy, it will become clear that this history can be adapted to suit quite different contexts and arguments.

We have noted the value that Truman and Eisenhower found in contrasting America's founding ideals with the principles of Soviet communism in the 1950s. Their allusions to the founding heritage reflected the context in which they spoke: in emphasising the superior virtue and strength of American democracy they offered reassurances to the public. However, their employment of this language served a further purpose. In framing the United States' opposition to communism in these terms, Truman and Eisenhower implied that their approach to international politics was motivated by a desire to preserve the Founders' legacy. In so doing they established a rhetorical justification that subsequent presidents were to echo in defining the motives of their foreign policy.

In one of his final speeches as president, Truman stressed the importance of preserving the principles inherited from the Founders. Americans in 1953 were, he said, 'free men, heirs of the American Revolution, dedicated to the truths of our Declaration of Independence'.³³ It was a message he had maintained throughout his presidency as he sought to illustrate the ideological division between the United States and Soviet Russia. As his administration began to shape a foreign policy predicated on opposing and containing the threat of communism, it is clear that much of the president's rhetoric was intended to engender confidence in the virtue and strength of this policy direction. In a major foreign policy speech in February 1950, Truman explicitly tied his government's stance on containing communism to the circumstances and objectives of the Revolutionary War. George Washington, he said, knew that 'there were times when the use of force to defend democracy could not be avoided... The task of Americans today is fundamentally the same as it was in Washington's time. We, too, must make democracy work and we must defend it against its enemies.' Continuing the comparison, Truman explained that the task in the 1950s stretched further still as the United States was obliged to support other nations in their preservation of democracy. His presidency was dominated by these concerns, both as the United Nations gathered support and stability, and as his government developed a programme of economic aid and technical assistance to developing countries and those in Europe weakened by the impact of World War II. Truman's rhetoric reflected the new responsibilities that the United States was assuming under his leadership. He noted that 'the great principles for which the American Revolution was fought have become known throughout the world'. The United States was required to defend the 'freedom,

³³ Truman, '366 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 7, 1953'.

welfare, and opportunity' of these people, as well as their own. Addressing the National Conference on International Economic and Social Development two years later, he related the government's 'Point Four' foreign aid programme to America's founding ideals in clear terms:

The American Revolution has never stopped. In almost every generation we have overturned old ways of life, and developed new ones - always moving toward... a better life for all our people... Now, through Point Four, we can help the people in the underdeveloped regions to move forward along the same path... This is the way for us to live up to our ideals as a Nation.³⁴

The association between Truman's presidency and the aims of the Founders was similarly stark in his July Fourth address in 1951 in which he spoke explicitly of America's central role in defending the fledgling United Nations against its opponents. Much like 'Americans in 1776', he explained, the current generation were 'launching a new idea' in the face of opposition, primarily from 'the forces of Soviet communism'. Americans were fighting in Korea 'in defense of freedom', dying 'for the same cause as those who fell at Bunker Hill' during the Revolutionary War. Having justified the nation's involvement in the Korean conflict in these terms, Truman went further, aligning the wider goals of his administration with the objectives of the Revolution:

If we do not succeed in building up our Armed Forces, in controlling inflation, and in strengthening our friends and allies, then the cause of self-government, the cause of human freedom, is lost. If we with all that we have in our favor do not succeed... the whole great experiment that began in 1776 will be over and done with.³⁵

With statements such as these the president was setting the stakes high, implying that the purposes assigned to the nation by the Founders would fail if the aims of his government were not achieved. Although extended here to include economic concerns, Truman's invocations of the Revolution tended to support his comments on the communist threat. Justifying the continued growth of the American military and the UN engagement in Korea

³⁴ Truman, '42 - Address on Foreign Policy at the George Washington National Masonic Memorial, February 22, 1950'; '81 - Address Before the National Conference on International Economic and Social Development, April 8, 1952'.

³⁵ Truman, '144 - Address at the Ceremonies Commemorating the 175th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1951'.

in terms of an emerging conflict between freedom and tyranny, Truman established a discourse that his successor was to find similarly valuable.³⁶

As Mary Stuckey considered, Eisenhower widened his predecessor's world view in articulating a conception of national purpose rooted in a 'mythologized' understanding of America's origin and destiny. Drawing on a sense of 'mission' and divine guidance familiar from many of the writings of the founding generation, he positioned the United States as the primary defender of democracy.³⁷ It was a definition of national identity that essentially demanded American intervention against the threat of communist expansion. The 'deep convictions' of the Founding Fathers, he affirmed in a radio broadcast in April 1956, 'have always guided us as a nation... These ideas of freedom are still the truly revolutionary political principles abroad in the world'. Faced by them, 'dictatorship and despotism must give way'. Such statements were typical. Directly addressing American relations with the Soviet Union prior to the visit of the Russian premier, Nikita Khrushchev, in September 1959, Eisenhower invoked the Declaration of Independence:

It stands enshrined today as a charter of human liberty and dignity. Until these things belong to every living person their pursuit is an unfinished business to occupy our children and generations to follow them. In this spirit we stand firmly in defense of freedom... If the forthcoming visit of Mr. Khrushchev... should bring to him some real appreciation of this spirit... then indeed the venture would be a thousandfold worthwhile.³⁸

In this manner Eisenhower presented the Founders' concept of liberty at the centre of the United States' international outlook. Indeed, he implied as his predecessor had that the defence of freedom was the central objective of the nation's foreign policy. In so doing he preserved and passed on a definition of national motives to which subsequent presidents would return in their efforts to justify American military action.

Lyndon Johnson, notably, from the beginning of his presidency publicly defined America's motives in Vietnam in terms of the defence of freedom. The 'freedom to learn', the 'freedom to grow', the 'freedom to hope', he elaborated in an address in February 1966, 'This is what our struggle in Vietnam is all about'. Aligning these motives with his civil

³⁶ The language of NSC 68, the critical National Security Council report approved by Truman as U.S. policy in September 1950, very much reflected this ideological framing of foreign policy objectives. As Ted Widmer noted, in justifying plans for U.S. rearmament by describing a conflict between 'freedom' and 'slavery', NSC 68 'resorted to some old language to advance its new message'. See Widmer, pp. 237-9.

³⁷ Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), pp. 244-5.

³⁸ Eisenhower, '87 - Address at Annual Dinner of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 21, 1956'; '214 - Radio and Television Report to the American People on the European Trip, September 10, 1959'.

rights agenda at home, he explained that the same aspirations drove the ‘struggle for equal rights in this country’. On more than one occasion he explicitly tied the cause in Southeast Asia to that for which Americans had fought during the Revolution. Addressing an audience of military veterans in August 1968, for example, Johnson affirmed that, ‘From Valley Forge to the jungles of Vietnam, [the army] knew what they were fighting for’, namely ‘the defense of freedom’.³⁹ Though an abstract statement of war aims, it is one to which American presidents have returned persistently. George W. Bush, for example, consistently framed America’s motives in Iraq and Afghanistan in these terms during the first decade of this century.⁴⁰ Indeed, his second Inaugural Address in 2005 directly aligned his administration’s foreign policy objectives with the nation’s first principles. The ‘expansion of freedom’, he said, had been the defining ‘mission’ of the country ‘from the day of our founding’. In aiding ‘the success of liberty in other lands’, Americans were ensuring that the ‘Declaration of Independence...means something still’, just as it did when it was ‘first read in public’. Such rhetoric was typical of Bush’s oratory in these years as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan came to dominate his presidency. Repeatedly he implied that his administration’s motives were in line with the principles that had dictated American military action since the Revolution. Closely echoing the language of Johnson in the 1960s, Bush explained that ‘From Valley Forge to Vietnam, from Kuwait to Kandahar, from Berlin to Baghdad, brave men and women have given up their own futures so that others might have a future of freedom.’⁴¹

The frequency with which Bush employed such rhetoric indicates the value that he and his speechwriters perceived in it. As the examples from Truman, Eisenhower and Johnson show, there is a striking consistency to the language with which presidents have justified their foreign policy objectives. Its impact, however, is less certain. In the years after World War II, it was necessary for presidents to respond to the new responsibilities that the United States had assumed as the world’s leading democracy. By drawing a distinction between the ‘despotism’ of communism and the commitment to liberty enshrined in America’s founding documents, Truman and Eisenhower thus presented America’s international role in a manner which appeared to reflect the national mood. The press response to Eisenhower’s Inaugural Address in 1953, for example, was typical. ‘The

³⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, ‘86 - Remarks in New York City Upon Receiving the National Freedom Award, February 23, 1966’; ‘452 - Remarks in Detroit at the Annual Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, August 19, 1968’.

⁴⁰ Bush repeatedly presented the ‘defense of freedom’ as the defining motive of the military action in both countries. See for example: George W. Bush, ‘Remarks at Whitehall Palace in London, United Kingdom, November 19, 2003’; ‘Remarks to Military Personnel at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, March 18, 2004’.

⁴¹ Bush, ‘Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005’; ‘The President’s Radio Address, May 26, 2007’.

differences between the good of freedom and the evil of tyranny were never better presented', declared *The Baltimore Sun*. Noting the president's comments on the responsibility of America to support and lead the world's democracies, *The Washington Post* added that Eisenhower had 'put an encircling arm around the entire free world'.⁴² Johnson's rhetoric in the 1960s, however, was less effective. As Ted Widmer suggested, it was ultimately a mistake for Johnson to conflate his administration's objectives in Vietnam with America's founding values. As the prospect of failure drew nearer, 'the language of freedom became less and less persuasive':

By insisting at such a high volume that the cause of America was linked to the war, Johnson did in fact raise the stakes significantly, which led to a catastrophic setback for American prestige around the world when he failed to win.⁴³

In some respects, President Bush faced a similar problem. With many Americans questioning the motives of the nation's involvement in Iraq, particularly as the progress of the war appeared uncertain, some commentators noted that the president's rhetoric had begun to ring hollow. For Widmer, Bush's 'overuse of the words *freedom* and *liberty*' had simply 'dulled the sense to them'. For others though, the war in Iraq was actively at odds with the principles that the president so consistently proclaimed. One U.S. foreign service officer indeed resigned on the basis that, 'The policies we are now asked to advance are incompatible...with American values'. In this sense, as Mary Stuckey and Joshua Ritter argued, Bush's foreign policy 'undermined the very values and practices' that his rhetoric 'claimed to engender and support'.⁴⁴

Ultimately allusions to the founding era are most effective when the speaker is in a position of strength and success. If the policies in support of which this rhetoric is employed are considered to be failing or at odds with the president's language, it follows that the rhetoric will lose some of its resonance. Nevertheless, the persistence with which presidents have tied their policies to America's founding heritage demonstrates their belief that this language can, more often than not, enhance the public's impression of their administration's agenda. Given the consistency with which foreign policy goals are defined in American political discourse, presidents on both sides of the party divide have been able to employ this rhetoric in promoting similar arguments. However, it is with regard to

⁴² 'The Inaugural Address', *The Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1953; 'Eisenhower's Inaugural', *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1953; Eisenhower, '1 - Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953'.

⁴³ Widmer, pp. 278-9.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 321; John Brady Kiesling quoted in Mary E. Stuckey and Joshua R. Ritter, 'George Bush, <Human Rights>, and American Democracy', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37:4 (2007), p. 661.

partisan domestic policy that the perceived utility and adaptability of the founding heritage is most sharply exposed.

On every occasion in which a president aligns their political agenda with the values of the founding era, they imply that they have an understanding of the Founders' vision. Given the differing political perspectives of Democrats and Republicans, however, the interpretation of the Founders' intent is not consistent. In stressing the loyalty of their administration to the nation's first principles, presidents of both parties have interpreted and adapted the founding heritage in a manner conducive to their arguments. As subsequent chapters will consider further, despite the diversity of subjects to which this rhetoric has been applied, there are recurring themes with regard to which presidents have found allusions to the Founders' legacy to be particularly useful.

For Republicans in the last half century, their most consistent appropriations of the founding heritage have occurred in speeches promoting limited government and the decentralisation of power. Noting the balance of state and federal authority enshrined in the Constitution and the distrust of overbearing central government provoked among Americans by their experience of British rule, Republicans have frequently argued that their decentralising policies reflect the Founders' vision of the political system.⁴⁵ Nixon established the theme in the early 1970s as he promoted a greater diffusion of power and revenue to state and local government. Such, in fact, was the president's confidence in his inheritance of the Founders' intended vision that he arrived at another bold slogan to describe his decentralising initiatives. Nixon excitedly explained to his speechwriter Raymond Price how he had woken at 3.30am with the idea:

We've been searching for a slogan. What I've decided on – it's going to shock the people like yourself, the purists, the intellectuals – it's the "New American Revolution".

It is clear that the president saw a broad appeal in the slogan; it would resonate with the 'silent majority', he said.⁴⁶ Through 1971-72, Nixon repeated the phrase in several

⁴⁵ Opposition to big government became a central theme in the public message of Republicans from the 1970s. See A. James Reichley, 'The Conservative Roots of the Nixon, Ford, and Reagan Administrations', *Political Science Quarterly* 96:4 (1981) and Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 489-93. Certainly, the Founders recorded several statements that reflected a distrust of over-centralised power. A 'very energetic government', wrote Thomas Jefferson famously in 1787, is 'always oppressive'. ('Jefferson to James Madison, December 20, 1787' in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* ed. by Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 917.) The opinion of Jefferson and others on the role of government will be considered in Part III.

⁴⁶ Schlesinger, p. 212. Nixon first referred to the 'silent majority' in a national address on Vietnam on November 3, 1969, alluding to those Americans he believed to be sympathetic to his administration's foreign

speeches aimed at gathering support for his 'New Federalism' programme. Preaching to the converted in an address to the conservative organisation, the Daughters of the American Revolution, in April 1971, the president explained the motives behind his call for 'a new American Revolution'. The concentration of power and revenue in Washington, D.C. was at odds with the Founders' intent. As a consequence America required 'government renewal on what I call a revolutionary basis'. A year later his words had gathered a more direct purpose as he focused his attention on passing his 'general revenue sharing' legislation, whereby state governments would receive a greater portion of federal tax revenue. In an unoriginal act of stage-managed symbolism, Nixon signed the bill in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the Founding Fathers had framed the new nation. Addressing the assembled audience, the president declared that, while the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights created the federal system, his bill would 'renew it'. In a national radio address a fortnight later, he presented general revenue sharing as the first step towards his 'new American Revolution'. It was 'a new declaration of independence for state and local government'.⁴⁷

President Ford chose not to employ such explicit slogans. However, sharing his predecessor's preference for decentralised government, he closely maintained Nixon's rhetorical approach. I have already suggested that the occasion of the Bicentennial did Ford's own lacklustre image no harm. In several speeches Ford claimed that the political legacy of the Founders being celebrated in 1976 was one committed to decentralised government and individual freedom. One speech in January of that year was typical. 'To keep faith' with the Founding Fathers, he said, 'we must strive for the responsible self-government that they sought...George Washington warned against the danger of the centralized power of government. Yet we find ourselves in a Bicentennial Year [looking] back with something less than pleasure at the erosion of State and local authority.' He elaborated on his intention to address this 'erosion' before ending with a clear message:

If the Bicentennial is to be more than a colorful, historical pageant, we must restore on local and State level the opportunity for individuals to

policy. The phrase recurred in several subsequent speeches as Nixon strove to identify and target 'middle America', a wide constituency perceived to be supportive of his administration more broadly. See Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 37-76 and Nixon, '425 - Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, November 3, 1969'.

⁴⁷ Nixon, '147 - Remarks at the 80th Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 19, 1971'; '354 - Remarks on Signing the General Revenue Sharing Bill, October 20, 1972'; '396 - Radio Address on Urban Affairs, November 1, 1972'; On Nixon's 'New Federalism' and revenue sharing, see Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), pp. 194-6 and Richard P. Nathan, 'A Retrospective on Richard M. Nixon's Domestic Policies', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26:1 (1996), pp. 157-9.

have more say in how their taxes are spent, in how they live, in how they work...Should the Bicentennial accomplish nothing else, this alone would be a resounding triumph - a fitting tribute to our heritage.⁴⁸

With these words, Ford tied the Bicentennial and the intentions of the Founding Fathers directly to his own stance on government and taxation. The effort was unashamedly transparent. The year 1976 was more than a historic anniversary, it was an election year. Ford and his advisers were therefore not going to miss the opportunity to milk the Bicentennial for all it was worth. As *The Baltimore Sun* had predicted, in publicising the president's own politics, the occasion 'could not be matched'.⁴⁹ Addressing audiences from the National Association of Evangelicals to a convention of 'Future Homemakers', Ford persistently used the Bicentennial as a rhetorical vehicle for his own political objectives. If the anniversary was to have any 'real meaning', he said again in March, people like the 'future homemakers' of North Carolina must be given 'a real voice' by increasing the decision-making powers of state government.⁵⁰ Given the timing of Ford's presidency, he was in a unique situation. In the two hundredth year of America's independence, appropriations of the founding heritage appeared consistently apposite. It was, however, Ronald Reagan who, of all post-war Republican presidents, most explicitly aligned his agenda with the Founders' inheritance.

Reagan hoped, as noted above, that the 1980s would be remembered as an age when the American Revolution was 'reborn'. He made it equally clear that it was he who aimed to make this possible. Throughout his presidency he delivered speeches that explicitly framed his decentralising economic policies in terms of the vision inherited from the Founding Fathers. His first target in the summer of 1982 was a constitutional amendment that would oblige governments to maintain a balanced federal budget. Speaking at a rally in support of the measure, the president declared that they had gathered to 'write a new chapter in the American Revolution'. Government deficits, he said, were the product of federal spending in areas that curtailed the freedom of Americans to provide for their own 'happiness'. The proposed amendment would increase 'individual freedom', he concluded, thereby allowing Americans to 'renew our revolution'. The broad theme of decentralisation was never far from Reagan's oratory. He insisted that his stance reflected

⁴⁸ Ford, '51 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Virginia General Assembly in Williamsburg, January 31, 1976'.

⁴⁹ 'U.S. sticks to center politically', *The Baltimore Sun*, October 25, 1975.

⁵⁰ Ford, '235 - Remarks in Charlotte at the North Carolina State Annual Convention of the Future Homemakers of America, March 20, 1976'. See also, for example, '125 - Remarks at the Combined Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Evangelicals, February 22, 1976'.

that of the Founders, stating as he did in an address to the Tennessee State Legislature in March 1982, that Americans ‘must cleave to that well-charted course first laid out for us by our Founding Fathers’.⁵¹

Reagan’s message was most explicit three years later as he sought support for his tax reform plans. Echoing Nixon before him, he labelled his policy in several speeches a ‘second American Revolution’. Despite the familiarity of such rhetoric, Reagan’s language with regard to tax reform was remarkable. He elevated a banal, albeit significant, proposal to lower taxation and simplify tax codes, to an essential statement of the nation’s defining values, speaking in a radio address in May 1985 of a ‘revolutionary first for fairness’ and ‘an expression of both America’s eternal frontier spirit and all the virtues from the heart and soul of a good and decent people’. His tax reform represented, he said, ‘a second American revolution for hope and opportunity’. For the next two years, the president invoked the slogan as he continued to promote his economic policies. The effort in essence culminated on the eve of Independence Day in July 1987 when Reagan arrived at the Jefferson Memorial in the nation’s capital to launch a package of economic reforms, labelled an ‘Economic Bill of Rights’. Speaking in the shadow of Jefferson’s bronze statue, Reagan made it clear that his proposals to limit taxation and federal deficits represented an inheritance of the Founders’ attitude to the role of government. A commitment to limited central power and individual freedom was, he affirmed, what ‘our forebears wanted’. Securing his administration’s economic policies would ‘finish the job’ that Jefferson and his contemporaries had begun.⁵²

Reagan’s efforts were not universally well received. Noting the president’s clear attempt to align his economic package with the Founders’ vision in his speech at the Jefferson Memorial, the *Los Angeles Times* questioned the accuracy of the association. In ignoring the fact that the framers of the Constitution were forced to establish greater centralised power in order to levy taxes and regulate the economy, Reagan was continuing to ‘cling fondly to his own simplistic notions of American history’.⁵³ Such criticism, however, did not curtail the president. Indeed, it was the very simplicity of his allusions to the founding heritage that rendered this history such an adaptable and usable source for his public rhetoric. Referring to the Founders’ core principles in predominately vague and

⁵¹ Reagan, ‘Remarks at a Rally Supporting the Proposed Constitutional Amendment for a Balanced Federal Budget, July 19, 1982’; ‘Address Before a Joint Session of the Tennessee State Legislature in Nashville, March 15, 1982’.

⁵² Reagan, ‘Address to the Nation on Tax Reform, May 28, 1985’; ‘Remarks Announcing America’s Economic Bill of Rights, July 3, 1987’. Reagan’s specific appropriation of Thomas Jefferson’s legacy will be considered at length in Chapter 6.

⁵³ ‘Reading Reagan’s Rights’, *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1987.

abstract terms better allows presidents to imply the adherence of their policies to these values. In Reagan's case, his language enabled him to maintain the connection between the Founders' intent and the government decentralisation promoted by modern Republicans.

With this link firmly established, it is perhaps not surprising that Reagan's successor adopted similar rhetoric in promoting his agenda. In 1992, in a succession of public addresses, George H.W. Bush positioned his administration's plans for government and regulatory reform in line with the Founders' intentions. He chose Philadelphia's Independence Hall as the ideal location for a major speech in April of that year in which he portrayed the reshaping of the federal bureaucracy as an essential step in 'restoring the principles of our Founding Fathers'. By supporting his proposals, Americans would prove themselves 'worthy of the men who met here in this room and began the world's only permanent revolution'. The inference was the same when Bush spoke three weeks later of his plans to reduce government regulation. He argued that limiting the regulatory reach of the federal authority would return the country to a model closer to that envisioned by the Founders:

The day is coming when we will put the final wrecking ball to the discredited system of the social engineers. We will restore this country. We will build it back, sturdy in the radical faith in freedom that is the legacy of our Founding Fathers.⁵⁴

Promoting the restoration of the Founders' vision could, as we have seen, be an effective rhetorical approach in confronting contemporary challenges. The language of Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Bush, however, illustrates that this rhetoric could be equally valuable in supporting specific political agendas. In stating that their decentralising policies would bring the United States closer in line with the principles of the Founding Fathers, these presidents hoped to lend a sense of sanction and legitimacy to their arguments. The consistency with which they adopted this approach in their speeches is significant: the four Republicans had identified an aspect of the founding heritage – namely the Founders' distrust of over-powerful central government – that suited the policy agenda common to each of their administrations. Unlike the foreign policy rhetoric that transcended the party divide, therefore, Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Bush appropriated the founding heritage on behalf of explicitly partisan arguments. Crucially, while the approach worked for them in the context in which they spoke, the same rhetoric could not be adopted by American leaders who pursued different political arguments. Such is the adaptability of the founding

⁵⁴ H.W. Bush, 'Remarks to the Federalist Society of Philadelphia in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 3, 1992'; 'Remarks on Regulatory Reform, April 29, 1992'.

heritage, however, that other presidents have been able to invoke different aspects of the Founders' legacy better suited to their agenda.

There have in fact been several occasions in the decades since 1945 when Democratic presidents have portrayed the vision of the Founders in a manner almost diametrically opposed to the approach of Nixon and his Republican successors. In promoting progressive domestic policies that inherently involved federal intervention, Democrats have suggested that the Founders intended the government to support the needs of the people. Harry Truman established the theme in advocating the creation of a national health insurance programme. Responding to Republican opponents critical of the attendant increase in federal power, Truman suggested that his proposals reflected the Founders' intent. Addressing an audience in October 1952 he explained that the 'Founding Fathers were great believers in having the Government do for the people what the people could not do for themselves'. Citing James Madison's sponsorship of a federal health programme to provide vaccination against smallpox in 1813, Truman doubted that the accusations of 'socialized medicine' currently being directed at his government would have been heard then. Particularly striking in Truman's rhetoric was the way in which he sought to undermine the suggestion that his opponents, in criticising such federal initiatives, better reflected the principles of the Founders. The 'progressive liberalism' pursued by his administration, he insisted in one notable speech, was inherited from the politics of Thomas Jefferson; his opponents, meanwhile, were 'reactionary', elitist and at odds with Jefferson's democratic spirit.⁵⁵

This effort to invoke the founding era in both advancing an agenda and undermining the position of opponents was pursued more starkly by Johnson in the 1960s. Given the raft of legislation he proposed under his 'Great Society' programme, targeting significant changes in the provision of welfare, medical care, housing and education, it was in Johnson's interest to assert as Truman had that the Founders intended government to support those in need. Responding to his Republican detractors, Johnson on more than one occasion quoted Jefferson's statement that 'the care of human life and happiness is the first and only legitimate object of good government'. As Chapter 3 will relate, the president also turned frequently to the words of the Declaration of Independence in support of his economic and welfare proposals. Allowing the access of all Americans to the 'pursuit of

⁵⁵ Truman, '276 - Address at Tacoma at a Rally in the Armory, October 2, 1952'; '32 - Address at the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, February 19, 1948'; The manner in which Truman aligned his agenda with Jefferson's 'progressive liberalism' will be considered further in Chapter 6.

happiness’ was a persuasive tagline, persistently exploited.⁵⁶ Reiterating the notion of inheritance so often evident in presidential allusions to the founding era, there were occasions too when Johnson suggested that specific policies continued the work of the Founders. Speaking in May 1964 of his plans to tackle the economic underdevelopment of the Appalachian region, for example, he affirmed that a ‘revolution...is just beginning with our Appalachia program and with our poverty program. So we begin to fight to finish in the twentieth century what our forefathers started in the eighteenth.’⁵⁷

The contrast between Truman and Johnson’s employment of the founding heritage and that of the Republicans from which we have heard is clear. The ‘revolution’ which Johnson identified in his ‘poverty program’ was quite different to the ‘New American Revolution’ represented by Nixon’s tax policies. Indeed, in proposing an increase in federal intervention the Democrats pursued objectives directly at odds with the Republicans’ approach. Yet presidents of both parties turned to the same broad source for words of sanction; each of them emphasised the loyalty of their policies to the Founders’ principles. As subsequent chapters will reveal further, it is the malleability of the founding heritage that has allowed presidents to employ it on behalf of such distinct arguments. Alluding to the period in often vague and limited terms, they can emphasise the elements and quote the writings that best support their agenda. Inevitably the effort can sometimes appear strained. Reagan, for example, was heavily criticised in 1985 for describing the rebel Contras, supported by the U.S. government in their opposition to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, as ‘the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers’.⁵⁸ On other occasions though, allusions to the Founders’ legacy can appear particularly pertinent.

Such was the case when Johnson spoke in support of civil rights legislation. On accepting the Democratic Party’s nomination for the presidency in August 1964, Johnson asserted his hope that America could fulfil the values stated in the Declaration of Independence: ‘We seek a nation where every man can, in the words of our oldest promise, follow the pursuit of happiness’. Realising the promise of equality and liberty stated in the

⁵⁶ Johnson, ‘391 - Address at the Centennial Commencement of Swarthmore College, June 8, 1964’; The Jefferson quotation is drawn from ‘Jefferson to the Republicans of Washington County, Maryland, March 31, 1809’, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Vol. 1 ed. by J. Jefferson Looney, pp. 98–99; For ‘the pursuit of happiness’, see for example, Johnson, ‘95 - Special Message to the Congress on Domestic Health and Education, March 1, 1966’.

⁵⁷ Johnson, ‘321 - Remarks at City Hall, Cumberland, Maryland, May 7, 1964’.

⁵⁸ Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference, March 1, 1985’; Reagan repeated the statement in 1987: Reagan, ‘Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua, September 12, 1987’. *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* were among those who condemned the president’s language, the latter indeed quoting the chief representative of the Contras’ statement that Reagan’s ‘excessive rhetoric’ had, if anything, ‘hurt their cause’. Jacqueline Trescott, ‘Fast and Furious’, *The Washington Post*, March 3, 1987; Robert Pear, ‘Contra Chief Faults Reagan Statements’, *New York Times*, October 30, 1988.

founding documents – bridging the gap between the rhetoric of the Founders and the realities of American society – was a recurring theme in Johnson’s public oratory. It was in these terms that he responded to those who continued to oppose desegregation and the extension of civil rights. Most famously, addressing Congress in support of voting rights legislation in March 1965, he affirmed that the failure to secure equal rights for black Americans would represent a denial of the nation’s founding ‘purpose’:

The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: “All men are created equal”; “government by consent of the governed”; “give me liberty or give me death.” Well, those are not just clever words, or those are not just empty theories... Those words are a promise to every citizen that he shall share in the dignity of man.

Of course, since the earliest days of the nation, many Americans have highlighted the incompatibility of the Declaration’s language with the persistence of racial inequality. For a president seeking to address this problem, his rhetoric was therefore almost pre-ordained. Speaking at the signing of the Voting Rights Act five months later, Johnson proclaimed that, finally, the ‘promise’ established during the Revolution and extended in the 1860s with the abolition of slavery, had been ‘kept’.⁵⁹ Given the hostility with which many Americans still viewed desegregation and the extension of civil rights in the 1960s, the president’s message was a powerful one. Presenting the denial of these rights as a rejection of the promises enshrined in the nation’s revered founding documents, Johnson not only legitimated his own agenda, he undermined significantly the position of his opponents.

Johnson once remarked that he viewed the presidency ‘as an office of domestic persuasion more than domestic power’.⁶⁰ Without doubt, in the context of the civil rights agitation of the 1960s, his invocations of the founding era offered persuasive support to his arguments. Evident in all of the brief examples introduced here, from the foreign policy rhetoric of the 1950s to the tax reform of Ronald Reagan, is that, in presidential allusions to the founding heritage, context is everything. Johnson’s words on equality would have been less fitting in the speeches of Nixon or Reagan as they promoted political decentralisation in the 1970s and 1980s; similarly, Truman and Johnson, in promoting federal programmes, would have had no desire to acknowledge the Founders’ concerns regarding strong central government. Thus while all presidents strive to claim the

⁵⁹ Johnson, ‘541 - Remarks Before the National Convention Upon Accepting the Nomination, August 27, 1964’; ‘107 - Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise, March 15, 1965’; ‘409 - Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act, August 6, 1965’.

⁶⁰ Johnson, ‘477 - Remarks at a Reception for a Group of Labor Leaders, July 24, 1964’.

inheritance of the Founding Fathers, the manner in which they do so and the resonance of their efforts is dictated by the context in which they speak.

Conclusion

In considering examples of the more general allusions that presidents have made to the founding era in the period since 1945, this chapter has introduced themes that will recur throughout the remainder of my study. The consistency with which American leaders have called for a renewal of the Founders' spirit in times of challenge clearly indicates the resonance perceived in this rhetoric. It is inherently patriotic. With American political identity persistently defined in terms of the democratic values established by the Founding Fathers, there is always value in advocating a return, as Reagan put it, to the 'well-charted course...laid out' by these first leaders.⁶¹ It is on the same basis that presidents have sought to align distinct policy agendas with the nation's founding principles. By invoking the founding heritage in speeches promoting their political aims, presidents imply their own inheritance of the Founders' legacy. As Campbell and Jamieson put it, 'Reliance on the past as a sanction for the present implies continuity'. Invoking a history and a language with which the American public are deeply familiar, there is certainly value for presidents in pledging their loyalty to the nation's accepted traditions. It was on this basis that Roderick Hart described Johnson's voting rights speech in Congress as one of the most successful presidential addresses since 1945. The president had 'found new ways of linking familiar nationalistic myths with untried domestic politics, thereby allowing his listeners some comfort as they contemplated doing uncomfortable things.'⁶²

Inevitably, the success and resonance of this rhetoric is not always as assured as it was for Johnson in addressing civil rights. We have seen however, in the brief initial examples cited here, that there are consistent issues and arguments with regard to which allusions to the founding heritage can appear pertinent. Crucially, though, these issues can be diverse, advanced indeed by presidents on opposite sides of the party divide. The explanation lies, I suggest, in the adaptability of the Founders' legacy. In turning now to consider the manner in which specific elements of the founding heritage have been employed in presidential rhetoric, we will see clearly the extent to which this history has represented a usable past for presidents and their speechwriters.

⁶¹ Reagan, 'Address Before a Joint Session of the Tennessee State Legislature in Nashville, March 15, 1982'.

⁶² Campbell and Jamieson, p. 344; Roderick Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: presidential communication in the modern age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 210.

II. The Founding Documents

These are very explosive documents, Dr. Evans. We may think we have them safely bottled up, but the ideas they express will go on forever.

President Truman, September 17, 1951

With these words, Harry Truman reflected on the powerful status of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as they were transferred to their new home at the National Archives in September 1951. Commenting on the advanced scientific techniques employed to ensure the secure preservation of the United States' founding documents, he explained:

If they were only historical relics, it might seem strange that we should make a ceremony out of this occasion of sealing them up. But the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are more than historical relics. They are a living force in our life today. We may have some difficulty in preserving the parchment on which these two documents have been written, but the ideas they set forth will never perish.

Together with the Bill of Rights, these documents, said President Clinton over forty years later, are 'America's only crown jewels'.¹ Stored within helium-filled, bomb-proof cases in a grand rotunda, secured by eleven inch thick metal doors and armed guards, the 'Charters of Freedom' are presented to the public as sacred relics, to be admired, as at a religious shrine, with solemn reflection.

When these texts were first composed in the late eighteenth century, they served explicitly practical purposes. While the Declaration, penned in the midst of revolution, aimed to achieve the independent status necessary to pursue alliances in the conflict with Britain, the Constitution established the political and legal framework to which the American government was and remains bound. As Truman's words at the Archives made clear, however, these documents have since assumed a position in American culture altogether more symbolic. In presidential speeches and school classrooms, in popular writing and scholarly studies, the founding documents have, for the better part of two

¹ Harry S. Truman, '225 - Address at the Constitution Day Ceremonies at the Library of Congress, September 17, 1951'; William J. Clinton, 'Remarks on Affirmative Action at the National Archives and Records Administration, July 19, 1995'.

centuries, been placed at the root of American national identity. The principles of representative government, equal rights and individual freedom stated in the Declaration's opening paragraphs and legally enshrined in the Constitution comprise what several scholars have described as the 'American creed', the value system in which articulations of American identity and purpose have consistently been rooted.² The founding documents thus exist as the fundamental statements of the political values deemed to define and unite the nation. They are, moreover, the central physical relics of a mythologised era in American history, the 'twin sacraments', as Albanese put it, of a civil religion sustained by a reverence for the words and deeds of the nation's Founders.³

The two chapters that follow will consider the manner in which these documents, the primary texts of America's founding heritage, have been invoked and employed in modern presidential rhetoric. To a considerable degree, Truman's address in 1951 was typical. Presidents have often cited the founding documents together in discussing the origin and endurance of the nation's democratic values. Audiences are frequently reminded that maintaining a commitment to these principles – staying 'true', as Barack Obama put it, to their 'founding documents' - is the central responsibility of American citizenship. 'If you believe in the Declaration of Independence [and] the Constitution', affirmed Clinton in a series of campaign speeches in 1996, 'You're part of our America.'⁴ Numerous presidential addresses in the last seventy years have mirrored Clinton's approach. Firmly established as symbols of the United States' political identity, the founding documents represent a valuable source for presidents as they seek to reflect on the principles that direct both the nation and, crucially, their own administrations.

Despite this connection, however, the two texts do not occupy quite the same position in political discourse. With the original purpose of the Declaration long-since obsolete, it exists for Americans as an emblem of the nation's origins and a fixed statement of principles. Given the timelessness and universality of the values it relates, and the quotable eloquence of its memorable language, it can easily be applied and adapted to suit myriad diverse contexts. In contrast, the Constitution is a living, practical document, the interpretation and adaptation of which has become a contentious issue in American politics.

² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), pp.271-2; Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1981), p. 14; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996), p. 19.

³ Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), p. 18.

⁴ Barack Obama, 'Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009'; Clinton, 'Remarks in Springfield, Virginia, October 27, 1996'.

While the adaptability of the Declaration is therefore celebrated and accepted by all, the extent to which the Constitution is an evolving text represents a debate to which presidential speechwriters have been forced to respond.

3. The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration is the Polaris of our political order - the fixed star of freedom.

President Ford, July 2, 1976

Speaking at a ceremony commemorating the Bicentennial of the nation's birth on July 2, 1976, President Ford described the Declaration of Independence as a permanent, unalterable guide for Americans. It is, he stressed, 'the Polaris of our political order - the fixed star of freedom. It is impervious to change because it states moral truths that are eternal.'¹ These lofty words might jar were they not so familiar. Americans today, as they have for generations, are well accustomed to hearing the Declaration referenced in such terms. Of all the celebrated elements that comprise America's founding heritage, none is invoked with more frequency or reverence in presidential discourse than the document that declared the United States an independent nation in July 1776. It exists, of course, as a marker of the nation's origins: a significant historical artefact. For almost two centuries, however, the Declaration's central importance for Americans has rested on the statement of guiding values contained in its second paragraph:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.²

As the previous chapters introduced, a professed commitment to the democratic principles articulated in this most famous of passages has long been presented as the defining characteristic of American national identity. 'To be an American', explained Ford succinctly, 'is to subscribe to those principles which the Declaration of Independence proclaims'.³ The document has thus become inseparable from Americans' self-definition, consistently presented as an essential component in the fragile adhesive with which a huge and diverse population is held together. It is for this reason that the Declaration has become a constant fixture in the rhetoric of national leaders, its preamble the most frequently quoted words in the speechwriter's arsenal.

¹ Gerald R. Ford, '639 - Remarks at a Bicentennial Ceremony at the National Archives, July 2, 1976'.

² 'The Declaration of Independence', *The Charters of Freedom* (<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html>) [07/01/13].

³ Ford, '649 - Remarks at Naturalization Ceremonies at Monticello, Virginia, July 5, 1976'.

This chapter will consider the manner in which the Declaration of Independence has been invoked by presidents since 1945, highlighting first the consistency with which it has been presented both as a blueprint for national identity and in quasi-religious terms as the central piece of ‘American scripture’, as Pauline Maier so memorably described it.⁴ Such is the universally revered status of the document, however, that it has been invoked for reasons beyond a desire to celebrate the nation’s heritage and bolster patriotism. It has been appropriated by presidents on behalf of a variety of causes, its familiar phrases adapted to suit different contexts and political agendas. Venerated as a charter of freedom and invoked with regard to myriad diverse issues, the Declaration of Independence has become something quite different to that perceived by those who signed it in 1776.

Political Polaris

In describing the Declaration of Independence as a ‘fixed star’ and a statement of ‘eternal’ truths, Ford encouraged his audience to regard the text as an unchanging and infallible guide. The notion of permanence invoked by the president in 1976 belied, however, the considerable extent to which modern perceptions of the document differ from those of its immediate contemporaries. Given the status of the Declaration in modern American culture a number of historians have sought to highlight these differences, among them Garry Wills, Pauline Maier, Catherine Albanese and, more recently, David Armitage. Although pursuing varying specific themes in their work, each aimed to emphasise the dramatic elevation of the Declaration from a pragmatic, political document to an almost sacred charter of fundamental principles.⁵

It was intended as an assertion of statehood, unquestionably radical in its implications but aiming only to offer the justification for revolution. In so doing the members of the Continental Congress hoped to secure independent status, the ‘only means’, as Richard Henry Lee wrote on June 2, 1776, ‘by which a foreign alliance [could] be obtained’ in the ensuing conflict with Britain. Correspondingly, it was the act of separation from the mother country that provoked the interest and subsequent celebration of contemporaries, not the words with which it had been proclaimed (and certainly not the paper on which they had been written). The Declaration’s primary author, Thomas

⁴ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

⁵ Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976); Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence* (New York: Double-Day & Co, 1978); David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Jefferson, though decades later cognizant of the wider resonance it had by then assumed, still downplayed the radicalism and originality of its language and message. It aimed, he wrote in May 1825, ‘to justify ourselves in the independent stand we [were] compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment...it was intended to be an expression of the American mind.’⁶ Those few press articles that made any reference to the content of the document in the weeks following its release, drew only on its final paragraph in which the colonies were declared ‘free and independent states’, absolved of ‘allegiance to the British Crown’.⁷ Its account of British oppression and the curtailment of freedom was, as Maier stressed, already an established theme in the colonial press in the decade prior to independence.

Despite the greater prominence afforded the Declaration in the 1790s as Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists respectively celebrated and disparaged its authorship, it was not until after the War of 1812 that the document began to grow in stature. For Maier, the explanation lay in the desire of a new generation of Americans to preserve their revolutionary history. After decades occupied with establishing a government and fighting wars, the country was finally free to reflect on the achievements of a passing generation.⁸ To this end, in 1817, the first re-printings of the Declaration were produced for display in homes and official buildings; Congress commissioned John Trumbull to complete four paintings commemorating the Revolution, of which *The Declaration of Independence* was his most popular; and, by the mid-1820s, several histories of the period and biographies of the Declaration’s signers had appeared. Such was the growing veneration with which the founding era was remembered that Lafayette’s secretary, recounting the Marquis’ return to America in 1824, was moved to record that, ‘every thing which recalls this glorious epoch, is to [the people] a precious relic, which they regard almost with religious reverence’.⁹

Among these relics, the Declaration quickly emerged as the most powerful. The process described by Maier as ‘sacralization’ had begun.¹⁰ For Peleg Sprague, writing one of numerous passionate eulogies following the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July 4, 1826, the Declaration was a statement ‘of the native equality of the

⁶ ‘Richard Henry Lee to Landon Carter, June 2, 1776’, *Lee Archive* (<http://leearchive.wlu.edu/papers/letters/transcripts-gw%20delegates/DIV0294.html>) [12/08/13]; ‘Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* ed. by Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 1501.

⁷ See, for example, *The Pennsylvania gazette*, July 3, 1776 and, again, July 10, 1776.

⁸ Maier, p. 160.

⁹ A. Levasseur, *Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825* (Philadelphia: 1829), p. 67; Biographies included John Sanderson, *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia: R.W. Pomeroy, 1820-7) and John Royer ed., *The Monument of Patriotism* (Pottstown: John Royer, 1825).

¹⁰ Maier, p. 196.

human race, as the true foundation of all political, of all human institutions'. 'What', he asked, 'had the world ever seen that was equal, that approached to it?'¹¹ Pre-empting the efforts of modern presidents to appropriate the Declaration for their own purposes, advocates in the 1820s of greater rights for workers, farmers and women invoked the document's words on equality on behalf of their cause. So too did anti-slavery groups. Perceived as a quasi-sacred text, now revered across the political spectrum, it could be a powerful reference point in their moral arguments.¹² However its symbolism did not yet extend to that with which Americans today are accustomed.

Historians generally concur that the responsibility for elevating the Declaration of Independence to a statement of national identity lies several years later with Abraham Lincoln. The sixteenth president presented the document as a source of personal guidance, explaining in February 1861 that he had 'never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.' It offered, he maintained, 'a standard maxim for free society'.¹³ Having spent several years employing its words on equality in anti-slavery debates, Lincoln was well-prepared to offer perhaps the most influential invocation of the Declaration in American history. The opening line of his Gettysburg Address tied the document's words explicitly to the prescribed purpose of the United States. The nation, he affirmed, had been 'conceived in liberty, dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal"'. His statement simultaneously exposed the incompatibility of slavery with America's founding ideals while providing a binding sense of purpose to the nation that would reunite following the Civil War. In so doing, he completed the evolution of the Declaration from an assertion of independence to an inspiring statement of fundamental values, simultaneously universal and distinctly American.¹⁴ He and his generation had established a unifying document of national instruction, creating, as Maier concluded, 'a testament whose continuing usefulness depended not on the faithfulness with which it described the intentions of the signers but on its capacity to convince and inspire living Americans.'¹⁵

The effect was irreversible. Since then the Declaration of Independence has been invoked by American presidents in countless speeches concerned with fostering patriotism

¹¹ Peleg Sprague, *Eulogy on John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, pronounced in Hallowell, July, 1826; at the request of the committees of the towns of Hallowell, Augusta and Gardiner* (Hallowell: Glazier & Co., 1826).

¹² Maier, p. 196.

¹³ Abraham Lincoln, 'Speech at Independence Hall, February 22, 1861', *Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches* ed. by Terence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 113-4; 'Seventh Lincoln-Douglas Debate: Mr. Lincoln's reply' in *ibid*, pp. 68-88; Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p.102.

¹⁴ Lincoln, 'The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863', *Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches*, pp. 191-2.

¹⁵ Maier, p. 208.

and reflecting upon the nation's purpose and direction. In this discourse the original, practical intentions of the document's signers have been lost. Instead, the Declaration exists as something more intangible and abstract, employed in presidential public rhetoric for the symbolic resonance of its familiar words. It has therefore become, as Wills put it, 'a misshapen thing' in the minds of Americans, detached from its initial purpose yet revered to such a degree as an assertion of national ideals that loyalty is loudly pledged to it across the political spectrum.¹⁶

As Vanessa Beasley and others have established, a central demand of the 'rhetorical presidency' is the articulation of national identity.¹⁷ The most common presidential invocations of the Declaration correspondingly relate to this necessity. For most, an emphasis is placed on the enduring relevance of the principles established therein. Truman's message, for example, on returning to the National Archives to dedicate the 'new shrine' to the founding documents in December 1952, centred on the obligation of Americans to live by their founding ideals:

If the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were enshrined in the Archives Building, but nowhere else, they would be dead, and this place would be only a stately tomb.

The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence can live only as long as they are enshrined in our hearts and minds. If they are not so enshrined, they would be no better than mummies in their glass cases, and they could in time become idols whose worship would be a grim mockery of the true faith. Only as these documents are reflected in the thoughts and acts of Americans can they remain symbols of a power that can move the world.¹⁸

It would be difficult to find a more explicit example of a president framing the nation's commitment to its founding values in religious terms. As Pauline Maier highlighted with some discomfort, the display in the Rotunda at the National Archives actively encourages the association. In a quiet chamber of stone and marble, the public file by the documents on display, looking up at each reverentially. For Maier, 'the symbolism is all wrong'; it suggests, she wrote, 'a tradition locked in a glorious but dead past', undermining the

¹⁶ Wills, *Inventing America*, p. xxiv.

¹⁷ Vanessa B. Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

¹⁸ Harry S. Truman, '347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, December 15, 1952'.

necessity for each generation to preserve and reflect their national ideals.¹⁹ This though was precisely what Truman implored his audience to avoid. Much more than ‘historical relics’, he affirmed that the founding documents were displayed as ‘symbols of a living faith’, persistently relevant, indeed, essential to the direction of American politics and society.²⁰ His 1950 State of the Union address made clear his perception of the Declaration as a guiding force:

Our surest guide in the days that lie ahead will be the spirit in which this great Republic was rounded. We must make our decisions in the conviction that all men are created equal, that they are equally entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that the duty of government is to serve these ends.

That the Declaration provides the source of America’s sense of purpose – the nation’s guiding ‘Polaris’ – has been repeatedly stressed by presidents. Asked at a press conference in September 1960 how he would define the country’s purpose, President Eisenhower’s response was quick: ‘The United States’ purpose was stated in its Declaration of Independence...We may not be articulate about it, and we may not give daily the kind of thought to it that we should; but I believe America wants to live first in freedom and the kind of liberty that is guaranteed to us through our founding documents’. Five years later, Lyndon Johnson invoked a similar sentiment in his landmark speech in support of the Voting Rights Act. Prefacing his arguments in favour of the extension of equal rights to black Americans, he noted the unique origin of the United States: ‘This was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose. The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: “All men are created equal”, “government by consent of the governed”’. These phrases, he said, should not be dismissed as ‘clever words’ or ‘empty theories’; on the contrary, they continued to inform the nation’s direction and underpinned the causes for which Americans had ‘fought and died for two centuries’.²¹

For President Ford, speaking at a Naturalization Ceremony in July 1976, the United States could be defined as ‘a community of values’, centred upon those which ‘Jefferson’s pen so eloquently expressed’. ‘To be an American’, he explained to the new citizens assembled before him, ‘is to subscribe to those principles which the Declaration of

¹⁹ Maier, p. 215.

²⁰ Truman, ‘347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, December 15, 1952’.

²¹ Truman, ‘2 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 4, 1950’; Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘284 - The President’s News Conference, September 7, 1960’; Lyndon B. Johnson, ‘107 - Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise, March 15, 1965’.

Independence proclaims'. It was an assessment closely echoed by Bill Clinton twenty years later as he too reflected on the impact of immigration, presenting a definition of national identity that made possible the unity of an ethnically diverse population. 'If you believe in the Declaration of Independence', he told a student audience at Portland State University, 'if you accept the responsibilities as well as the rights embedded in [it], then you are an American. Only that belief can keep us one America in the twenty-first century.'²²

Such language implies a reliance on the Declaration in order for national unity to be maintained. It would be easy to dismiss this as exaggeration and Clinton's words as platitudinous. Yet numerous other examples would further illustrate the consistency with which presidents continue to link the Declaration to national purpose. So firmly established is this articulation of American identity that each new leader has little option but to adopt the same vocabulary. The quotations considered thus far are therefore nonpartisan and, essentially, non-political; invocations of the Declaration are a means by which all presidents publicly affirm the population's shared identity. Rarely, for example, has there been an Inaugural Address that has not, directly or indirectly, made reference to the document. However, there have in addition been several instances in which presidents, aware of the unassailable, universally revered status of the Declaration, have endeavoured to emphasise their own political loyalty to it.

"My kind of American"

A favourite line in Clinton's re-election campaign speeches in 1996 related to the primacy of the founding documents in his perception of good citizenship. Presenting himself as a champion of equality he dismissed the relevance of race, religion and background in determining participation and success in society, instead stressing that, 'If you believe in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence...you're my kind of American.' The line's recurrence in his campaign speeches indicates the value he and his writers perceived in it. Clinton's 'kind of American', he implied, was one committed, above all else, to the founding documents.²³ Indeed, reaffirming the connection two years

²² Gerald R. Ford, '649 - Remarks at Naturalization Ceremonies at Monticello, Virginia, July 5, 1976'; William J. Clinton, 'Remarks on Affirmative Action at the National Archives and Records Administration, July 19, 1995'; Clinton, 'Commencement Address at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, June 13, 1998'.

²³ Clinton, 'Remarks to the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., in Orlando, Florida, September 6, 1996'; Interestingly, Newt Gingrich, the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives during Clinton's second term, adopted a very similar line during his campaign for the presidential candidacy in 2012. 'If you believe in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the Federalist papers', he said on several

later the president advised an audience of senior citizens to ‘reread the Declaration of Independence’, as he himself claimed to, ‘on a regular basis’. It offers, he said, ‘the guidance we ought to have today.’²⁴ Avowals such as these firmly tied Clinton to the values stated in the document. It was a typical rhetorical device: such is the accepted resonance of the Declaration as a statement of America’s abiding principles that presidents across the post-war period have sought to legitimate their political aims and pronouncements by aligning their position with Jefferson’s revered text. Given the timeless and abstract nature of the Declaration’s memorable language, moreover, it has proved an adaptable source in relation to a wide variety of contexts and agendas.

Perhaps the most striking recurrent example of the Declaration’s partisan adaptation has related to the role of religion in society. Three post-war Republican presidents – Eisenhower, Reagan and George W. Bush – regularly invoked the document in advocating a prominent place for religious belief. Each cited the faith of the Founding Fathers as proof that religion should continue to inform the lives of Americans, including those in government. As Eisenhower explained in one typical address, the Declaration’s statement that ‘all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights’ stood as evidence that the Founders had intended the nation to rest on a ‘spiritual foundation’.²⁵ The strict emphasis of the Constitution on the separation of church and state and the unconventionality, in some cases, of the Founders’ personal religious beliefs was largely side-stepped in the efforts of these presidents to align their own position on faith in society with the country’s founding principles.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, particular effort was made in speeches directed at conservative and religious groups; addresses to audiences such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the International Christian Leadership account for the majority of examples.

Eisenhower was particularly emphatic, reiterating his argument on several occasions throughout his presidency. By making reference to the rights ‘endowed by their Creator’, the authors of the Declaration, said the president at a prayer breakfast in February 1953, ‘established that every free government is imbedded soundly in a deeply-felt

occasions, ‘Newt Gingrich ought to be your candidate.’ Perhaps he or his speechwriters had admired Clinton’s language in 1996. Newt Gingrich, ‘Remarks in San Francisco, California, February 26, 2012.’

²⁴ Clinton, ‘Remarks to the National Council of Senior Citizens, July 28, 1998’.

²⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Radio and Television Address to the American People on the State of the Nation, April 5, 1954’.

²⁶ Jefferson indeed, influenced as many of his contemporaries were by the sceptical and deist theories expounded within the European Enlightenment, declared himself to belong to ‘a sect’ of his own. ‘Jefferson to Ezra Stiles Ely, June 25, 1819’, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 15, ed. by Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1907), pp. 202-4.

religious faith or it makes no sense'. Elaborating on the point a year later in similarly assured terms, he cited the same quotation as proof that, 'Our system demands the Supreme Being.' 'There is', he continued, 'no question about the American system being the translation into the political world of a deeply felt religious faith.'²⁷ Eisenhower's statement was, at best, an exaggeration; there is little evidence to suggest that religious belief informed the framing of the political system. However, in his efforts to promote the 'spiritual foundation' that both he and, in these instances, his audience deemed important in society, the Declaration proved an adaptable source. For the purposes of the president's speechmaking, it little mattered that Jefferson's original draft of the text had made no appeal to God, nor that Jefferson himself actively opposed the influence of religion in politics.²⁸ Eisenhower could present a reading of the document that supported his aims and appealed to the conservative values of those he addressed.²⁹ His message in February 1953 in fact reached a wider constituency. *The Washington Post* reported with interest the president's words the following day, citing his reassurances that America's original grounding 'in religious faith' would ensure the preservation of its political system. As the author of the article suggested, Eisenhower's speech had particular resonance given the threat then perceived in the influence of communist ideology.³⁰ In a subsequent address indeed, the president would employ the Declaration in alluding directly to the ideological differences between communism and American democracy. While the United States' system was rooted in religious belief as evidenced by the language of its founding document, communism – 'the system that challenges us' – was 'atheistic'.³¹

Eisenhower therefore was able to employ the Declaration both in justifying the importance he saw in religious faith and in addressing the fundamental distinctions between American and communist politics, an issue that dominated the political discourse of the 1950s. For Ronald Reagan and, later, George W. Bush, the religious overtones of the Declaration could be invoked in support of more specific policy concerns. In several speeches, Reagan invoked the founding document as he strove to promote a reversal of the

²⁷ Eisenhower, '8 - Remarks at the Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast of the International Christian Leadership, February 5, 1953'; '86 - Remarks to the 63d Continental Congress of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 22, 1954'.

²⁸ Writing in 1802, Jefferson stressed the necessity of 'building a wall of separation between Church and State'. 'The legitimate powers of government', he maintained, 'reach actions only, and not opinions'. 'Jefferson to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, January 1, 1802', *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 36, ed. by Barbara B. Oberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 258.

²⁹ On Eisenhower's language on the importance of religion, see James David Fairbanks, 'Religious Dimensions of Presidential Leadership: The Case of Dwight Eisenhower', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 12:2 (1982), pp. 261-6.

³⁰ Kenneth Dole, 'Eisenhower Declares Free Government Is Based on "Deeply Felt Religious Faith"', *The Washington Post*, February 6, 1953.

³¹ Eisenhower, '86 - Remarks to the 63d Continental Congress of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 22, 1954'.

Supreme Court's decision to prohibit state-sanctioned prayer in public schools.³² Despite the Founders' explicit efforts to separate religion from the state, Reagan in one address cited the 'no fewer than four mentions of a Supreme Being' in Jefferson's text as proof that they did not intend to build a 'wall of separation' between the state and 'religious belief itself'. Two years later, in a national address on education policy, his argument remained the same. The Declaration's allusions to 'a Creator', he said, illustrated that its authors had found 'inspiration' and 'justification...in the Judeo-Christian tradition':

It most certainly was never their intention to bar God from our public life. And, as I have said before, the good Lord who has given our country so much should never have been expelled from our nation's classrooms.³³

Reagan thus sought sanction for his objective in the words of the Declaration; there was a clear sense in the president's language that the Founders' text legitimated his position on the school prayer issue. It was an approach that President Bush was to echo seventeen years later. Addressing an audience in June 2002, Bush criticised the decision by a federal court to render unconstitutional the recitation in schools of the Pledge of Allegiance's reference to a nation 'under God'. The language of the Pledge, insisted the president, merely reflected the references to a Creator in the Declaration of Independence.³⁴

Each of these examples clearly demonstrates the weight attributed to the specific language of the founding document. Eisenhower, Reagan and Bush perceived, in essence, one line from the text to be sufficient to support their arguments. In this context it is easy to understand why Maier and others have likened the Declaration to a holy script. Much as a Christian might quote from the Bible to justify a moral argument, American presidents can invoke Jefferson's words in support of their position, confident of the sense of legitimacy and sanction that these references can engender. In this sense, the Declaration represents for presidential speechwriters a consistently persuasive and malleable source.

Eisenhower's effort to contrast the atheism of communism with the United States' spiritual roots touched on another theme with regard to which America's founding charter has been readily applied. Several post-war presidents have invoked the Declaration in speeches pertaining to foreign policy and global politics. For those leading the nation during the first

³² John C. Green and James L. Guth, 'The Missing Link: Political Activists and Support for School Prayer', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 53:1 (1989), pp. 41-2.

³³ Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner, February 18, 1983'; 'Radio Address to the Nation on Education, August 24, 1985'.

³⁴ George W. Bush, 'Remarks Prior to Discussions With President Vladimir Putin of Russia and an Exchange With Reporters in Kananaskis, June 27, 2002'.

decades of the Cold War, the document could be held up as an indicator of the strength and virtue of American democracy and its superiority to the Soviet model. Much of Truman's speech at the Archives in 1952, for example, was concerned with affirming this distinction. The ideals expressed in the founding documents, he said, were 'having to struggle for survival throughout the world' against a communist threat which 'menaces freedom'. It was correspondingly essential, echoed Eisenhower in his State of the Union address three years later, that America's founding principles be presented as superior to those of the Soviet Union: 'We must act in the firm assurance that the fruits of freedom are more attractive and desirable to mankind in the pursuit of happiness than the record of Communism.' President Kennedy too maintained the theme, speaking often of the distinction between American and communist values as the Cold War reached its height in the early 1960s. To read the Declaration of Independence aloud today, Kennedy assured an audience in Philadelphia in 1962, 'is to hear a trumpet call' that for almost two centuries had 'shaken the globe'. People living behind the Iron Curtain continued, he said, to seek inspiration from the United States' model of democratic independence.³⁵

The allusions of these presidents to the Declaration were not confined to a comparison of values: they lent support to their framing of specific policy. Responsible for establishing the United States Information Agency in 1953, Eisenhower sought to explain its objectives. A central component of the government propaganda programme institutionalised in the early years of the Cold War, the president was keen to emphasise that the USIA was concerned with disseminating 'positive' messages. In aiming to inform the public in foreign countries of America's 'motives and actions', the Agency reflected, said Eisenhower, the Declaration's insistence on presenting 'facts...to a candid world'. Continuing to quote from the document he added that the USIA similarly acted 'out of a decent respect for the opinions of mankind'. The Agency's application in the 1950s of the 'same truth' expounded in Jefferson's text was, he implied, evidence of its merit.³⁶ It was in a similar vein that Kennedy subsequently positioned the responsibilities of the United States in the world. As several of his predecessors had, he presented the Declaration of Independence as a message intended for all humanity. Specifically he suggested that this sentiment motivated his policies in Latin America. Central among them was his 'Alliance

³⁵ Truman, '347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, December 15, 1952'; Eisenhower, '2 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 5, 1956'; John F. Kennedy, '278 - Address at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1962.'

³⁶ Eisenhower, '108 - Address to the Republican National Conference, June 7, 1957'; Shawn Parry-Giles, *The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945-1955* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), pp. 140-50.

for Progress' which aimed to support the establishment of democratic governments in the region and the injection of economic aid and investment.³⁷ Touring Mexico in 1962 in support of the programme, Kennedy spoke of the Declaration's contemporary relevance. It advanced, he told an audience in Mexico City, a theory of government not 'merely for the people of the United States, but for...people around the world.' Mexicans could feel 'in their everyday life the principles which our country espoused' in its 'momentous' founding documents. Framing an influential role in the world for the United States was a key theme in Kennedy's rhetoric and the universal message of the Declaration proved a valuable tool in justifying it. It inspired, he suggested, America's opposition to communism and its role in supporting democracy south of the border. It could motivate too the country's bond with western Europe. Discussing the necessity of forming an 'Atlantic partnership' with a united Europe during a July Fourth speech in 1962, the president affirmed that the nation should uphold its founding principles while forming with Europe a 'Declaration of Interdependence'. In so doing, the United States would continue to perceive Jefferson's Declaration as Abraham Lincoln had, as a 'promise not only of liberty "to the people of this country, but [of] hope to the world . . . [hope] that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance."' ³⁸

Allusions to the Declaration in speeches pertaining to foreign policy did not end with Kennedy. Significant examples from the public rhetoric of Presidents Johnson, Clinton, Bush and Obama will be analysed below as we turn to consider further the adaptability of the Declaration's specific language. George W. Bush, however, illustrated in 2006 a theme common to them all. Offering a message for the Fourth of July, he asked his audience to reflect on the 'sacrifice' of the American armed forces. Their current engagement in Afghanistan, he said, was motivated by the need 'to secure the promises of the Declaration of Independence'.³⁹ Comments such as this are clearly intended to align contemporary policies with the nation's founding principles. Regarding the complex conflict in Afghanistan, securing 'the promises of the Declaration' was an abstract and ill-defined aim. Yet, for the persuasive purposes of presidential rhetoric, the words were at least sufficient to tie the war's objectives to America's established and celebrated national values. One scholar in analysing Reagan's rhetoric in the 1980s suggested that this approach was typical. There is, wrote Dwight Anderson, 'an ahistorical, almost timeless consistency' to presidents' articulation of war aims: in framing them in terms of a defence

³⁷ Carl M. Brauer, 'John F. Kennedy: The Endurance of Inspirational Leadership' in *Leadership in the Modern Presidency* ed. by Fred I. Greenstein (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 129-30.

³⁸ Kennedy, '270 - Remarks at an Independence Day Celebration With the American Community in Mexico City, June 30, 1962'; Kennedy, '278 - Address at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1962'.

³⁹ Bush, 'The President's Radio Address, July 1, 2006'.

of America's founding principles, presidents 'refight the Revolution rhetorically'.⁴⁰ As the examples emerging from my analysis reveal, however, this pattern is not confined to foreign policy. Presidents have been able to adapt and apply the founding heritage in support of a diverse range of political arguments.

The adaptability of the Declaration of Independence was perhaps most obvious during the 1960s and 1970s when successive presidents appropriated it on behalf of quite different policy concerns. In the public rhetoric of Kennedy and Johnson, the document was employed primarily in relation to civil rights legislation. In approaching the contentious issues of desegregation and voting rights, both presidents spoke repeatedly of the necessity in drawing American society closer to the principle of equality enshrined in the founding text. Thus, Kennedy proclaimed in September 1962 that ending segregation and achieving equal rights would 'fulfil finally the promises of the Declaration of Independence'. Johnson, meanwhile, began his landmark speech on voting rights in March 1965 by presenting the Declaration's statement of equality as the central pillar of the nation's founding 'purpose'. It was a message that permeated several of his remarks on the subject. Reflecting in one of his last speeches as president in 1969 on the 'three far-reaching civil rights laws' passed during his administration, he explained again that it was Jefferson's Declaration that had initiated the 'Nation's commitment in the field of civil rights'.⁴¹

Three years later, however, Johnson's Republican successor invoked the document with similar ease on behalf of a quite different policy concern. After almost a decade of Democratic control in the White House, both Nixon and Ford pursued a more conservative agenda, striving in particular to reduce the active federal governance that characterised their predecessor's administration. In promoting government decentralisation, Nixon explicitly appropriated America's founding charter, labelling his 'general revenue sharing' programme in November 1972, 'a new Declaration of Independence for state and local government'. He could not have more clearly tied his policy to Jefferson's revered text. Four years later, Ford aimed for the same effect. Stressing his opposition to high federal spending on social welfare, he argued during a speech in Williamsburg that poverty would be 'abolished by economic growth, not by economic redistribution.' He continued,

⁴⁰ Dwight G. Anderson, 'Power, Rhetoric, and the State: A Theory of Presidential Legitimacy', *The Review of Politics* 50:2 (1988), p.207.

⁴¹ Kennedy, '399 - Remarks Recorded for the Ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial Commemorating the Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, September 22, 1962'; Johnson, '107 - Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise, March 15, 1965'; Johnson, '676 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 14, 1969'.

‘Inherent in the Declaration of Independence was the message: people can govern themselves.’⁴²

Many other examples would complement the point. As a statement of universal, timeless values, the Declaration can be employed in diverse contexts and presented in a manner conducive to quite different arguments. Such is the prevalence with which the Declaration has been explicitly tied to contemporary policies in presidential speeches that there can be little doubting the value speechwriters perceive in these references. The document in itself carries a symbolic weight, both as a physical, historical relic and through its status as the defining statement of American national purpose. Any effort to illustrate in their public rhetoric a commitment to its message or an inheritance of its spirit can only benefit a president. So familiar are the public with the language of the Declaration, in fact, that speechwriters have not always found it necessary to invoke its title in order to achieve the desired resonance. Some of the most interesting examples pertain to those occasions when presidents have reflected on the meaning of the document’s most memorable phrase: ‘the pursuit of happiness’. These instances are worth considering in isolation because the employment of these words reveals more clearly than that of any others the intrinsic adaptability of the Declaration of Independence.

“The pursuit of happiness”

‘The pursuit of happiness’: there is something inherently appealing in the phrase, in the optimistic promise it conveys and, concluding the memorable opening statement of the Declaration’s second paragraph, in the poetry of its language and rhythm. It is no surprise then that it has appeared in innumerable presidential speeches, often without further reference to its source document. So familiar are these four words that they resonate with the listener in themselves. And yet they are ill-defined and vague. Of all the principles and rights established in the Declaration, ‘the pursuit of happiness’ is by some distance the most abstract and, indeed, the most subjective. How does one define or measure happiness? It is as a consequence of this problem that several studies have considered the origin of the phrase, Jefferson’s perception of it and its distortion in the centuries since.

Most recognise the influence of seventeenth century English politics on the formulation of the phrase. ‘Life, liberty and property’ was the standard formula established in political debates across the Atlantic. As Gary Wills explored, however, Jefferson’s

⁴² Nixon, ‘396 - Radio Address on Urban Affairs, November 1, 1972’; Ford, ‘51 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Virginia General Assembly in Williamsburg, January 31, 1976’.

decision to insert – as George Mason had just weeks earlier in the Virginia Declaration of Rights – the much broader word, ‘happiness’, suggests he intended a meaning beyond the right to own property. Whether or not he and Mason were influenced, as Wills contended, by Frances Hutcheson and the Scottish Enlightenment, it seems certain that Jefferson’s definition of happiness extended to some degree into the realm of personal emotion.⁴³ Citizens, he implied, had the freedom to pursue their own happiness, however they might define it. As the historian Jan Lewis considered, whatever Jefferson’s precise intent, the inclusion of the phrase essentially ‘legitimated the individualistic strivings of the American people’. Indeed, for the cultural historian, Robert Darnton, the pursuit of happiness became by the twentieth century firmly associated with ‘the American Dream’ and an ‘American way of life’ defined by progress, individual enterprise and, primarily, economic success.⁴⁴ It remains though a sufficiently malleable phrase that presidents can apply it to a perception of happiness that chimes with contemporary contexts and their political agenda. As one recent scholar of presidential discourse has noted, such ‘abstract rhetoric has great political value’. The pursuit of happiness is an ‘elemental’ notion and as such, particularly given its prime place within the sacred language of the founding documents, ‘easily engenders feeling of approbation’.⁴⁵ As the following examples will illustrate, presidents in the last seven decades, presumably hopeful of this response, have invoked the phrase with regard to a variety of issues, presenting a definition of it suitable to the themes of their own rhetoric and the direction of their policy.

The prevalence with which President Eisenhower adopted the phrase is perhaps surprising given his general aversion to florid, lofty rhetoric. In the frustrated assessment of his former speechwriter Emmet Hughes, ‘All oratorical flourishes made the man uneasy, as if he feared the chance that some hearer might catch him *trying* to be persuasive.’⁴⁶ More than most though, Eisenhower publicly reflected on the meaning of ‘the pursuit of happiness’, describing on one occasion his personal ‘obsession’ with the phrase. He concluded in a speech in 1955 that the Founders intentionally chose not to define it. Instead, he suggested, Americans could interpret it, ‘each according to his own desires, to the

⁴³ Wills, *Inventing America*; See also Maier, p. 134.

⁴⁴ Jan Lewis, ‘Happiness’ in *A Companion to the American Revolution* ed. by Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), p. 659; Robert Darnton, ‘The pursuit of happiness’, *Wilson Quarterly* 19:4 (1995), pp. 47-50.

⁴⁵ Elvin T. Lim, ‘Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32:2 (2002).

⁴⁶ Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and their Speechwriters from FDR to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 82.

deepest aspirations of his own soul'.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, he offered his own interpretation at times when it was rhetorically useful for him to do so. Continuing his efforts to underline the ideological gulf between U.S. democracy and Soviet communism in June 1958, he, in a somewhat strained tangent, spoke of the importance of 'a sense of humour' in the 'pursuit of happiness'. Communists, he explained, lacked this sense, just as they forbade 'independence of thought'.⁴⁸ More generally though, both Eisenhower and Truman tied the pursuit of happiness to America's role in promoting peace and democracy in the years after World War II.

Speaking in July 1947, Truman cited Jefferson's decision to alter in the Declaration the standard call for 'life, liberty and property' as proof that the Founder prioritised 'human rights' over 'property rights'. 'Happiness', the president argued, related to the former. Following this preface, Truman turned to address the primary topic of his speech, namely the role of the United Nations in protecting human rights. In so doing he tied the work of the UN to America's founding principles, noting their global appeal: 'We have learned', he continued, 'that nations are interdependent, and that recognition of our dependence upon one another is essential to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of all mankind.' As the United States proceeded to offer economic aid to Europe under the Marshall Plan and relations with the Soviet Union grew strained, Truman continued to invoke the Declaration's language in these terms, stressing in a number of speeches the importance of interdependence, democratic values and the United Nations.⁴⁹

Eisenhower too placed emphasis on the universality of these words. Reporting to Congress on America's participation in the UN, he backed plans to reverse the build-up of 'increasingly destructive armaments'; only then, he said, could nations 'live in the true spirit of peace [and] devote [their] energies to the pursuit of happiness'. Indeed, in his last speech before beginning a 'goodwill' trip to Asia in December 1959, Eisenhower declared it his primary mission to 'emphasize abroad' the United States' faith in the right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. This was, he said, 'our country's true hallmark'. True to his word, a week later he invoked the phrase in stressing the ties between America and India during an address in New Delhi.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Eisenhower, '165 - Remarks to the Delegates to the Second Conference of Young Political Leaders From North Atlantic Treaty Countries, June 1, 1960'; '136 - Remarks at Ceremonies Commemorating the Discovery of the Old Man of the Mountain, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire, June 24, 1955'.

⁴⁸ Eisenhower, '125 - Address at U.S. Naval Academy Commencement, June 4, 1958'.

⁴⁹ Truman, '138 - Independence Day Address Delivered at the Home of Thomas Jefferson, July 4, 1947'. See also '280 - Remarks in Independence at the Liberty Bell Luncheon, November 6, 1950'.

⁵⁰ Eisenhower, '290 - Radio and Television Address to the American People Before Leaving on Good Will Trip to Europe, Asia, and Africa, December 3, 1959'; '315 - Remarks at the Opening of the World Agriculture Fair in New Delhi, December 11, 1959'.

This application of the phrase in speeches related to international politics and foreign policy remained common among Eisenhower's successors. Lyndon Johnson, for example, affirmed a similar message before his departure on a global trip in 1966. Portraying his administration's foreign strategy as 'the outreach of our domestic policy', he explained, 'Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are not only our hope for America; they are what we hope for all the world.'⁵¹ In essence, he presented the Declaration's most famous words as the defining influence on his presidency's goals, at home and abroad. The listener could therefore infer that both his Great Society programme and his aims in the Vietnam War were driven by America's founding principles. Several years later, President Clinton was to justify the deployment of U.S. troops in Bosnia in similar terms. Addressing the nation in November 1995, he explained that American involvement in preserving peace in the region following the Bosnian War was in line with their founding ideals. 'America is about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', he said. Intervention in Bosnia, just as in the two World Wars, would be motivated by the United States' obligation to 'stand for these ideals'.⁵²

In more recent years, Presidents Bush and Obama have maintained the theme. Presenting liberation as the motivating aim of the United States' military engagement in Afghanistan, Bush affirmed in 2002 that, 'We liberate people, because we hold true to our values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. Such rhetoric was typical of Bush's speeches on the subject. Yet, despite generally preferring softer foreign policy language than his predecessor, Obama's message to the troops at Bagram Air Base in December 2010 was similar. The 'right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', he assured them, was what they were 'fighting for here in Afghanistan' and 'protecting back home.'⁵³ That both presidents should justify the nation's involvement in a prolonged war on the basis of such an abstract aim is testament to the perceived resonance of the Declaration's words. Given the inextricable link between Jefferson's language and the established articulation of American national identity, Bush and Obama were presenting the conflict in Afghanistan as a battle fought in defence of the nation's defining principles.

In each of these examples, the freedom to secure 'happiness' was presented as a universal goal, championed by the United States and denied by its foreign adversaries. Promoting the United Nations in the early years of its existence, Truman and Eisenhower linked its objectives to America's first principles; later presidents were to portray their own

⁵¹ Johnson, '532 - Remarks Upon Arrival at the Honolulu International Airport, October 17, 1966'.

⁵² Clinton, 'Address to the Nation on Implementation of the Peace Agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, November 27, 1995'.

⁵³ Bush, 'Remarks on National Homeownership Month, June 18, 2002'; Obama, '1037 - Remarks to United States and Coalition Troops at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, December 3, 2010'.

foreign policy as an extension of these same values. In each case, citing the specific language of the Declaration of Independence allowed presidents to portray a link between the nation's contemporary concerns and its founding ideals. As further examples will expose, alternative interpretations of 'the pursuit of happiness' have allowed the same connection to be made in support of more explicitly partisan political concerns.

In several notable instances, Republican presidents have found value in defining the phrase in terms of individual and economic liberty. Consider, for example, the rhetoric with which Gerald Ford justified his opposition to institutional and governmental centralisation: 'Mass education, mass government, mass labor', he affirmed at a Judicial Conference in Michigan, had stifled 'individual independence'. Speaking a year prior to the Declaration's Bicentennial, Ford invoked the document's most famous phrase. The 'right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', he said, specifically related to that which he perceived to be under threat, namely the 'freedom of the individual'. 'Those words are not just for political orations or even court decisions. They are', he continued in declaring his administration's intentions, 'the watchwords of what we must be about as a people in the coming years.' Ford's subsequent speeches promoting decentralisation and deregulation returned to the Declaration for support. Introducing plans to 'modernise' federal regulatory agencies in July 1975, thereby reducing 'unnecessary redtape', he reminded his audience that 'government was intended to help us in the pursuit of happiness, not to set up obstacles'. In a similar address two months later, the president declared deregulation of the natural gas market a 'high priority goal' of his administration before turning to reflect on the commitment to free enterprise enshrined in the Declaration's reference to the 'pursuit of happiness'.⁵⁴

Ronald Reagan defined the phrase in the same terms. Indeed, during an Independence Day speech in 1986, he professed certainty in its meaning, before applying it directly to his policy agenda:

They have a wonderful phrase describing economic liberty in the Declaration of Independence. They call it "the pursuit of happiness". Well, with tax reform, we're going to make that pursuit a lot easier for all Americans.

⁵⁴ Ford, '400 - Remarks at the Sixth Circuit Judicial Conference in Mackinac Island, Michigan, July 13, 1975'; '374 - Remarks at the White House Conference on Domestic and Economic Affairs in Cincinnati, July 3, 1975'; '562 - Remarks at Dedication Ceremonies for the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum in Midland, September 13, 1975'.

Rarely has a president more explicitly appropriated the Declaration in support of their policies. It required a precise definition of Jefferson's language, dismissive of any ambiguity in the author's original intent. Elaborating on his proposals to place constitutional limits on taxation and government spending a year later, Reagan maintained his interpretation of those famous words. Quoting again from the Declaration's second paragraph, he explained that his 'Economic Bill of Rights' rested on the understanding that 'economic freedoms' enable 'an individual to pursue his own destiny'. These included the freedom to participate in an open market and to own property. Like Ford, Reagan's understanding of 'the pursuit of happiness' related strictly to individualism, incorporating too his opinions on federal government. Speaking at a rally supporting a balanced-budget amendment to the Constitution, he denounced the levels of government spending since 1960, asserting that his predecessors had forgotten that 'the function of government is not to confer happiness upon us'. He continued:

The Declaration of Independence does not say, life, liberty and happiness. It says, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." There are some things that are left to us to do.⁵⁵

The directness with which Reagan exploited the words for his own purposes is striking. He encouraged his audience to accept, first, that the Declaration provided Americans with specific instructions and, second, that his administration acted in accordance with them. Significantly, Reagan implied too that his approach more closely reflected the intent of the Founders than had the policies of his predecessors. More than validating the political stance of its speaker, therefore, rhetoric such as Reagan's can be used in an effort to delegitimise the approach of opponents. Such is the adaptability of the Declaration's language, however, that Democratic presidents have been able to claim their own inheritance of its principles with no less ease than Republicans. Indeed, by invoking 'the pursuit of happiness' in their promotion of federal programmes, Presidents Truman, Johnson, Carter and Clinton presented a definition of the phrase in stark contrast to that offered by the Republicans.

Inheriting the interventionist legacy of Roosevelt's New Deal, President Truman's rhetoric upheld the belief in building the economy through job creation and federal support for the poor. He made his argument clear during his 1949 State of the Union address in which he

⁵⁵ Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Independence Day and the Centennial of the Statue of Liberty, July 5, 1986'; 'Remarks Announcing America's Economic Bill of Rights, July 3, 1987'; 'Remarks at a Rally Supporting the Proposed Constitutional Amendment for a Balanced Federal Budget, July 19, 1982'.

described the objectives of his ‘Fair Deal’ programme. His administration rejected ‘a “trickledown” concept of national prosperity’. Motivated, he said, to guarantee that all Americans had ‘a fair chance in the pursuit of happiness’, the government should work to ensure that wealth is ‘created for the benefit of all’.⁵⁶ Given the volume of domestic legislation advanced by Lyndon Johnson under his Great Society programme, there was ample opportunity for him to reference the Declaration in similar terms. On several occasions he spoke of the need to aid Americans who, through economic and other constraints, were struggling to ‘find their own pursuit of happiness’. Speaking in August 1964, he affirmed that securing for every citizen the opportunity to ‘follow the pursuit of happiness’ – ‘not just security, but achievements and excellence and fulfilment of the spirit’ – was America’s ‘oldest promise’. Remarks such as these were an effective addition to the many speeches in which Johnson promoted civil rights legislation and welfare reform. In some instances, indeed, they were applied to specific policies, as in his discussions of health care. Reflecting, for example, on the introduction of the Medicare health insurance programme in March 1966, Johnson aligned the initiative with the nation’s founding ideals, explaining that ‘the health of our people is essential to the pursuit of happiness’.⁵⁷

Fourteen years later, Jimmy Carter spoke comparably in support of his education policies. Inaugurating the newly created Department of Education in 1980, he considered the reasons for the Declaration’s allusion to ‘happiness’, concluding that the famous phrase related directly to learning. Citing Jefferson’s comment that education offered the surest ‘foundation...for the preservation of freedom and happiness’, Carter proclaimed that ‘education can mean happiness’. In this spirit, he suggested, the new Department would elevate ‘education to the status that it has always enjoyed among American people.’⁵⁸ The link which Carter attempted to make between the words of the Declaration and his position on education policy was somewhat tenuous. In fact though, it is examples such as this, when the language appears more forced, that best illustrate the merit perceived by presidents and their writers in referencing the founding document. What is certain is that successive Democratic presidents found value in equating the Declaration’s notion of ‘happiness’ with their perception of social improvement, be that in terms of education, health care or civil rights. Inheriting this rhetorical approach from his predecessors, Bill

⁵⁶ Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 293-5; Truman, ‘2 - Address to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 5, 1949’.

⁵⁷ Johnson, ‘107 - Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise, March 15, 1965’; ‘541 - Remarks Before the National Convention Upon Accepting the Nomination, August 27, 1964’; ‘95 - Special Message to the Congress on Domestic Health and Education, March 1, 1966’.

⁵⁸ Carter, ‘Department of Education Remarks at a Ceremony Marking the Inauguration of the Department, May 7, 1980’.

Clinton felt able to declare during the Congressional election campaign in 1998 that the Democratic Party ‘stood’ for ‘freedom, the pursuit of happiness, and a more perfect Union’. Much of his speechmaking endeavoured to tie the Declaration’s words to his legislative agenda. Indeed, during an address early in his presidency he had explicitly identified as the ‘whole goal’ of his economic programme, a changing of ‘the priorities of this country so people can pursue what the Founding Fathers wanted: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.’ The same phrase appeared in the opening lines of a speech to Congress introducing his health care reform proposals in September 1993. These words represented he said, the ‘American Dream’; making that dream a reality, he implied, required the provision of health security and the fixing of a ‘badly broken’ health care system.⁵⁹

Tenuous or not, all of these examples demonstrate the connections that presidents have endeavoured to draw between the Declaration and their own political agenda. In each instance, ‘the pursuit of happiness’ was interpreted in a manner that suited their purpose. Thus, while Republican presidents have found value in defining the phrase in relation to individualism, economic liberty and limited government, Democrats have aligned it with the provision of social welfare, health and education. Both, meanwhile, have found cause to present ‘the pursuit of happiness’ as a universal goal, motivating their approach to foreign policy. Such is the ubiquity of the phrase in presidential rhetoric, however, that it has appeared in relation to a greater diversity of issues and policies than this coherent picture suggests.

Richard Nixon, for example, once defined the phrase in terms of ‘quality of life’, invoking the familiar words in stressing the importance of the arts and leisure. For Ford in 1976, meanwhile, the phrase was relevant to his anti-crime strategy; for Carter, it was related to his energy and environmental policies. Indeed, in his Farewell Address in 1981, Carter presented a contemporary interpretation of the Declaration’s second paragraph that tied it explicitly to his own concerns:

For this generation, ours, life is nuclear survival; liberty is human rights; the pursuit of happiness is a planet whose resources are devoted to the physical and spiritual nourishment of its inhabitants.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Clinton, ‘Remarks at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Reception in San Francisco, California, February 25, 1998’; ‘Remarks to Boeing Employees in Everett, Washington, February 22, 1993’; ‘Address to a Joint Session of the Congress on Health Care Reform, September 22, 1993’.

⁶⁰ Nixon, ‘483 - Special Message to the Congress About Funding and Authorization of the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities, December 10, 1969’; Ford, ‘380 - Remarks in Fort Worth at the Fort Worth-Tarrant County Bar Association Luncheon, April 28, 1976’; Carter, ‘Farewell Address to the Nation, January 14, 1981’.

In subsequent years, Reagan and George W. Bush offered a different application again, invoking the phrase in support of their pro-life stance on abortion. Their argument was ostensibly the same: in Reagan's words, 'the unborn child is a living human being entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. For Clinton, finally, this entitlement could equally be applied to the Constitution's Second Amendment. Seeking to appease opponents of his legislation banning assault weapons, the president assured them in 1995 that his administration did not want 'to interfere with anybody's legitimate pursuit of happiness in the exercise of their right to keep and bear arms.'⁶¹

As was established at the outset, it is the flexibility and subjectivity of the phrase that allows 'the pursuit of happiness' to be invoked with such frequency and variety in presidential speeches. It is, meanwhile, the resonance of the words that motivates their inclusion. It would be difficult to identify any other phrase in the American political lexicon with which the public are more familiar. Linked directly to its source, it correspondingly feeds off the symbolic, quasi-religious and patriotic status that the Declaration of Independence enjoys. Perhaps above all, however, it is the adaptability of the words themselves that explains their continued prevalence. Thomas Jefferson's intended meaning is uncertain. As Robert Darnton considered, this ambiguity allows a variety of interpretations. It could be possible, for example, to argue that Jefferson's omission of the word 'property' in his reformulation of the standard phrase indicated that he was a 'secret socialist'.⁶² Darnton, of course, was exaggerating the point. While there have been several instances in which Democratic presidents have invoked Jefferson and 'the pursuit of happiness' in support of social welfare legislation, it is no less valid to argue, as Republican presidents have, that 'happiness' and 'property' were essentially interchangeable. Economic liberty, Reagan maintained, was the explicit meaning of the phrase. Crucially, there is no right or wrong application of it. It is universally appealing and easily adapted. In short, it is a gift for the presidential speechwriter.

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson foresaw the elevation of the Declaration of Independence into a piece of national scripture. Writing to Ellen Coolidge in November 1825, he predicted a time when even the desk on which he drafted the text would be 'carried in the procession of our

⁶¹ Reagan, 'Address to Congress on the State of the Union, January 25, 1988'; Bush, 'Remarks on Signing the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003, November 5, 2003'; Clinton, 'Remarks to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, January 27, 1995'.

⁶² Darnton, 'The pursuit of happiness', p. 47.

nation's birthday, as the relics of the saints are in those of the Church.'⁶³ Nevertheless, the diversity of causes with regard to which his words were to be appropriated by future leaders might well have surprised him. Since 1945 the Declaration has consistently remained a prevalent feature in presidential rhetoric, invoked in a wide variety of contexts. No other element of the founding heritage has been referenced with such persistence. Despite even the diversity of political voices in which references to Jefferson himself have been heard in the last seven decades, his prominence in public rhetoric declined during the administrations of Eisenhower and George W. Bush.⁶⁴ The Declaration of Independence, however, is universal, unassailable and, furthermore, essential to the framing of American national identity. Consequently, it remains a permanent fixture in presidential rhetoric.

The words it contains, moreover, are as loaded with symbolic resonance as the document itself. There are none more familiar in American political discourse than those expressed in the Declaration's second paragraph. Ironically, it is the long-established familiarity and ubiquity of these words that extends their adaptability and obscures their original meaning. Joyce Appleby in her analysis of the early American republic articulated the problem well: 'There is nothing so hard to discover in the past as that which has subsequently become familiar.'⁶⁵ Her concern was with uncovering historical truths, searching beyond the mythology of the founding era and the uncritical assumptions that can attend our perceptions of the Founding Fathers, their work and their legacy. This is not the concern of presidents or their speechwriters. It serves their purpose to maintain the myths, aware of the sense of patriotism, identity and continuity that references to the nation's origins can engender.

For Richard Nixon, indeed, the familiarity of the Declaration's words was a problem not because it obscured their original meaning but, on the contrary, because it inhibited their modern interpretation. Standing in the Rotunda at the National Archives in July 1971, he remarked:

We are in the presence of some immortal phrases: All men are created equal; government derives its powers from the consent of the governed; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These are familiar words - perhaps too familiar. Because the real meaning of the words of independence is the meaning we give them today, in our own lives.

⁶³ 'Jefferson to Ellen Randolph Coolidge, November 14, 1825', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, pp. 1507-8.

⁶⁴ Allusions to Jefferson in presidential rhetoric will be considered at length in Chapter 6.

⁶⁵ Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and the New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), p. 5.

Nixon's concern was reminiscent of that articulated at the Archives by Truman twenty years earlier; Americans must find practical instruction in the nation's founding documents, ensuring their continued relevance. Nixon's suggestion, however, that the words therein must be interpreted through a contemporary lens and adapted to suit modern circumstances is significant. It implies that while great stock should be placed in the principles established by the Founders, the manner in which they originally defined them is less important than their modern application. In essence Nixon justified the adaptation of the Declaration to suit diverse contexts and beliefs; its 'real meaning', he said, is not that perceived by its authors but rather that attributed to it by each American, in their 'own lives'.⁶⁶

In some respects, it would be difficult to condemn that sentiment. Reflecting on the ideals presented in the Declaration in relation to contemporary circumstances seems a positive approach. Pauline Maier's central fear in writing of the 'sacralization' of the founding documents was that it encouraged a detachment from the principles therein, an unthinking acceptance of their memorable phrases rather than a consideration of their continued relevance and practical application.⁶⁷ Moreover, it is an exclusively positive fact that the clear limits inherent in the Declaration's original statement of equality have been addressed in response to shifting attitudes and contexts. The meaning of the message that 'all men are created equal' has evolved. Although, of course, limits still exist, it has become a considerably more inclusive statement of equality than the Founders envisaged. Nevertheless it is a curious fact of American political discourse that presidents can simultaneously present the Declaration as an indisputable, unalterable guide, finding justification for their arguments in the specifics of its language, while at the same time acknowledging the malleability of its principles in adapting them to suit myriad diverse issues, from energy policy to abortion, tax reform to health care. Ultimately, presidents and speechwriters can exploit both the subservience directed towards the Declaration and the flexibility of its content. In their necessarily frequent discussions of national identity and purpose, the Declaration offers a ready-prepared statement. In speeches pertaining to policy goals and political arguments, meanwhile, any association with the values enshrined in the text can lend a sense of legitimacy and inheritance. It was Jefferson's earnest wish that Americans would continue to 'pledge' their 'adhesion' to the Declaration's

⁶⁶ Nixon, '220 - Remarks of the President, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and Speaker of the House Carl Albert at a Ceremony Opening the American Revolution Bicentennial Era, July 3, 1971'; As the next chapter will consider, there is a significant contrast between this acceptance of the Declaration's adaptability and the contentious debate that surrounds the adaptation of America's second founding document, the Constitution.

⁶⁷ Maier, p. 215.

principles.⁶⁸ He need not have worried. Doing so has long-since become a central, almost obligatory feature of presidential rhetoric.

⁶⁸ 'Jefferson to John Quincy Adams, July 18, 1824', *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib02507>) [Accessed 17/08/13].

4. The Constitution

We revere the Constitution because it is at the core of who we are.

President Clinton, September 17, 2000

President Clinton delivered these words during a ‘groundbreaking ceremony’ in September 2000 for the National Constitution Center, a remarkable, determinedly modern museum in Philadelphia, two blocks north of the site in which the United States Constitution was debated and finally signed in 1787.¹ The many visitors to the Center in the decade since it opened on July 4, 2003 will each have encountered, through the museum’s interactive exhibits, a celebration and a discussion of the Constitution’s history, its meaning, its employment and its evolution. One cannot enter and not be struck by the depth that the museum’s curators have succeeded in tapping with regard to what is, at root, a drily practical political charter. The Center states a bold ‘mission’: ‘to illuminate constitutional ideals and inspire acts of citizenship’. Borrowing from the language of the Constitution’s famous preamble, their stated ‘vision’ is grander still: ‘We envision a more perfect union where “We the People” know our Constitution, celebrate our freedoms, embrace our role as citizens, and inspire the world.’ The Constitution, they assert further, is ‘the most powerful vision of freedom ever expressed’.²

Considering this language in tandem with Clinton’s comment in 2000, a statement which placed the celebrated document at the centre of American national identity, we might observe that the Constitution is referenced with rhetoric very similar to that associated with the Declaration of Independence. The words relate to abstract principles; they present the Constitution, like the Declaration, as a symbol of ‘freedom’, an ideal at once essential to America’s unique identity and inspiring to the whole world. As the opening section of this chapter will illustrate, presidential invocations of the Constitution have consistently reflected this connection between the two texts. Immediately clear, however, is that, in the task of reinforcing national values and emphasising their continuity, the Constitution is fundamentally a less usable source for presidents than Jefferson’s founding charter.

The ringing phrases of the Declaration’s second paragraph lend themselves to this rhetorical aim. Eminently quotable, they articulate a set of timeless principles, easily

¹ William J. Clinton, ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, September 17, 2000’.

² ‘About The Centre’, *National Constitution Center* (<http://constitutioncenter.org/about>) [27/05/2013].

invoked and adapted in changing circumstances. The Constitution, in contrast, is a sober political document, a practical framework of laws to which the American government remains bound. With the exception of its memorable opening words – ‘We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union’ – its language is dry and concrete: of little appeal to the presidential speechwriter. Aware of the essential role of the Constitution in the United States’ political identity, presidents and their writers are therefore faced with the challenge of celebrating the endurance and importance of the document while largely avoiding reference to the specifics of its content. The result is that the Constitution, a practical text that continues to govern the work of government, is cited in presidential speeches in almost exclusively abstract and idealised terms.

The constraints that limit the Constitution’s value as a source do not, however, end there. Perhaps of more significant concern to speechwriters is the debate and division that surrounds the issue of constitutional interpretation. While the timeless, universal and indisputable principles of the Declaration can comfortably be applied to new contexts, many Americans reject the notion that the Constitution can be similarly adapted. The contention that surrounds the issue today has not always been a prominent feature of political discourse. Indeed, as the final section of this chapter will discuss, prior to the 1980s presidential allusions to the Constitution reflected a broad agreement that the text was a living document, intentionally left open to interpretation and amendment. With the arrival of Ronald Reagan in the White House, however, this pattern of consensus ended as the president and an increasing number of conservatives adopted an originalist stance on constitutional law. Reagan’s efforts to appoint judges to the Supreme Court who prioritised the original intent of the Constitution’s framers cemented the debate in the political and popular mainstream.³ In the decades since, Republican presidents have followed in Reagan’s footsteps, finding value in aligning their agenda with a professed commitment to the framers’ intent. Nonoriginalist Democrats, meanwhile, have proceeded with conspicuous caution, avoiding the confident allusions that their post-war predecessors had made to a living, evolving Constitution.

A Covenant

The United States Constitution serves a fundamentally practical purpose. Beyond the Bill of Rights, moreover, it is devoid of any explicit reference to the democratic principles that

³ See Dennis J. Goldford, *The American Constitution and the Debate over Originalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

defined the Revolution and found such eloquent expression in the Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, Americans have always been encouraged to perceive the Constitution as something more, as a symbol of their political identity and an emblem of national unity. For two centuries it has existed alongside the Declaration, together comprising the defining artefacts of the founding era and the primary source of the values continually deemed to unite the nation.

Thomas Jefferson, writing almost three decades after the Constitution's ratification, reflected an awareness of the symbolic status that such texts could assume:

Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the arc of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment.⁴

There was a concern in the Virginian's words, a recognition perhaps that the essential practical purpose of constitutions could be obscured through the mythologizing of their authors and of the circumstances of their creation. Jefferson did not want the continued progress of the American nation to be impeded by the blind devotion of future generations to the work of his own. Already, however, Jefferson in 1816 could perceive that the United States Constitution had been elevated in the minds of Americans into something more symbolic than a sober political charter. Many of his colleagues, indeed, had a hand in the process.

In George Washington's Farewell Address, a text frequently cited as a source of guidance, the outgoing president implored Americans to ensure that their Constitution be 'sacredly maintained'. Twenty years later, in his final Annual Message as president, James Madison described the Constitution that he had such a central role in securing as 'dear to us all' and the 'palladium' of 'true liberty'.⁵ The words of Washington and Madison were typical of the veneration with which Americans quickly came to regard their new government's founding document. Several historians have written of this process. Discussing the origins of American civil religion, Catherine Albanese regarded the 'worship' of the Constitution in similar terms to the Declaration of Independence. The difference was that, while the latter did not achieve its lofty status until several decades

⁴ 'Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* ed. by Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 1401.

⁵ George Washington, 'Farewell Address, September 19, 1796'; James Madison, 'Eighth Annual Message, December 3, 1816'. For allusions to Washington's 'Farewell Address', see for example: Lyndon B. Johnson, '566 - Remarks in Harrisburg at a Dinner Sponsored by the Pennsylvania State Democratic Committee, September 10, 1964' and George W. Bush, 'Remarks Honoring President George Washington's 275th Birthday in Mount Vernon, Virginia, February 19, 2007'.

after it was written, the Constitution was almost immediately accepted by the American people as ‘a new covenant’ and something ‘sacrosanct’. For John Murrin, this sense of reverence and the ‘frenzy of self-congratulation’ that followed the Constitution’s ratification were both necessary and consciously encouraged by contemporary politicians and early historians. Lacking any stable sense of shared identity in the first years of independence, Americans could find in the Constitution a symbol of national unity. It was on this basis that Murrin memorably described the product of the framers’ deliberations in 1787 as ‘a roof without walls’: ‘a substitute for any deeper kind of national identity.’⁶

As Michael Kammen traced with some regret, the ‘rhetoric of reverence’ attached to the Constitution continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century to such a degree that the Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster was able to declare by December 1850 that the Constitution was ‘all that gives us a national character’. Webster exaggerated of course, yet his statement illustrated the extent to which the text was accepted as a defining symbol, as something, to quote Kammen, ‘culturally determinative’. The historian’s concern was that this conception of the Constitution precluded Americans from understanding and scrutinizing the text more closely. It could be cited endlessly as a symbol of the nation’s political ideals, a revered founding document, yet the majority of the population remained ignorant of the specifics of its content. In his 1994 study of ‘the Constitution in American culture’, Kammen cited a Gallup Poll in 1947 as sobering evidence of his contention: of the 2800 Americans asked the question, ‘What is the Bill of Rights?’, only 22% could give a satisfactory answer.⁷

It is this legacy that post-war presidents inherited. With the Constitution firmly established in the minds of Americans as a national symbol and hindered further by the lack of engaging, quotable language in the text itself, presidents have continued to invoke the document in precisely the abstract and superficial terms that Kammen found so restrictive.

As with allusions to the Declaration of Independence, persistent is the notion that the Constitution should be central to national identity. When Harry Truman spoke at the new ‘shrine’ to the founding documents at the National Archives in December 1952, the central significance of the Constitution to Americans was his primary theme. ‘Perhaps’, he

⁶ Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), pp. 207-216; John Murrin, ‘A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity’ in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* ed. by Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 334-347.

⁷ Kammen reports that more than 41% did not know or had no answer; a further 35% offered incorrect or only partially correct responses. Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), pp. 3, 94, 343.

suggested, ‘it takes a lifetime of experience to understand how much the Constitution means to our national life.’ The text expressed ‘an idea that belongs to the people - the idea of the free man.’ As the previous chapter explained with regard to the Declaration, Truman’s speech implored Americans to recognise that this idea of liberty remained essential to their nation’s identity.⁸ Lyndon Johnson later gave a similarly rousing address on the anniversary of the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1964 in which he spoke in abstract language of the ‘meaning’ of the document. ‘Today’, he affirmed, ‘we guide our course by the star of the Constitution that our forefathers fixed for us’. It was ‘the rock’ on which the American republic stood. In the context of the president’s civil rights agenda, moreover, Johnson explained that it was the responsibility of his generation to ensure that ‘the meaning of our country and our Constitution... shall be the same for all Americans, regardless of their creed or their color or their origins.’⁹ On the same day twenty-three years later, the Bicentennial of the Constitution, President Reagan actively sought to reflect on the origin, content and evolution of the document that had endured for two centuries. Nevertheless, despite some comment on the virtues of the American political system, his speech in Philadelphia was dominated by statements that presented the Constitution in symbolic terms. Reagan returned to the very language that Jefferson had foreseen:

This document that we honor today has always been something more to us, filled with a deeper feeling than one of simple admiration - a feeling, one might say, more of reverence... It is a covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our Founding Fathers did constantly appeal for assistance.¹⁰

It is difficult not to read Reagan’s grandiose words in isolation and respond with some cynicism. Washington, Madison and other contemporaries, without doubt, perceived the Constitution as something precious and unique, worthy of respect and celebration.¹¹ They initiated the language of reverence that persisted in Reagan’s rhetoric. However, first and foremost, the framers regarded the product of their work as an essential, practical framework for government. Reading Reagan’s speech, one can sympathise with Kammen’s

⁸ Harry S. Truman, ‘347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, December 15, 1952’.

⁹ Johnson, ‘579 - Remarks in Sacramento on the Steps of the State Capitol, September 17, 1964’.

¹⁰ Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the "We the People" Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 17, 1987’.

¹¹ Benjamin Rush, for example, regarded the new Constitution in religious terms, convinced that the ‘form and adoption’ of the Union was ‘as much the work of Divine Providence as any of the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testament’. Quoted in Albanese, p. 216.

concerns. Of course, Reagan was not alone; similar language continued to appear in the speeches of his successors. Clinton spoke of the ‘hallowed’ founding documents. He believed, as we have heard, that the Constitution lay ‘at the core’ of American identity. Obama, too, has spoken of the necessity in ‘keeping faith’ with the Constitution, presenting its ‘enduring principles’ as comprising ‘a compass that can help us find our way’.¹² In presenting the document as a persistent guide, not simply in a political sense but also in terms of the values deemed essential to the American character, Obama touched on a common theme. It was on this basis, for example, that President Ford instructed Americans in January 1976 to remain ‘true to our Constitution and to our ideals’. Similarly, George H.W. Bush fifteen years later emphasised the ways in which the Constitution remained ‘a reliable guide’ before asking Americans to consider whether they were ‘still living true to the framers’ legacy’.¹³

These examples clearly indicate the predominant tone in which modern presidents have invoked the Constitution in their public speeches. Little reference is made to the specific content of the text. Instead, the Constitution is heralded variously as an abstract guide, a quasi-sacred text and the defining root of the United States’ political principles. As the scholars present at a major conference held in 1980 to mark the forthcoming Bicentennial of the Constitution concluded, such a presentation of the founding document is at odds with the text produced by the framers. In notable contrast to the ‘ringing’ language on rights and liberties found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution was ‘a sober, responsible document designed to work’.¹⁴ Rather than responding to this distinction by discussing the Constitution in more concrete, practical terms, however, presidents, in lieu of ‘ringing’ quotations from the text itself, instead continue to reference the Constitution in abstract language. A ‘sober, responsible document’ does not suit the purposes of presidents whose public speeches are so frequently concerned with offering rousing reinforcement of the principles deemed to unite Americans and by which, they imply, their own administrations are guided. An idealised image of the Constitution as a symbol of the nation’s identity and guiding values is a far more usable rhetorical tool.

¹² Clinton, ‘Remarks on the Charters of Freedom Project, July 1, 1999’; ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia’; Barack Obama, ‘Remarks at the National Archives and Records Administration, May 21, 2009’.

¹³ Gerald R. Ford, ‘19 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 19, 1976’; George H.W. Bush, ‘Remarks at the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights Luncheon at Montpelier in Orange County, Virginia, December 16, 1991’.

¹⁴ Paul Bender and Martha A. Field, ‘Report on the Deliberations of Committee 1’, *The Bicentennial Conference on the United States Constitution*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1980), p. 93.

Presidents, of course, cannot ignore the true nature of the Constitution: the document is often cited in terms of the political system it established. However, even in these instances, emphasis is rarely placed on specific details. On the contrary, allusions to the government created by the framers have allowed presidents to reinforce in celebratory language the notion that America's republican system and origins are unique, intrinsic to the nation's political identity and, correspondingly, worthy of adulation.

Frequently, the creation of the Constitution is heralded by presidents as a unique and remarkable achievement. Indeed, the period in which the infant nation's first politicians debated, drafted and finally ratified the document in Philadelphia is a central moment in America's founding heritage. If 1776 is the most celebrated year in American history, 1787 must follow closely behind. Consequently, we hear presidents invoking the rigorous debates, the uncertainty and the requisite determination that attended the creation of the Constitution. References are often made to the 'genius' and the 'courage' of the framers.¹⁵ In several speeches, James Madison has been cited directly, presented as the 'Father of the Constitution' and a voice of enduring wisdom on matters of political theory. Remembered, in the words of Ford and Bush senior, for his 'quiet genius' and 'deep love of liberty', Madison's statements on law and government in *The Federalist Papers* have, on occasion, been quoted as presidents have emphasised the continuity in the political system.¹⁶

Stressing always the uniqueness of the framers' endeavours, several presidents have presented the work of 1787 as the initiation of a bold 'experiment in democracy'. Such language helpfully supported the efforts of Reagan to promote, as he so often did, his perception of American exceptionalism. During a speech at the Republican National Convention in 1988, for example, he employed the phrase in discussing the continued achievements of 'an extraordinary breed we call Americans'. While this was a theme with which Reagan was particularly preoccupied, every president has considered it important to uphold the sense of the United States as a special nation. Thus Clinton too, for instance, found it pertinent to reflect in Maryland nine years later on the moment the Founders

¹⁵ See, for example, H.W. Bush, 'Remarks at the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights Luncheon at Montpelier in Orange County, Virginia, December 16, 1991' and Obama, '463 - Remarks at a Ford's Theatre Gala, June 6, 2010'.

¹⁶ Reagan, 'Remarks at the Bicentennial Celebration of the United States Constitution, September 16, 1987'; Bush, 'Remarks at a Celebration of Greek Independence Day, March 23, 2001'; Ford, '639 - Remarks at a Bicentennial Ceremony at the National Archives, July 2, 1976'; H.W. Bush, 'Remarks on Signing the Year of Thanksgiving for the Blessings of Liberty Proclamation in Orange County, Virginia, December 16, 1991'; Both Johnson and Reagan, for example, drew on Madison's words in *The Federalist* in discussing the balance between state and federal government. See Johnson, '77 - Remarks in Atlantic City at the Convention of the American Association of School Administrators, February 16, 1966' and Reagan, 'Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National Governors' Association in Cincinnati, Ohio, August 8, 1988'.

launched ‘the greatest experiment in democracy and opportunity the world has ever known’.¹⁷ For others, citing the superior model of government that emerged from the framers’ deliberations has offered, in addition, an opportunity to compare the debates of modern politics with those that attended the ratification of the Constitution. An address recently delivered by President Obama to a student audience in Michigan was typical:

[Politics has] always been noisy and messy, contentious, complicated. We've been fighting about the proper size and role of Government since the days the Framers gathered in Philadelphia. We've battled over the meaning of individual freedom and equality since the Bill of Rights was drafted... So before we get too depressed about the current state of our politics, let's remember our history. The great debates of the past all stirred great passions... What is amazing is that despite all the conflict, despite all its flaws and its frustrations, our experiment in democracy has worked better than any form of government on Earth.¹⁸

Audible in Obama’s speech was a reverence for the American political system itself. While presidents very rarely discuss the specific content of the Constitution in their public addresses, they have consistently found value in celebrating, in the broadest terms, the nature of their government. There have been scores of speeches in the last seven decades, for example, in which presidents have referred to the ‘checks and balances’ inherent in the framers’ system that prevented, as Truman explained during a Constitution Day address in 1951, ‘any part of the Government from having absolute power’. For Gerald Ford, this was a ‘basic ingredient’ in a text which he described in 1974 as ‘the greatest document for the governing of people in the history of mankind’. Three years later as he prepared to leave the White House he remarked that his experience in government had taught him to place the ‘highest value’ on the Constitution’s separation of powers. The document was ‘the bedrock of all our freedoms’, he said, ‘Guard and cherish it’.¹⁹ Ford’s enthusiasm was typical. References to the ‘genius’ of the Constitution appear regularly in presidential speeches. Johnson, for instance, spoke in such terms of the balance the framers had achieved between creating a flexible charter and one rooted in fixed principles and ‘enduring institutions’. Reagan later echoed Ford in describing as ‘genius’ the Constitution’s separation of powers and, specifically, the independence of the judiciary.

¹⁷ Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988’; Clinton, ‘Remarks to the Maryland General Assembly in Annapolis, Maryland, February 10, 1997’.

¹⁸ Obama, ‘329 - Commencement Address at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 1, 2010’.

¹⁹ Truman, ‘225 - Address at the Constitution Day Ceremonies at the Library of Congress, September 17, 1951’; Ford, ‘174 - Remarks at Greensboro, North Carolina, October 19, 1974’; Ford, ‘1057 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 12, 1977’.

For Clinton, meanwhile, speaking in 1995 to the Conference of State Legislatures, ‘the genius of [the] constitutional system’ lay in the balance between state and federal power.²⁰

Celebrating the country’s political framework is therefore a consistent theme. Significantly, however, these allusions to ‘checks and balances’ and ‘enduring institutions’ do not accompany a critical discussion of the Constitution’s practical content. They reinforce a sense of uniqueness, they perpetuate the established notion that the Founders and their work are to be revered and celebrated, and they present the nation’s political origins as an essential facet of American identity. However, this language does little to address the concerns of Michael Kammen. Indeed, American presidents continue to present the Constitution as a document ‘swathed in pride’. As the chief articulators of the nation’s political identity, they are guilty of perpetuating the ‘fulsome rhetoric of reverence’ that Kammen believed ‘obscured’ a ‘reality of ignorance’.²¹ Educating Americans on the nuances of constitutional law is not, however, the president’s responsibility. The priority of their public rhetoric is to engage with their audience in memorable, resonant language. The sober content of the Constitution is consequently ill-suited. The result ultimately is that the document is most commonly invoked in much the same manner as the Declaration of Independence: in abstract, idealised language, as a symbol more than a tangible text. Lacking the endlessly employable rhetoric of the Declaration’s opening paragraphs, moreover, this disjunction between text and popular image is all the more pronounced in invocations of the Constitution. The irony is that, unlike the Declaration – frozen in time, functioning in essence as a fixed statement of national values – the Constitution remains alive, directing the work of government and the judiciary. It is here, most significantly, that the employment of the two documents differs. While the Declaration is accepted as a timeless expression of defining political principles, correspondingly adaptable to changing circumstances, the employment of the Constitution is subject to considerable debate. In the decades since World War II, the interpretation and adaptation of the Constitution has become an increasingly contentious issue to which presidential rhetoric has been forced to respond.

A Living Document

If one read in isolation the abstract references to the Constitution made by presidents in the examples cited thus far, it would be possible to conclude that the document exists primarily

²⁰ Johnson, ‘6 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 12, 1966’; Reagan, ‘Remarks at the "We the People" Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 17, 1987’; Clinton, ‘Remarks to the National Conference of State Legislatures, March 16, 1995’.

²¹ Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself*, p.3.

as a revered historical artefact and a symbol of the United States' political identity. The reality, of course, is quite different. America's possession of a written constitution ensures the consistent necessity and practical importance of the document and its interpretation. As the political scholar Dennis Goldford explains, the most fundamental debates in American politics find 'constitutional expression'.²² One need only consider the many occasions in the last seventy years in which significant political disputes have become constitutional issues, from the civil rights controversies of the 1950s and 1960s, to the introduction of anti-terrorism measures in the last decade. Indeed, there remains validity in the famous observation of Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s that 'scarcely any political question arises in the United States which is not resolved, sooner or later, into a judicial question.'²³ Given that Americans have consistently been encouraged to view the Constitution as a symbolic source of unity and a defining guide, the role of the text in American politics is all the more significant. As Goldford puts it, 'political conflict over principles basic to and definitive of American society quite naturally finds expression in conflict over interpretation of the fundamental text that formalizes those principles and renders them authoritative.'²⁴ My concern is not with the specific nature of these constitutional debates. However, in order to gain an understanding of how American presidents portray and employ the Constitution in their public rhetoric, it is essential to consider the manner in which they have responded to the document's status as a living, practical text, subject to interpretation and dispute.

In their allusions to the Constitution, presidents across the post-war period have acknowledged that the continued use and endurance of the document is central to its character and status in American political culture. Although differing opinions on constitutional interpretation came to have an impact on the language of American leaders towards the end of the last century, every president has found value in celebrating the Constitution's endurance. Indeed, very often, the durability of the document has been presented as indicative of the strength and vitality of America itself.

President Truman's speech at the National Archives in 1952 provides a key example. He stressed that the founding documents were not mere historical relics; they were 'symbols of a living faith', of the continued commitment of Americans to the democratic principles enshrined therein. The Constitution, Truman explained, was enduringly vital:

²² Goldford, p. 3.

²³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 280.

²⁴ Goldford, p. 3.

You can read about the Constitution and you can study it in books, but the Constitution is not merely a matter of words. The Constitution is a living force - it is a growing thing.²⁵

It was in this sense that Truman drew a distinction between the two founding documents newly installed at the Archives. Although presidents consistently affirm the continued pertinence of the democratic principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence, it is cherished as a foundational and fixed statement of values. The Constitution, in contrast, is not frozen in time. Rather, it continues to survive as a practical, living document.

Thus, President Eisenhower could celebrate the Constitution during a speech in August 1955 as ‘a vital, dynamic, deathless charter for free and orderly living in the United States.’ For Kennedy in September 1963, meanwhile, the framers’ document was responsible for maintaining an ‘indestructible union of indestructible States’. It had created, he told an audience of state leaders, ‘the best system yet devised’.²⁶ When the responsibility for commemorating two hundred years of the Constitution fell to President Reagan in 1987, his focus too was on the document’s endurance and vitality. During his State of the Union address in January of that year, Reagan explained:

[W]e must always remember that our Constitution is to be celebrated not for being old, but for being young - young with the same energy, spirit, and promise that filled each eventful day in Philadelphia's statehouse.

Reagan’s references to the enduring youth and ‘energy’ of the Constitution allowed him to present the document as representative, in a sense, of the continued vigour and optimism of the nation more broadly. Laying out in his speech a vision of future progress, the president affirmed that America’s ‘best days have just begun.’ He encouraged his audience, indeed, to recall the circumstances of the Constitution’s original creation, noting the tone of optimism reputedly voiced by Benjamin Franklin as the Philadelphia Convention drew to a close. Observing an image of the sun emblazoned on the back of George Washington’s chair, explained Reagan, Franklin announced that he had been unable to tell ‘whether it had been a rising or a setting sun’. With the signing of the Constitution, however, he now had ‘the happiness to know’ that it was a rising sun. For Reagan and later for Bill Clinton, who repeated the tale in a speech on the eve of the new millennium, the Franklin anecdote

²⁵ Truman, ‘347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights’.

²⁶ Eisenhower, ‘210 - Address at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association, Philadelphia, August 24, 1955’; Kennedy, ‘368 - Telephone Remarks to the 5th Annual National Conference of State Legislative Leaders, September 21, 1963’.

was indicative of the sense of youth and potential bound up in the nature of the Constitution itself.²⁷

Of course, the framers themselves had declared in the preamble to the Constitution that the document aimed to create ‘a more perfect Union’. Frequently, presidents seeking to strike the tone of optimism encapsulated in Reagan’s rhetoric have employed the phrase, always reinforcing the connection between the endurance of the Constitution and the continued progress of the nation. It was in this sense that Johnson concluded his 1965 State of the Union message, affirming that the country’s founding ideals would continue to ‘lead Americans as they entered ‘the third century of the search for "a more perfect union."’ ‘This, then’, he said, ‘is the state of the Union: Free and restless, growing and full of hope’. President Ford in 1977 offered a similar statement in his annual message to Congress. There was always ‘room for improvement’, he explained, ‘but today we have a more perfect union than when my stewardship began’.²⁸ Twenty years later, Clinton expanded upon the theme, reflecting explicitly on the vision of progress encapsulated in the Constitution’s opening statement. During a speech in July 1998, the president described the framers’ objective ‘to form a more perfect union’ as ‘the enduring mission of America’. Any ‘great nation’, he said, ‘is always a work in progress’:

[The Framers] understood that they could never imagine the far reaches of America's future. They understood that these ideals they set up would never be perfectly realized. And so they gave us a mission that will be just as good for our grandchildren as it is for us, just as good as it was for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, “to form a more perfect Union”, because there will always be something there to do better, always a new challenge.²⁹

The framers then, in Clinton’s assessment, had envisaged a nation constantly progressing, forever striving for greater perfection. Implied in all of the speech extracts cited thus far is the notion that the Constitution itself lies at the root of this progress, a living document enduring through the course of American history and still vital today. No president would dispute this statement. Clinton’s words in 1998, however, hinted at a subject with regard to

²⁷ Reagan, ‘Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union, January 27, 1987’; Clinton, ‘Remarks at the "America's Millennium" Celebration, December 31, 1999’. As Chapter 5 will discuss further, the Franklin anecdote has proved a favourite of speechwriters. In addition to Reagan and Clinton, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson each referenced the story in at least one speech. See Eisenhower, ‘283 - Address in Convention Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 1, 1956’; Kennedy, ‘452 - Remarks at Fitzgerald Field House, University of Pittsburgh, October 12, 1962’; Johnson, ‘499 - Remarks at the Dedication of Thomas More College, Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, September 28, 1968’.

²⁸ Johnson, ‘2 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 4, 1965’; Ford, ‘1057 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 12, 1977’.

²⁹ Clinton, ‘Remarks at the National Treasures Tour Kickoff, July 13, 1998’.

which, in recent decades, there has been considerably less consensus. In suggesting that the framers, unable to foresee the future changes in American society, condoned a ‘mission’ of subsequent improvement, Clinton subtly implied that the Constitution itself had intentionally been left open to amendment and adaptation.

Today, it is impossible to read Clinton’s implicit argument and not consider the contentious issue of originalism, surely the central polarising debate in constitutional law in the last thirty years. Emerging first among academic discussions in response to the expansion of judicial power and intervention under Earl Warren’s Supreme Court in the 1960s, the debate reached the political and popular mainstream with Reagan’s tenure in the White House in the 1980s. Reagan represented a new body of predominately conservative opinion which maintained that the Constitution should be applied by federal courts with strict adherence to its original intent and meaning.³⁰ Writing in 1986, Edwin Meese III, Attorney General during the Reagan administration, explained the originalist argument, stressing the necessity of studying the specific language of the Constitution:

The further afield interpretation travels from its point of departure in the text, the greater the danger that constitutional adjudication will be like a picnic to which the framers bring the words and the judges the meaning.

Rather than regarding as positive the ability of Americans to adapt the Constitution to changing contexts, originalists see a ‘danger’ in perceiving the document as ‘an empty vessel into which each generation may pour its passion and prejudice’.³¹ Reagan himself made his position transparent in several public speeches during his presidency, most prominently when speaking in support of his nominations to the Supreme Court. In seeking to appoint, in particular, Judge Robert Bork, the president nailed his colours to the mast. A committed advocate of originalism, Bork would, said Reagan in a national address in October 1987, exercise ‘judicial restraint’, ensuring that the courts would ‘interpret the law, not make it’. Following the Senate’s rejection of Bork’s nomination, Reagan nevertheless maintained his argument in promoting an alternative candidate. Discussing his nomination of Douglas Ginsburg, the president asserted that, ‘Too many judges have reinterpreted the Constitution [and] got away from the original intent of the Founders’:

³⁰ There is a large body of political and legal scholarship on the original intent debate. Helpful overviews can be found in Goldford, *The American Constitution* and Jack N. Rakove ed., *Interpreting the Constitution: The Debate over Original Intent* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990). For specific work supportive of different sides of the debate, see below.

³¹ Edwin Meese III, ‘Interpreting the Constitution’ in Rakove, pp. 18-19.

Judge Ginsburg remembers, as I do, the warning of James Madison that “if the sense in which the Constitution was accepted and ratified by the Nation is not the guide to expounding it, there can be no security for the faithful exercise of its powers.”³²

Madison’s words, addressed to Henry Lee in 1824, helpfully supported Reagan’s argument.³³ The president might have referred also to the opinion of Thomas Jefferson who famously deemed it America’s ‘peculiar security’ to possess ‘a written Constitution’. Writing to William Johnson in June 1823, Jefferson elaborated on his point:

On every question of construction we should carry ourselves back to the time, when the Constitution was adopted; recollect the spirit manifested in the debates; and instead of trying [to find] what meaning may be squeezed out of the text, or invented against it, conform to the probable one, in which it was passed.³⁴

Many, largely conservative, politicians, jurists and scholars have found in these words and elsewhere convincing justification for a strict interpretation of the Constitution, loyal, as they perceive it, to the original intent of the framers.³⁵ The nuances of the debate in which they are involved are not my direct concern here. What is essential to reflect upon, however, is the fact that, by the 1980s and with Reagan’s controversial nominations to the Supreme Court, a decisive change had occurred. Previously, the intended flexibility of the Constitution was broadly accepted across the political spectrum with many, indeed, celebrating the adaptability of the document as its central asset. Within the academy, meanwhile, most scholars continue to view the Constitution in these terms, as a living document the original limitations of which politicians and jurists must consistently address.³⁶ Since the 1980s, however, and what Goldford has called ‘the single-minded

³² Reagan, ‘Address to the Nation on the Supreme Court Nomination of Robert H. Bork, October 14, 1987’; ‘Radio Address to the Nation on the Supreme Court Nomination of Douglas H. Ginsburg and the Federal Budget, October 31, 1987’.

³³ ‘James Madison to Henry Lee, June 25, 1824’, *Founders Online: National Archives* (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-0247>) [17/08/13].

³⁴ ‘Jefferson to Wilson Cary Nicholas, September 7, 1803’ in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1140; ‘Jefferson to Justice William Johnson, June 12, 1823’ in *ibid*, p. 1475. Inevitably, those who dispute the position of originalists can equally find support among the writings of the founding generation. Advocating that the Constitution be left open to future amendment, Samuel Williams, for example, declared that ‘No policy would appear more puerile or contemptible to the people of America, than an attempt to bind posterity to our forms... The aim is altogether the reverse, to make provision for the perpetual improvement and progression of the government’. Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Burlington: 1809), p. 396.

³⁵ Notable scholarly support for originalism can be found in Keith E. Whittington, *Constitutional Interpretation: Textual Meaning, Original Intent, and Judicial Review* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990) and, more recently, in Gary L. McDowell, *The Language of Law and American Constitutionalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁶ The central scholarly rejection of originalism can be found in Leonard Levy, *Original Intent and the Framers’ Constitution* (New York: MacMillan, 1988). For a comprehensive picture of the debate, with

jurisprudential agenda of the Reagan administration', the division between originalist and nonoriginalist perceptions of constitutional law has permeated American politics, affecting nominations to the Supreme Court as presidents seek to appoint judges who will interpret the Constitution in line with their own reading of it.³⁷ Of interest to my study is the extent to which this fault-line has been reflected in presidential rhetoric.

A comparison of presidents' public allusions to the Constitution before and after 1980 appears to confirm that the prominence of the originalism debate during and since the Reagan administration has influenced the language of presidential speechwriters. In the first decades after World War II, presidents were considerably more likely to present the Constitution explicitly as an evolving document, intentionally left open to adaptation. In June 1945, for example, Truman delivered an address in San Francisco in which he likened the newly-signed Charter of the United Nations to America's Constitution. He stressed that both would continue to require alterations in response to changing circumstances:

When [our Constitution] was adopted, no one regarded it as a perfect document. But it grew and developed and expanded. And upon it there was built a bigger, a better, a more perfect union.

This Charter, like our own Constitution, will be expanded and improved as time goes on. No one claims that it is now a final or a perfect instrument. It has not been poured into any fixed mold. Changing world conditions will require readjustments.³⁸

It was with similarly explicit language that President Kennedy reflected on the nature of the Constitution during a speech to a student audience in August 1962. The text, he said, had always required people to 'make it work' in contexts vastly different from that in which it was originally composed: 'The Constitution was written for an entirely different period in our Nation's history. It was written under entirely different conditions.' Kennedy indeed stressed that several specific provisions of the Constitution, among them the so-called general welfare clause, had necessarily been 'interpreted by man' and 'made to work today in an entirely different world from the days in which it was written'.³⁹ Kennedy's perception of the Constitution as an adaptable text was clear, his allusion moreover to the general welfare clause perhaps suggestive of the continued debate between left and right

contributions from scholars and jurists on both sides of the divide, see Jack N. Rakove ed., *Interpreting the Constitution*.

³⁷ Goldford, p. 1.

³⁸ Truman, '66 - Address in San Francisco at the Closing Session of the United Nations Conference, June 26, 1945'.

³⁹ Kennedy, '349 - Farewell Remarks to Participants in the Summer Intern Program for College Students, August 28, 1962'.

over the focus and reach of federal spending.⁴⁰ For more explicit statements of the Constitution's malleability in the context of specific policy concerns, however, we must turn to Kennedy's successor.

Lyndon Johnson, very much a product of the New Deal in his pursuit of a bold domestic legislative agenda, was not afraid to align his policies with an adaptive reading of the Constitution. His speeches provide the clearest indication of the relative acceptability of such rhetoric before the 1980s. Consider, for example, his address in February 1964 to officials from the Inland Revenue Service. Justifying the increased government spending in education and health care that attended his proposed 'war on poverty', the president encouraged his audience to empathise with those who lived on low incomes, many of whom were hindered by discrimination in education and employment. The 'time has come in our national life', he said, 'when we have got to make our Constitution a living document. We have got to do unto others as we would have them do unto us'.⁴¹ This idea that the principles of equal rights enshrined in the Constitution should be more sharply reflected in the realities of American society was a consistent theme in Johnson's public rhetoric, particularly with regard to civil rights legislation.⁴² It was though primarily when speaking in response to Republican detractors of the federal intervention inherent in much of his administration's policy agenda that Johnson made his perception of the Constitution most transparent. In several speeches during his election campaign in 1964, the president referred to the opening words of the document, explaining that they could be defined in support of the government action which his critics opposed. Typical was a speech in Reno, Nevada in which he addressed opposition to the regulation of business:

There are some of those among us who say that "we, the people" should get out of business, as a people, acting through the Government. Well, I say, and so do you, that "we, the people" are going to stay in business and "we, the Government" are going to do together the things that we can't do alone.

⁴⁰ The 'general welfare clause' is located within Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, pertaining to the tax and spending powers of Congress. For a discussion of the long history of debate regarding the interpretation of the clause, see Robert G. Natelson, 'The General Welfare Clause and the Public Trust: An Essay in Original Understanding', *The University of Kansas Law Review* 52 (2003). On Kennedy's federal spending plans, see Irving Bernstein, *Promises Kept: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 130-3.

⁴¹ Johnson, '182 - Remarks to Key Officials of the Internal Revenue Service, February 11, 1964'.

⁴² See, for example, Johnson, '446 - Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill, July 2, 1964' and '515 - Remarks in Rodney Square, Wilmington, Delaware, October 13, 1966'.

Johnson clarified his broader argument during a television address to the nation, highlighting the benefits of current federal programmes and stressing that the public acted ‘through government’:

We are now told that we the people acting through Government should withdraw from education, from public power, from agriculture, from urban renewal, and from a host of other vital programs... This is a radical departure from the historic and basic current of American thought and action... I propose to build on the basic beliefs of the past.⁴³

The president thus employed the familiar words of the Constitution’s preamble in suggesting that his opponents, not his administration, were at odds with the United States’ historic principles. In quite explicitly adapting these words to suit his argument that government acted on behalf of ‘the people’, he further illustrated his comfort in presenting the Constitution as a text open to interpretation.

While Johnson provides the clearest example of this rhetoric, it is equally significant to note that his Republican successors presented broadly the same conception of the Constitution. Although Earl Warren, whose modern and progressive interpretation of the text did much to define the political era, ended his tenure at the head of the Supreme Court in 1969, presidential rhetoric did not yet suggest the shift in attitudes that was to come a decade later. Indeed, speaking alongside the new Chief Justice, Warren Burger, in July 1971, Richard Nixon presented the Constitution in terms similar to his predecessors. Congress, he proclaimed, must continue to follow the Constitution’s purpose ‘to form a more perfect union’ as it had done ‘for nearly 200 years’, by ‘improving our laws to make them more responsive to the changing needs of our people’. It was a theme which President Ford was to maintain five years later upon the Bicentennial of American independence. The original limitations of the Constitution, particularly as regarded the denial of equal rights to all Americans, had necessitated, said Ford, a ‘union of corrected wrongs and expanded rights’.⁴⁴ In recognising the failures of the Founders’ original model, Ford introduced a subject which his Democratic successor, President Carter, was not afraid to acknowledge. Speaking in May 1980, in support of a long-disputed amendment to the Constitution acknowledging the equal rights of women, Carter spoke of the ‘incremental progress’ that had been made in extending equality since a period in which ‘discrimination’

⁴³ Johnson, ‘655 - Remarks at the State Building in Reno, October 12, 1964’; ‘638 - Television Address to the American People, October 7, 1964’.

⁴⁴ Nixon, ‘220 - Remarks of the President, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and Speaker of the House Carl Albert at a Ceremony Opening the American Revolution Bicentennial Era, July 3, 1971’; Ford, ‘645 - Remarks in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 4, 1976’.

had been ‘acknowledged and condoned’. The Constitution, he asserted, should be updated to remove this remaining ‘deprivation of rights’.⁴⁵

The consistency of rhetoric revealed in these examples, from Truman to Carter, is sufficient to expose the sharp contrast that Reagan’s subsequent pronouncements represented. Prior to his administration, no post-war president had publicly declared their support for an originalist reading of the Constitution. Such, however, was the strength of Reagan’s remarks on the subject, in conjunction with nominations to the Supreme Court that brought the issue to the forefront of public consciousness, that the existing trend in presidential allusions to the Constitution was halted. Thereafter, while Reagan and his Republican successors could rally behind the originalist argument, aligning their agenda with the framers’ intent, it appears that Presidents Clinton and Obama were forced to reference the Constitution in more cautious language, wary of engaging from their nonoriginalist perspectives with a now contentious debate.

A key advantage for Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush and, later, his son was that, in representing the overwhelmingly conservative body of support for an originalist interpretation of the Constitution, they were able to emphasise the loyalty of their policies to the specific intent of the framers. Each, for example, delivered speeches that identified in the Constitution the foundation of the limited government they professed to favour. Reagan put the argument most succinctly during a speech in February 1984 in which he promoted the freedom of the business community from government regulation. Essentially undermining the manner in which Lyndon Johnson had adapted the opening words of the Constitution two decades before, Reagan explained his argument:

To those who would stifle personal initiative through more and more government, I ask them to read the Constitution. As a matter of fact, just read the first three words. It says, “We the People.” It doesn't say, “We the Government.”

Reagan’s opposition to the centralisation of power was perhaps the most persistent theme of his public rhetoric. He consistently turned to the Constitution for support, not just in reminding audiences of the power balance inherent within the federal system but, more

⁴⁵ Carter, ‘Equal Rights Amendment Remarks at a White House Briefing, May 15, 1980’. Carter’s rhetoric is conspicuous among that of post-war presidents for the occasions, albeit few, in which he explicitly criticised the inequality of the Founders’ politics and practice. Indeed, during one question-and-answer session in 1977, he sought to temper the reverence directed at the Founding Fathers, reminding his audience in particular of their failure to denounce and abolish slavery and to extend the suffrage to all Americans: ‘those people that we admire so much said it’s all right to have slaves as long as they are black.’ See Carter, ‘Presidential Scholars Remarks to High School Students Selected as Presidential Scholars of 1977, June 9, 1977’.

often, in aligning limited government and individual freedom with the overarching vision of the framers. The opening words of the text therefore provided him with a perfect source. Returning to them during his Farewell Address in January 1989, Reagan elucidated for the final time as president the focus of his own politics:

“We the People” are the driver; the government is the car. And we decide where it should go, and by what route, and how fast...Our Constitution is a document in which “We the People” tell the government what it is allowed to do. “We the People” are free. This belief has been the underlying basis for everything I’ve tried to do these past eight years.⁴⁶

His successor, George Bush, maintained a very similar message, again rooting his preference for limited government in his reading of the framers’ intent. This was never clearer than during Bush’s speech upon the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights in December 1991 in which he reflected upon the primary principles of the Constitution. Explaining their concern that ‘stark limits’ be placed ‘on the exercise of Government power’, the president affirmed that, ‘The framers had the humble genius to recognize that manmade laws and government are not a panacea for human problems.’ With decentralisation very much established as a key component of Republican discourse, it is no surprise that George W. Bush described the focus of the Constitution in language closely reminiscent of his father’s a decade before. Announcing a ‘new federalism initiative’ in the second month of his tenure which aimed to restore greater control and independence to local and State government, Bush spoke again of the Founders’ intent: ‘The Framers of the Constitution did not believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful Federal Government. They believed that our freedom is best preserved when power is dispersed.’⁴⁷

Each president thus affirmed with conviction their knowledge of the framers’ intentions and, furthermore, the loyalty of their own stance on government to these original objectives. Reagan indeed spoke similarly with regard to other aspects of his policy agenda. Most notable, perhaps, were the terms in which he argued in favour of reinstating prayer in schools, a topic to which he returned in several speeches. Presenting as wrong the Supreme Court’s decision in the 1960s to rule state-sanctioned school prayer unconstitutional, Reagan stressed that the framers’ concern with separating church and state did not extend to any specific provisions regarding public education. On the contrary, Reagan cited the

⁴⁶ Reagan, ‘Remarks During a Homecoming and Birthday Celebration in Dixon, Illinois, February 6, 1984’; ‘Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989’.

⁴⁷ H.W. Bush, ‘Remarks at the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights Luncheon at Montpelier in Orange County, Virginia, December 16, 1991’; Bush, ‘Remarks at the National Governors’ Association Conference, February 26, 2001’.

comments of George Washington and others in support of his argument that religion offered lessons in morality essential to a child's education. 'And yet', explained the president in a typical address in January 1984, 'today we're told that to protect the first amendment, we must expel God, the source of all knowledge, from our children's classrooms. Well, pardon me, but the first amendment was not written to protect the American people from religion; the first amendment was written to protect the American people from government tyranny.'⁴⁸ Reagan conveyed little doubt that his reading of the Constitution reflected the framers' intent. This was particularly clear in one of his last speeches as president, in which he expressed his wish that the judiciary would act on the issues of both school prayer and abortion in line with his own reading of the Constitution: 'maybe in the next few years, the courts will even figure out what the American people know: that the right to abortion is not in the Constitution and the right to pray, including for schoolchildren to pray, is'. Such language consistently permeated Reagan's public rhetoric as he strove to illustrate his administration's adherence to the letter of the Constitution. A speech on crime policy in February 1988 essentially summarised the focus of his persistent argument. Presenting the tougher sentencing his administration had overseen as reflective of the Constitution's concern for protecting 'the victims of crime', Reagan declared that the 'original intent' of the framers was paramount. Unlike the lenient 'liberal message', his administration had approached crime and justice in the manner 'originally intended by the framers'.⁴⁹

As the Bush examples above reveal, Reagan's strong language left an indelible mark on the manner in which his successors would employ the Constitution in their public speeches. In more recent years, indeed, George W. Bush demonstrated the continued prominence of the original intent debate by discussing the process of appointing Supreme Court justices in language no less determined than Reagan's in 1987. Bush rejected the entire notion of 'a living document', explaining during a speech in November 2007:

⁴⁸ Reagan, 'Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta, Georgia, January 26, 1984'.

⁴⁹ Reagan, 'Remarks to Administration Officials on Domestic Policy, December 13, 1988'; 'Remarks at the Annual Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner, February 11, 1988'; Reagan's efforts to highlight the issue of original intent and the loyalty of his own policies to the Constitution provoked a reaction in the contemporary press. *The Hartford Courant* in May 1982 noted the 'great frequency' with which the president referenced 'the Constitution and the intentions of its authors' in promoting 'his own social programs, such as the New Federalism and prayer in school'. Quoting the opinions of Garry Wills and others, the article criticised Reagan's approach, arguing that the president's rhetoric on limiting federal government misrepresented the motives and intent of the Founders. (Bill Stall, 'Reagan Muddies Constitutional Waters', *The Hartford Courant*, May 28, 1982.) A piece in the *Los Angeles Times* five years later was similarly critical. Despite Reagan's efforts to suggest that his agenda reflected what 'the Framers of the Constitution intended all along', his deregulation of the economy was at odds with the attitude of Madison and his colleagues who had considered economic regulation the 'bedrock of the Constitution'. ('Reading Reagan's Rights', *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1987.)

Advocates of a more active role for judges sometimes talk of a “living Constitution”. In practice, a living Constitution means whatever these activists want it to mean. They forgot that our Constitution lives because we respect it enough to adhere to its words.

In contrast, said Bush, his ‘judicial philosophy’ was ‘based on what our Founders intended’.⁵⁰ With this pattern of discourse firmly established among Republican presidents, therefore, the two Democrats inhabiting the Oval Office since the 1980s have been forced to respond. Neither Clinton nor Obama during his first term, however, elected to meet the debate head on by promoting a flexible interpretation of the Constitution in vocabulary of comparative strength. On the contrary, both invoked the document in notably cautious language.

The ease and frequency with which presidents prior to Reagan presented the Constitution as an adaptable text were strikingly absent from the speeches of Clinton and Obama. Presumably aware of the popularisation of the originalism debate and of the value their Republican counterparts had correspondingly found in pledging strict loyalty to the Constitution, both Democrats avoided direct allusions to their nonoriginalist stance. Invocations of the Constitution in their speeches instead generally featured implicit language; reference was made more to the abstract spirit and values enshrined in the text, than to specific aspects of interpretation. Thus, Clinton, discussing the balance between state and federal government before an audience of state governors in January 1995, spoke of the need to ‘renew’ the ‘profound guiding principles’ of the Constitution but made no comment on the provisions detailed in the text itself. On occasions, meanwhile, when Clinton came closer to suggesting that the framers’ original vision had necessarily evolved, he still fell far short of the openness with which President Johnson and others portrayed an adaptable document. In several speeches early in his second term, for example, Clinton spoke of applying ‘our enduring values to a new set of challenges’ in the pursuit of ‘a more perfect union’. American progress, he stated in one address, could be accounted for by the ‘flexible’ and ‘evolving’ nature of ‘government’; he made no reference, however, to the evolution of the Constitution itself. The language with which Clinton employed the founding document was, appropriately, typified by his address at the groundbreaking ceremony for the National Constitution Center in 2000. Clearly an opportunity to reflect on the nature and use of the framers’ document, the president nevertheless confined himself to predominately abstract language. Stressing the need to remain ‘open to change’, he

⁵⁰ Bush, ‘Remarks at the Federalist Society’s 25th Annual Gala Dinner, November 15, 2007’. See also, Bush, ‘Remarks to the Conservative Political Action Conference, February 8, 2008’ and ‘Remarks to the Cincinnati Chapter of the Federalist Society in Cincinnati, Ohio, October 6, 2008’.

described the Constitution as the ‘home base’ to which Americans could always return and ‘the anchor of the changes and the challenges of any new era’.⁵¹

When one considers Clinton’s careful rhetoric in comparison to the explicit references that, for example, Truman, Kennedy and Johnson made to ‘a living document’, requiring ‘readjustments’ in accordance with a changing world, the contrast is clear.⁵² Perhaps, however, Barack Obama provides a better example still. As a president promoting significant changes in American society, the manner in which he has employed the Constitution on behalf of his agenda is striking. Like Clinton, Obama has avoided the nonoriginalist language of pre-Reagan presidents, advocating change in terms of a renewal of constitutional values rather than engaging directly with the issue of constitutional law.

The clearest indication of Obama’s approach came during his election campaign in 2008, in a speech that remains perhaps his most significant. Titled ‘A More Perfect Union’ and delivered at the National Constitution Center, the speech, ostensibly addressing the issue of race in American society, was rooted in a reflection on the endurance and evolution of the nation’s founding ideals. Obama began by declaring that the persistence of slavery and racial inequality in the new republic had left the original Constitution ‘unfinished’. He did not, however, condemn as Jimmy Carter did the framers’ neglect, nor did he suggest that future alterations were a necessary departure from their vision. On the contrary, he explained that the ‘answer to the slavery question’ was already ‘embedded within’ the original text. This was ‘a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law’. Nevertheless, in stressing that American society had subsequently progressed, narrowing ‘the gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of [the Founders’] time’, Obama conceded the continued need for advancement. It was in these terms that he subtly alluded to his own political aims, an agenda that in reality called for considerable change. He spoke of the alterations needed in education, employment, housing and health care in order, as he perceived it, to address persistent inequalities. Despite the constitutional questions that would inevitably attend the pursuit of these goals, Obama was careful to align his implicit proposals with the enduring spirit of

⁵¹ Clinton, ‘Remarks to the National Governors’ Association Conference, January 31, 1995’; ‘Remarks on Ending Drug Use and Drug Availability for Offenders and an Exchange With Reporters, January 12, 1998’; ‘Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future in Philadelphia, April 28, 1997’; ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, September 17, 2000’.

⁵² Truman, ‘66 - Address in San Francisco at the Closing Session of the United Nations Conference, June 26, 1945’; Johnson, ‘182 - Remarks to Key Officials of the Internal Revenue Service, February 11, 1964’.

the Constitution. These changes reflected, he suggested, the nation's consistent recognition that, while 'the union may never be perfect', it 'can always be perfected'.⁵³

Obama's memorable speech in 2008 surely represents one of the most creative and effective uses of the Constitution in American presidential discourse. Clearly keen to avoid engaging directly with the issue of constitutional interpretation and adaptation, Obama nevertheless succeeded in simultaneously advocating change while stressing a continued commitment to the values 'embedded' in the framers' text. It was a message he continued to convey as he began his presidency, emphasising in his Inaugural Address the need to remain 'true to our founding documents'.⁵⁴ When he came to discuss the controversial issue of anti-terrorism in May 2009, his language was well established. Avoiding any comment on the specifics of the framers' intent, Obama nevertheless portrayed some of the key measures introduced in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a departure from the principles enshrined in the Constitution. Citing in particular the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre, he accused his predecessor's administration of failing 'to use our values as a compass':

I've studied the Constitution as a student; I've taught it as a teacher; I've been bound by it as a lawyer and a legislator. I took an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution as Commander in Chief. And as a citizen, I know that we must never, ever, turn our back on its enduring principles for expedience sake...[We] need not sacrifice our security for our values, nor sacrifice our values for our security [...]

As Obama's words clearly demonstrated, neither he nor Clinton were any less concerned with stressing their loyalty to the Constitution than were Presidents Reagan or Bush. The difference is that, while the latter's alignment with an originalist interpretation of the document allowed them to claim inheritance of the framers' explicit intent, the Democrats were and remain restricted to more implicit language. Perceiving the Founders' vision as an evolving and adaptable 'foundation of principles', Clinton and Obama subtly promoted change in their public rhetoric through assurances that the Constitution continues to provide, as Obama put it in typically abstract terms, 'a compass that can help us find our way'.⁵⁵

⁵³ Obama, 'Address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia: "A More Perfect Union"', March 18, 2008'; Obama's speech received widespread media coverage. Reports in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* describing the address as an 'extraordinary moment' were typical. See, for example, Janny Scott, 'Obama Chooses Reconciliation Over Rancor', *New York Times*, March 19, 2008, and 'Moment of Truth', *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2008.

⁵⁴ Obama, 'Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009'.

⁵⁵ Obama, 'Remarks at the National Archives and Records Administration, May 21, 2009'.

Conclusion

Without doubt, the manner in which presidents have discussed the flexibility of the Constitution has changed over the course of the last seven decades. With many conservatives, today and since the 1980s, supporting a strict adherence to the original intent of the framers, it is no longer politically acceptable for a president to portray the Constitution as an adaptable text in the manner frequently demonstrated earlier in the period. Where there is continuity and consistency in presidential rhetoric, however, is in the presentation of the Constitution as the enduring foundation of the nation's political principles. Indeed, Obama's words in 2009, spoken symbolically at the shrine to the founding documents in the nation's capital, were reminiscent of those delivered in the same location more than half a century earlier by President Truman. While Obama's concern was the curtailment of liberties he perceived in aspects of the government's anti-terrorism programme, Truman in 1952 identified a similar breach of constitutional rights in the activities of anti-communist McCarthyites. Standing before the newly-displayed founding documents at the National Archives, Truman spoke in powerful terms of the threat these Americans posed to the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution:

Whether they know it or not, these people are enclosing the spirit as well as the letter of the original Constitution in a glass case, sealed off from the living nation. They are turning it into a mummy, as dead as some old Pharaoh of Egypt, and in doing that they are giving aid and comfort to the enemies of democracy... The external threat to liberty should not drive us into suppressing liberty at home.⁵⁶

Regardless, therefore, of the divisive issue of constitutional interpretation and the impact of the originalism debate, what persists is the portrayal of the Constitution as an essential symbol of America's political identity. Although the terms in which presidents have conveyed their loyalty to the document have varied since the 1980s, all have pledged their allegiance to it.

The similarities between the status of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in this respect are clear. Both are portrayed in symbolic language as the source of the nation's defining values; both are cited as the enduring guides to which contemporary politicians remain committed. While the Declaration has consistently

⁵⁶ Truman, '347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, December 15, 1952'.

represented a usable source for presidential speechwriters, however, the Constitution is more complex. Hindered by its sober, political language and disputes over its interpretation, presidents have been encouraged to reference the framers' work in abstract, idealised terms. With the originalism debate now an established feature of political discourse in the United States, presidential speechwriters must continue to grapple with the paradoxical fact that the Constitution exists for Americans, simultaneously, as an abstract symbol and a living, practical, political document.

III. The Founding Fathers

It would be interesting if we could have the counsel of Washington, of Madison, or of Jefferson, or of Franklin today, after all this span of almost two centuries, if they could sit with us and counsel with us on these problems.

President Eisenhower, April 22, 1954¹

One imagines that every American president would echo Eisenhower's sentiment. The Founding Fathers remain the most celebrated figures in American history, elevated to a status almost mythic in the public consciousness. Only Abraham Lincoln exists on a comparable plane in the esteem and affections of Americans. It is the Founders though – those political leaders who drove the country to independence and established the republic – to whom presidents most consistently return in their public rhetoric.² As Eisenhower suggested, the wisdom and judgement of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and others is beyond rebuke, their words a source of indisputable guidance. Such at least is the impression permeated in the rhetoric of presidents. In the assessment of John F. Kennedy, this 'brilliant' and 'exceptional' collection of individuals represented 'the most extraordinary outpouring of human ability devoted to government...since the days of Greece'. Most significantly though, the Founders are held responsible for establishing the political traditions and principles that have defined the nation since its inception. As Ronald Reagan explained in 1981, they are recalled with 'reverence' because 'all that we as Americans have been blessed with...could not have happened without their vision and their courage.' Tied to the democratic values still deemed to guide the nation, the Founders

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, '86 - Remarks to the 63d Continental Congress of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 22, 1954'; I continue to use the terms 'Founding Fathers' and 'Founders' interchangeably. Of course, it is regrettable that the gendered allusion to 'fathers' has become embedded in popular and scholarly discourse, thus obscuring the role of women during the founding era. However, such were the inequalities of the age that the politicians credited with establishing the nation were all men. Moreover, the term remains prevalent in the speeches of modern presidents. As Obama said in an attempt to address the issue recently, 'we can assume that there were founding mothers whispering smarter things in the ears of the Founding Fathers'. See Barack Obama, '368 - Commencement Address for Barnard College in New York City, May 14, 2012'.

² I define the Founders as R.B. Bernstein has, as those individuals who, 'by word or deed', played a central role in founding the United States 'as a nation and a political experiment' in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. See R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009), pp. 6-7.

are therefore presented as enduringly relevant. As George W. Bush told an audience in 2005, ‘the spirit of our Founders still shapes the conscience of our country.’³

Listening to the remarks of these presidents it is easy to consider the Founding Fathers as a collective, almost indistinguishable one from the other. Certainly, it is very often in these terms that American leaders have alluded to them; the achievements of the founding era and the political principles then established can broadly be attributed to them all. They were, however, individuals, each with their own character, reputation and distinct associations, both in the eyes of their contemporaries and in the assessment of posterity. So familiar are their names to the American public that several of these figures have been mentioned in the speeches of post-war presidents. As the previous chapter noted, James Madison has been cited on occasions when presidents have discussed the Constitution and the foundation of the political system. John Adams, meanwhile, a central figure during the Revolution and early republic, has been referenced in several addresses with regard to subjects as diverse as war, the arts and the United States’ relationship with the Dutch.⁴ Several other names from the era, including Alexander Hamilton, Patrick Henry, John Jay, Joseph Warren and John Marshall, have been cited in isolated instances, their association with particular subjects rendering them a viable source in specific speeches.⁵ It is the intention of the two chapters that follow, however, to consider the four figures whose employment in modern presidential rhetoric best encapsulates the ‘usability’ of the Founders’ legacy for presidents and their writers.

In examining the allusions of post-war presidents to George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, Chapter 5 will demonstrate how these individuals, perceived quite differently in the collective memory of Americans, have each represented a valuable source for speechwriters in distinct ways. Washington has consistently been portrayed as a symbol of the United States’ origins and endurance, a heroic leader of spotless character.

³ John F. Kennedy, ‘397 - Remarks at a Luncheon Marking the Publication of the First Four Volumes of the Adams Papers, October 3, 1961’; Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks to Business Leaders at a White House Briefing on Economic Competitiveness, February 17, 1987’; George W. Bush, ‘The President’s Radio Address, July 2, 2005’.

⁴ George H.W. Bush, ‘Remarks to Military Personnel and Their Families in Frankfurt, Federal Republic of Germany, May 31, 1989’; Reagan, ‘Remarks at a Luncheon for Recipients of the National Medal of Arts, June 18, 1987’; Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony for Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, April 19, 1982’.

⁵ Hamilton has been cited in relation to his establishment of the American financial system. See, for example, William J. Clinton, ‘Remarks on Electronic Commerce, November 30, 1998’; Henry and Warren have been remembered for their efforts to galvanise support for the Revolution in the 1770s. For Henry, see Eisenhower, ‘118 - Remarks to the Committee for Economic Development, May 20, 1954’. For Warren, see Reagan, ‘Remarks at a North Carolina Republican Party Rally in Raleigh, October 26, 1982’; Jay and Marshall have been referenced with regard to their roles at the head of the Supreme Court. For Jay, see Bush, ‘Remarks at a Swearing-In Ceremony for John G. Roberts, Jr., as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, September 29, 2005’. For Marshall, see Richard Nixon, ‘93 - Remarks at the Opening Session of the National Conference on the Judiciary in Williamsburg, Virginia, March 11, 1971’.

Standing above political divisions, he has been presented as an emblem of the nation's values and a model to be emulated. In contrast to the remote Washington, Franklin is a more accessible figure. Familiar to the public, presidents have been able to cite him in discussing subjects with which he is associated. While Washington and Franklin have been referenced by American leaders in these terms across the post-war period, Paine's employment has changed over time. Still identified with political radicalism by the mid-twentieth century and rarely ranked alongside the nation's leading Founders, Paine's presence in presidential rhetoric after 1945 was unexpected.⁶ However, on the strength of his eminently quotable writings, he has been cited in several notable instances in the last seven decades, first by Democrats, then later, most decisively and against all expectations, by the Republican, Ronald Reagan. In attempting to reconcile the radical with the conservative, we will see that Paine's primary asset as a source for modern presidents has been the adaptability of his words and the ambiguity of his political legacy.

The symbolic resonance of Washington, the familiar appeal of Franklin, and the malleability of Paine can all be found in the language with which modern presidents have invoked Thomas Jefferson. Such is the breadth of instances in which Jefferson's name and words have been appropriated that Chapter 6 is dedicated to him alone. Revered as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, he has been presented as an icon of American democracy. It is the complex character of his legacy, however, that has made him such an adaptable source for modern presidents. His diverse and memorable writings contain political statements of service to both the conservative and the liberal. Exploiting the malleability of his political legacy, leaders across the party divide have explicitly laid claim to Jefferson's inheritance, emphasising the elements of his political thought most applicable to their own partisan agenda.

⁶ As Harvey Kaye notes, the English-born radical has generally been positioned outside the top rank of the Founding Fathers, certainly below Washington, Franklin and Jefferson. See Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), pp. 3-4.

5. Washington, Franklin and Paine

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and others are revered by us, and legitimately so.

President Carter, June 9, 1977¹

Jimmy Carter's language in 1977 was not unusual. The reverence with which Americans regard their nation's Founders is well established and frequently reaffirmed in the speeches of presidents. This sense of veneration shows no sign of waning. As R.B. Bernstein recently commented, the 'appeal of a mythologized cadre of founding fathers' remains 'overwhelming'.² Although often considered as a collective, individuals within this celebrated 'cadre' have received particular attention in the speeches of American leaders. It is the aim of this chapter to examine in turn the manner in which the three men cited directly by Carter have been invoked in post-war presidential rhetoric. Washington, Franklin and Paine were quite different men, with varying reputations in their lifetimes and since. Recalled and applied in distinct ways, however, each has proved a valuable source for presidential speechwriters.

Washington, the symbol

On February 22, 1982, President Reagan delivered a speech marking the 250th anniversary of George Washington's birth. Addressing an audience gathered on the 'hallowed grounds' of Washington's Virginian home at Mount Vernon, Reagan spoke of the enduring place of America's first president in the hearts of the people:

We come filled with pride and gratitude to honor George Washington, Father of our Country, knowing that because of what he did, we're free and we're Americans.

Two hundred and fifty years after his birth, Washington's star shines brighter than ever... Words alone cannot express how much we revere this giant for freedom. Yes, he is first in our hearts and will be first for all time.³

¹ Jimmy Carter, 'Presidential Scholars Remarks to High School Students Selected as Presidential Scholars of 1977, June 9, 1977'.

² R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009), p. 10.

³ Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at a Mount Vernon, Virginia, Ceremony Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington, February 22, 1982'.

No other leading figure of the founding era is referenced by presidents in quite the manner reflected in the language of Reagan. Washington inhabits a position in the consciousness of Americans higher than the rest of his contemporaries. Though ‘Founding Fathers’ all, Washington is and always has been regarded as the ‘Father of his Country’, an infallible national symbol.

He was the military general who led the Continental Army to victory in the Revolution, thereby securing the very existence of the United States. He was the hero who then took on the burden of the presidency and brought unity and some semblance of stability to the infant nation. In standing down from the presidency after two terms in office, just as he had earlier resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the army, Washington both set a precedent for the future and sealed his own reputation as a selfless patriot, acting for the good of the country. Such in essence was his biography during and after the Revolution. Yet it was his character as much as his deeds that saw him elevated to a position almost mythic in the eyes of Americans. The writings of Washington’s colleagues and observers are replete with references to his dignity and modesty, to the respect he commanded, to the heroic presence he inhabited and the wise judgement he exhibited.⁴ In essence a legend in his own lifetime, with his death in December 1799 Washington assumed a status justifiably likened by many scholars to that of a saint.⁵ The eulogies composed in the weeks after his death read like hagiography. A ‘political savior’, proclaimed one typical example, his ‘great soul...sustains the nation’s cares’. It was the ‘duty’ of Americans to ‘remember him as a Providential man, given, furnished, and supported for the glory and happiness of this new world’.⁶

Not content with recording the virtue and heroism evident in Washington’s genuine endeavours, his first biographers embellished his life story, inventing episodes that were to

⁴ Abigail Adams, for example, wrote admiringly of Washington’s ‘dignity’, ‘modesty’ and ‘affability’. (‘Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 12, 1789’, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801* ed. by Stewart Mitchell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), p. 15.) Benjamin Rush was similarly effusive in his praise, writing as early as 1775: ‘His zeal, his disinterestedness, his activity, his politeness, and his manly behavior...have captivated the hearts of the public and his friends. He seems to be one of those illustrious heroes whom providence raises up once in three or four hundred years to save a nation from ruin.’ (‘Benjamin Rush to Thomas Ruston, October 29, 1775’, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, Vol. I ed. by L.H. Butterfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 92.)

⁵ Catherine Albanese, for example, described Washington as a ‘holy man’ in the opinion of contemporaries; Barry Schwartz considered him ‘a sacred possession’. Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), p.144; Barry Schwartz, ‘The Character of Washington: A Study in Republican Culture’, *American Quarterly* 38:2 (1986), p. 202.)

⁶ Abiel Abbott, *An Eulogy on the Illustrious Life of George Washington* (Haverhill, MA: Seth H. Moore, 1800); For most, Washington was nothing less than an instrument of God, a ‘second Moses’ as one writer put it, leading his people from oppression to freedom. (Ammi Ruhami Mitchell, *An Eulogy of George Washington* (Portland: Elezer A. Jenks, 1800), pp.17-18.) In the memorable assessment of Richard Henry Lee, Washington had stood ‘first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen’. See Richard Henry Lee, *A Funeral Oration Prepared and Delivered at the Request of Congress* (Brooklyn: Thomas Kirk, 1800).

blur irrevocably the lines between man and myth. Most influential was the popular work of Parson Weems whose fictional anecdotes, from the tale of Washington felling a cherry tree as a child to the vision of the army commander praying on his knees in the snow of Valley Forge, served to illustrate Washington's strength, piety and patriotism.⁷ In the midst of the Revolution, over a decade before Washington's inauguration as president, John Adams had written of the 'superstitious veneration...paid to General Washington'.⁸ By the time Weems and others had offered their engaging contributions to the Washington cult a quarter of a century later, the man had assumed a position described by one historian as 'godlike'. In the decades that followed, many Americans came to cherish even physical items associated with their first leader, the ephemera of 'Washingtoniana' regarded almost as sacred relics.⁹ As Karal Ann Marling has documented, the celebration and reverence of Washington's memory continued well into the twentieth century as his name and image became a ubiquitous presence in American political and cultural discourse.¹⁰

And so they remain. As the words of Reagan in 1982 suggested, the image of Washington projected in the speeches of modern American presidents differs remarkably little from that perceived in the early years of the nineteenth century. He remains above all the idolised hero. The myths prevail. In Christmas messages to the nation, several post-war presidents have reminded the public of Washington and his troops daringly crossing the freezing Delaware River in December 1776, an episode recounted and embellished in countless works of literature, art and film. The story of the general praying in the snow at Valley Forge, meanwhile, first established in Weems' biography and later popularised in art, has been referenced on numerous occasions. Eisenhower, Ford and Reagan cited the tale directly, each presenting it as fact, not legend. No doubt with Arnold Friberg's iconic 1975 painting of the scene in mind, Reagan in one address described Washington 'on his knees in the snow at Valley Forge' as 'the most sublime figure in American history'. The religious overtones of Reagan's words were not far removed from the eulogies of 1800. Describing the 'skill and perfection' with which Washington worked to 'liberate the Colonies and establish the Republic', Reagan commented that the Founder 'seemed to be carrying out a divine plan for America'.¹¹ While other post-war presidents have stopped

⁷ Marcus Cuncliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 16.

⁸ Adams quoted in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His "Travels Through Life" Together with His Commonplace Book for 1789-1813* ed. by George W. Corner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 141.

⁹ Cuncliffe, p.14.

¹⁰ Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹¹ Reagan, 'Remarks at a Mount Vernon, Virginia, Ceremony Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington'; Other examples include: Dwight D. Eisenhower, '271 - Remarks Upon

short of employing such explicitly spiritual language, all have described Washington as the ‘Father of our Country’ among the many references recurrently made to his inspiring example and achievements. For Bill Clinton in 2000, he was ‘the greatest hero of our Revolution’; for George W. Bush seven years later, it was only appropriate that ‘Children are taught to revere his name and leaders to look to him for strength’.¹²

In these speeches, audiences heard little of Washington the man. Rather, they were encouraged to imagine the ‘hero’, the great liberator, the ‘sublime figure’ kneeling in prayer. For the purposes of presidential speechwriting, the symbolic Washington represents an inherently usable source. Indeed, it would be difficult to portray him in any other way. More than any other Founder, Washington concealed his real self, consciously avoiding opinionated pronouncements and revealing little of his personal life, even in private conversations and correspondence. In the minds of his contemporaries, this allowed him to stand above political divisions as a neutral and unifying figure during the uncertainty of the Revolution and the fragility of the new republic. He was, wrote Garry Wills, ‘the embodiment of stability...speaking for fixed things in a period of flux.’¹³ Crucially moreover, both then and ever since, this cultivated image of neutrality and detachment meant that Americans could paint Washington in the hues that suited them best.

In modern presidential rhetoric, he has been invoked most often as a symbol of the nation’s origins, as the ‘father’ who conceived the nation and first assumed the presidency, setting precedents that all his successors have endeavoured to follow. Upon their inauguration, presidents have often acknowledged in the ritual their inheritance of a position and a tradition passed down from Washington. On other occasions, stock is taken of the progress made ‘since Washington’s day’ or of the similarities that persist.¹⁴ However, there are two more specific themes with regard to which Washington’s memory has been consistently invoked in the last seven decades. The scene depicted in Friberg’s painting of the army general kneeling in prayer reflects, in essence, the two central strands of Washington’s symbolic, popular image. While he will always be recalled as the nation’s

Lighting the National Community Christmas Tree, December 24, 1953’ and Gerald Ford, ‘125 - Remarks at the Combined Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Evangelicals, February 22, 1976’.

¹² William J. Clinton, ‘Remarks Aboard the U.S.S. John F. Kennedy in New York City, July 4, 2000’; George W. Bush, ‘Remarks Honoring President George Washington’s 275th Birthday in Mount Vernon, Virginia’.

¹³ Schwartz, ‘The Character of Washington’, pp. 203-5; Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1984), p. xxi; See also, Cuncliffe and Albanese.

¹⁴ There are innumerable examples in this vein, among them George H.W. Bush’s Inaugural Address which opened with a reflection on the ‘continuity’ since Washington’s inauguration and Harry Truman’s 1950 address on foreign policy in which he found ‘the task of Americans today...fundamentally the same as it was in Washington’s time’. George H.W. Bush, ‘Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989’; Harry S. Truman, ‘42 - Address on Foreign Policy at the George Washington National Masonic Memorial, February 22, 1950’.

first president, it is in this vision of military leadership and religious piety that speechwriters have found greater contemporary resonance.

Since the earliest biographies, the dominant image of Washington has been of the soldier, not the politician. It better suits the heroic picture in which he has always been framed. As such, the public rhetoric of post-war presidents has generally reflected this trend, evoking Washington the general more often than Washington the president. The strength and resolve displayed by the commander-in-chief during the Revolutionary War is frequently invoked as a source of inspiration during contemporary periods of crisis and challenge. As the examples in Chapter 2 illustrated, presidents, particularly when the military is involved in foreign conflicts, have very often reminded audiences of the endurance and sacrifice displayed by the army through the winters of 1776 and 1777. During the Korean War, President Truman recorded a national broadcast from Valley Forge in which he affirmed his faith in the ability of the country to triumph over the communist threat. They would succeed because Americans in 1950 had ‘the same unconquerable belief in freedom’ that ‘inspired the men of George Washington’s army’. In his State of the Union address two years later, Truman reflected again on the ‘ideals’ for which Americans were fighting, both ‘in the field’ in Korea and against the proliferation of communism more broadly. Success depended, he explained, on retaining the ‘same faith and vision’ that Washington had inspired in his troops:

In the darkest of all winters in American history, at Valley Forge, George Washington said: “We must not, in so great a contest, expect to meet with nothing but sunshine.” With that spirit [our forefathers] won their fight for freedom. . . In the great contest in which we are engaged today, we cannot expect to have fair weather all the way. But it is a contest just as important for this country and for all men, as the desperate struggle that George Washington fought through to victory.¹⁵

Truman’s words both tied the concerns of Cold War America directly to the cause of the Revolution while demanding the same spirit of sacrifice and resolve embodied by the Revolution’s leading figure. It was an effect encouraged by several of Truman’s successors. Lyndon Johnson, as we have heard, persistently presented the Vietnam War as a conflict fought in defence of America’s founding ideals. Reflecting soberly on the

¹⁵ Truman, ‘Address at Valley Forge at the Boy Scout Jamboree, June 30, 1950’; ‘5 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 9, 1952’.

sacrifices demanded of those sent to fight in Asia, he likened his own position in one memorable speech in 1968 to that of Washington during the Revolution:

Fired by the glory of his cause, but aware always of its terrible costs, Washington voiced the words that have whispered in the mind of every leader since that time - every leader who has had to commit men to the agony of battle: "Good God, what brave men must I lose this day."

Aware no doubt of the rising casualties in Vietnam and the fierce opposition that his continued commitment of troops was engendering at home, Johnson assured his audience that, in his 'mind...and heart', Washington's words had 'echoed without stop throughout the hours of many days and many long nights'.¹⁶ It was a powerful association to imply: nobody could doubt the revered Washington's sense of responsibility, nor the virtue of the cause in which he and his army were engaged. Pointedly, almost forty years later, during the most significant foreign conflict since Vietnam, George W. Bush invoked the Founder in very similar terms to Truman and Johnson. Indeed, speaking in 2007, Bush compared the objectives of the 'War on Terror' directly to those for which Washington fought. The 'will' of the general, said Bush, was 'unbreakable':

George Washington's long struggle for freedom...inspired generations of Americans to stand for freedom in their own time. Today, we're fighting a new war to defend our liberty and our people...And as we work to advance the cause of freedom around the world, we remember that the Father of our Country believed that the freedoms we secured in our Revolution were not meant for Americans alone.¹⁷

In these examples, the presidents and their writers clearly considered it pertinent to align the current endeavours of the American military with the irrefutable cause of the Revolutionary War. By citing Washington directly, moreover, they evoked an image familiar to the public, of the selfless and 'unbreakable' general. This portrayal of Washington as a symbol of endurance and sacrifice has not been confined to speeches concerned with war. Both Reagan and Obama presented the trials of Washington and his army during the Revolution as an inspiration to Americans in the face of contemporary

¹⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, '246 - Remarks Upon Dedicating the Hall of Heroes and Presenting the Medal of Honor to a Member of Each of the Nation's Military Services, May 14, 1968'; Opposition to the war had grown significantly following the Tet Offensive in January 1968 during which North Vietnamese forces stormed targets in Saigon itself. Thereafter, the 'antiwar attack on the administration's Vietnam policy poured forth on every conceivable front'. See David W. Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 143-151.

¹⁷ Bush, 'Remarks Honoring President George Washington's 275th Birthday in Mount Vernon, Virginia'.

economic challenges. ‘The problems we face today’, affirmed Reagan during the recession of 1982, ‘don't require the kind of sacrifices Washington and his men made that Christmas night on the Delaware, but they do require us to give and sustain our best efforts...to rebuild our country.’¹⁸ For Obama, the memory of Washington’s war leadership resonated in the context of the economic crisis facing the country upon his arrival in the White House in 2009. Closing his first Inaugural Address, Obama returned his listeners to the familiar story of the new nation’s first winter:

At a moment when the outcome of our Revolution was most in doubt, the Father of our Nation ordered these words be read to the people:

“Let it be told to the future world...that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive...that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it].”

America, in the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words.

Washington’s call for hope and sacrifice during the desperate struggles of the Revolution clearly contained a lesson germane to Obama’s message. The new president’s rhetoric in this instance was particularly shrewd. The quotation was Thomas Paine’s but in attributing it to Washington, Obama’s words gained both the latter’s symbolic heft and Paine’s rousing language.¹⁹ The symbolic Washington invoked in presidential speeches is, most often, silent; unlike Paine, Franklin and Jefferson, he proffered few words that lingered long in the historical memory. Perhaps unsurprisingly though, the one Washington quotation that has been employed recurrently by modern presidents again related to his status as a military leader.

Democrats and Republicans alike have drawn on Washington’s first State of the Union message in expressing their commitment to maintaining defence spending. On the subject of ‘providing for the common defense’, Washington affirmed that, ‘To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace’.²⁰ Every post-war president

¹⁸ Reagan, ‘Remarks at a Mount Vernon, Virginia, Ceremony Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington’. Reflecting in a speech five years later on the nation’s economic recovery, Reagan recalled Washington’s return to Valley Forge in 1787 and suggested that the Founder must have hoped, as Americans in 1987 should, that the spirit of resolve demonstrated in years past be maintained: ‘[Washington prayed] that such sacrifices be not in vain, that the hope and promise that survived such a terrible winter of suffering not be allowed to wither now that it was summer.’ Reagan, ‘Remarks at the "We the People" Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 17, 1987’.

¹⁹ Barack Obama, ‘Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009’. The quotation was drawn from *The American Crisis* essays, composed by Paine during the Revolutionary War. Their employment in modern presidential rhetoric is discussed below. Thomas Paine, *The American crisis, and a letter to Sir Guy Carleton, on the murder of Captain Huddy, and the intended retaliation on Captain Asgill, of the Guards* (London: W.T. Sherwin, 1817).

²⁰ George Washington, ‘First Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union, January 8, 1790’.

prior to Clinton cited Washington's message in support of their commitment to preserving the nation's military strength, while Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush senior quoted the first president's words directly. It was the opinion of Nixon in August 1972 that Washington's language on the subject had 'not been surpassed':

"To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace." Let us not forget that warning of his, because the stakes now for us and for the rest of the world are infinitely greater than it was [*sic*] in that early period[...]²¹

Jimmy Carter, not remembered as a strong advocate of military spending, nevertheless employed Washington's words with conviction in asserting his administration's obligation to maintain America's strength. Quoting the familiar statement on Veterans Day in 1978, Carter continued: 'I will, as President, make our own preparations so thoroughly that no enemy will ever wish or dare to test us.' Five years later in a major national address on defence spending, President Reagan returned to the same source, citing Washington's opinion as a central foundation to his carefully assembled argument. Acknowledging the nation's economic problems in February 1982, Reagan conceded that it was a 'hard time to call for increased defense spending' but found support for the policy in Washington's words. The first president's 'wise piece of advice on defense preparedness' was, said Reagan, 'as timely today as it was when he uttered it nearly two centuries ago... When I reread this quote a few days ago, it brought to mind the current public debate over this administration's efforts to protect the peace by restoring our country's neglected defenses'.²² This was a valuable piece of rhetoric with which to preface the policy elaboration that followed.

Although the Reagan speech was more explicit than some, each of these examples illustrate that Washington's words on national defence are considered almost indisputable. Several others could reinforce the point. In the tone of all these references is a sense that the support of the revered soldier-statesman is justification enough for the maintenance of defence spending. Certainly, Washington, firmly established as a symbol of military leadership, provides a powerful a voice of sanction. However, it has not only been the image of the uniformed general that speechwriters have found value in recalling.

²¹ Nixon, '267 - Remarks at the American Legion's Annual National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, August 24, 1972'.

²² Carter, 'Veterans Day Remarks at Ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery, November 11, 1978'; Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Defense Spending, February 19, 1983'.

Washington has frequently been cited by modern presidents as a model of moral and religious values.

In the assessment of his contemporaries, Washington's piety and morality underpinned his public deeds. 'The purity of his private character', effused Richard Henry Lee following Washington's death, 'gave effulgence to his public virtues.'²³ His regard for religion, added another eulogist, was 'the most brilliant part of his finished character'. Americans in 1800 admired religious faith in their leaders; devout Calvinists and nonbelievers alike regarded religion as an important support for civil society.²⁴ It would be difficult to argue that the expectations of Americans today regarding their presidents differ significantly in this respect. Religious faith appears a prerequisite for any candidate seriously aspiring to the presidency.²⁵ Once in office, meanwhile, there is frequent cause for presidents to address faith issues, be it in speeches to religious organisations or with regard to social policies. On such occasions, of all the Founding Fathers, Washington is the most likely to make an appearance.

The 'sublime figure', as Reagan put it, of Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge again provides the foundation for several of these invocations. President Eisenhower, who spoke often of the necessity of religious and moral values in American society, described Washington's 'recourse to sincere and earnest prayer' during the Revolution as evidence of the general's rejection of an 'exclusive dependence upon mere materialistic values'. Religious faith, continued Eisenhower in his 1953 Christmas message, is 'the foundation of free government'. Thirty years later to the day, Reagan identified the same message in the iconic image of the pious general. In turning to prayer at a time when success in the Revolutionary War hung in the balance, Washington had 'personified a people who knew it was not enough to depend on their own courage and goodness; they must also seek help from God, their Father and Preserver'. The celebration of Christmas in these speeches of course lent sanction to the presidents' allusions. It is not surprising that addresses on the annual National Day of Prayer have frequently returned to the famous scene.²⁶

²³ Lee, *A Funeral Oration*.

²⁴ Schwartz, 'The Character of Washington', pp. 215-6.

²⁵ See Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 417, 427-8.

²⁶ Eisenhower, '271 - Remarks Upon Lighting the National Community Christmas Tree, December 24, 1953'; Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Christmas, December 24, 1983'; See, for example, Reagan, 'Remarks at a White House Ceremony in Observance of National Day of Prayer, May 6, 1982'.

The Valley Forge episode, however, is not an isolated source of evidence for Washington's religious faith. He offered several statements on the subject that together have proved a favourite source for presidents in their many speeches to religious groups. Truman in an address to 'American Churchmen' in September 1951 was one of many to cite the role of God perceived by Washington in the success of the Revolution:

[Our forefathers] saw, in our successful struggle for independence, the working of God's hand. In his first inaugural address, George Washington said, "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men, more than the people of the United States."

President Johnson meanwhile, speaking at the Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast in 1964, preferred to quote from Washington's 1789 Thanksgiving Proclamation in expressing his hope that Americans would continue to remember 'the petition of the Father of our Country, who urged his countrymen to offer "humbly our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and ruler of nations"'. For Gerald Ford, addressing an audience on the same occasion in 1976, a letter circulated by Washington upon resigning his position as commander of the army in June 1783 was equally adaptable. Stressing as Eisenhower did the necessity of ensuring that the United States' 'spiritual principles' matched its growing wealth and power, Ford repeated Washington's 'earnest prayer' that 'God would graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with charity and humility, and a peaceful temper of mind, without which we can never hope to be a happy nation'.²⁷

Reagan, who referenced Washington in more speeches than any other post-war president, found particular utility in evoking the image of the pious leader. Again, Washington's words with regard to grounding politics in principles of faith provided valuable material in addressing religious constituencies. Reagan's speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in March 1983 quoted Washington's Farewell Address in asserting that, 'of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports'.²⁸ Reagan's allusions to Washington's religious faith, however, occurred most often in support of his efforts to reinstitute school prayer. Chapter 3 revealed the efforts of Reagan to appropriate the Declaration of Independence on

²⁷ Truman, '241 - Address to the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen, September 28, 1951'; Johnson, '172 - Remarks at the 12th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast, February 5, 1964'; Ford, '37 - Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, January 29, 1976'.

²⁸ Reagan, 'Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983'.

behalf of his long-running argument; Washington's words provided additional support. He cited the first president's appeals to God during the Revolutionary War in a national address 'On Prayer' in September 1982 and returned to Washington's statements on religion and morality on several subsequent occasions, among them a speech to the 1983 Convention of National Religious Broadcasters, a 1984 rally in Atlanta and a radio address dedicated to the topic of school prayer a month later. 'George Washington believed', proclaimed Reagan in the latter instance, 'that religion was an essential pillar of a strong society':

In his farewell address, he said, "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." ...But now we're told our children have no right to pray in school. Nonsense. The pendulum has swung too far toward intolerance against genuine religious freedom. It's time to redress the balance [...]²⁹

Of course, Washington's words offered no view on the specific issue addressed by Reagan. Nevertheless, in citing them, Reagan implied that his pursuit of an amendment on school prayer was in line with the incontestable opinions of Washington.

Significantly, Reagan's appropriation of Washington on the school prayer issue was the only sustained example in post-war presidential rhetoric in which the Founder was invoked in support of an explicitly partisan political goal. While his words on national defence have been employed by presidents of both parties, it has primarily been as a universal, nonpartisan symbol of America's origins, values and endurance that Washington has been cited in presidential speeches. The image of the military hero who secured the success of the Revolution has proved a consistently valuable point of reference as presidents have sought to encourage a spirit of unity and resolve in the face of contemporary challenges. The perception of Washington as a moral and pious leader, meanwhile, has allowed presidents to invoke him in discussing the importance of religious values in American society. He will forever be recalled too as the person, in the words of Bush senior, who 'shaped the contours of the Presidency' and 'established a model' to which each of his successors have endeavoured to adhere.³⁰

²⁹ Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Prayer, September 18, 1982'; 'Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, January 31, 1983'; 'Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta, Georgia, January 26, 1984'; 'Radio Address to the Nation on Prayer in Schools, February 25, 1984'.

³⁰ H.W. Bush, 'Remarks at the Dedication Ceremony of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota, July 3, 1991'.

A neutral, depoliticised figure in the minds of Americans, Washington cannot easily be employed on behalf of overtly political arguments. For the same reason, however, he is available to all presidents as a symbolic figure existing above political divisions, an unchanging icon of patriotism. The mythic Washington endures, remote yet, as Kennedy explained in 1961, appealed to by every president for ‘inspiration’ and ‘counsel’.³¹

Franklin, the familiar

President Truman, writing in response to a report by the National Historical Publications Commission in June 1951, remarked that Benjamin Franklin had done ‘as much as any man in our history to shape the kind of country we live in today’.³² Truman, perhaps, exaggerated. Never president and of an older generation than the other leading Founders of the United States, Franklin died in 1790 with the nation still in its infancy. Although, moreover, a central presence at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, he did not have the critical role in shaping the new government that others, principally James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, assumed. However, Franklin was undeniably a giant of that era, then the most famous American in the world and, on account of his existing reputation in science, business, philosophy and diplomacy, a man whose advice and aid was keenly sought and employed during and after the Revolution. He was among the five men entrusted with drafting the Declaration of Independence and, as a foreign envoy, he worked to secure first the Franco-American alliance so critical to the Revolution’s ultimate success and finally the negotiated peace with Britain that brought an end to the conflict.

John Adams, concerned that the history of the Revolution, and his own central role within it, would be misremembered, famously remarked that the achievements of the era would likely be attributed overwhelmingly to Franklin and Washington, the two Founders whose fame and status far outreached that of the others:

The essence of the whole will be that Dr Franklin’s electrical Rod smote the earth, and out sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod - and thenceforward these two conducted all the policy, negotiation, legislation, and War.³³

³¹ Kennedy, ‘125 - Remarks at a Reception Marking African Freedom Day, April 15, 1961’.

³² Truman, ‘127 - Letter in Response to Report of the National Historical Publications Commission, June 16, 1951’.

³³ ‘John Adams to Benjamin Rush, April 4, 1790’, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, Vol. II ed. by Lyman H. Butterfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 1207.

Historians, of course, have ultimately offered a more balanced assessment than Adams feared. However, he was right to predict that, in the years after their death, it was Washington and Franklin who were recalled with the greatest veneration by Americans. Just as the first president was perceived as a nonpartisan and unifying figure, Franklin existed above political divisions: a neutral whose memory could be celebrated regardless of shifts in the political weather. As Bernstein has recognised, the result was that Washington and Franklin, since the first decades of the nineteenth century, ‘held sway as the two gold-standard founding fathers, by most measures impervious to changing historical trends and popular whims.’³⁴ Indeed, Franklin assumed his own distinct identity in the collective memory of Americans. His rise from humble printer to celebrated statesman, recounted in his enormously popular *Autobiography*, was a story of self-advancement inspiring to subsequent generations. As entrepreneurship and economic independence became dominant themes in nineteenth century American culture, Franklin was portrayed as the definitive self-made man. He became, wrote Gordon Wood, ‘the man who personifies the American Dream’.³⁵

In these respects, Franklin, like Washington, resonates with Americans on a symbolic level. The numerous speeches in which modern presidents have alluded to Franklin, however, reveal a significant difference between the two men. Unlike the remote and impersonal Washington, Franklin is a familiar figure, correspondingly cited more with affection than solemn reverence. As Wood explained, he has a ‘unique appeal’ as ‘the most accessible...and the most folksy of the Founders’.³⁶ It is a common perception. The biographer Edmund Morgan recorded his disappointment that Americans today have been ‘born too late to enjoy [Franklin’s] company’. He has, remarked the editor of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* in 1956, a ‘contemporary quality’, such that he remains ‘a man with whom the American people can be comfortable and at ease.’³⁷ It is this sense of familiarity that most clearly characterises the allusions that modern presidents have made to Franklin. Crucially, he has distinct associations in the consciousness of Americans that speechwriters have been able to exploit in addressing related issues.

Since the earliest years of the nineteenth century, Americans have known Franklin better than any other Founder of the nation. His best-selling *Autobiography* became required reading in schools from the early 1800s: the image of Franklin established in his writing, of

³⁴ Bernstein, p. 142.

³⁵ Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 3, 246.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1.

³⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. ix; Leonard Labaree, ‘The Return of Mr Franklin’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 100:4 (1956), p. 342.

a scientist, businessman and diplomat, remains familiar to Americans today.³⁸ Perhaps above all, however, he is remembered as the wise elder statesman, his long, greying hair and bifocal spectacles framing a face that is surely the most recognisable of all the Founders'. Certainly, it is the grandfatherly sage that post-war presidents have found most value in evoking in their public speeches. Just as Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century found in Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* succinct guidance on a breadth of issues, from health to politics to personal relationships, his memorable proverbs and words of advice have frequently been quoted by modern presidents.

Such was the diversity of topics on which Franklin wrote that his words are often apposite. Thus, Truman, during his campaign for election in 1948, could invoke Franklin in stressing his administration's desire to maintain peace in the face of the communist threat. Just as 'old Benjamin Franklin' affirmed that 'honesty is the best policy', explained Truman in one speech, 'in our day, peace is the best policy for the world'. For Kennedy, meanwhile, Franklin's words were pertinent to the message of unity which the president hoped to impress on the French government during a speech in Paris in May 1961:

Benjamin Franklin once wrote in his diary, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, about a snake, which had one body and two heads and going to the river to get a drink it ran into a twig. One head went in one direction and one head went in the other, and ultimately he died of thirst.

I believe that we are one body. And it is my hope that on this visit we can contribute to the uniformity of view which will permit us to go to the river of peace and gain satisfaction from it.³⁹

This example is typical. Franklin's proverbs, mined from the pages of *Poor Richard*, offered colourful support for the public messages of several of Kennedy's successors. Presidents Johnson and Clinton for instance, in discussing economic concerns, both returned to Franklin's famous promotion of thrift in the adage, 'a penny saved is a penny earned'. Reagan, meanwhile, found the assertion that, 'Investment in knowledge pays the best interest' to be a useful quote in a 1988 speech centred around the United States' commitment to funding scientific research. Clinton, in a similar vein, later turned to Franklin in positioning education as an on-going priority of the government. 'Genius without education', quoted the president in May 2000, 'is like silver in the mine'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Wood, p. 3.

³⁹ Truman, '210 - Informal Remarks in San Antonio, Texas, September 26, 1948'; Kennedy, '217 - Toasts of the President and President de Gaulle at the Formal Dinner in the Elysee Palace, May 31, 1961'.

⁴⁰ Johnson, '78 - Remarks at the Swearing In of John A. Gronouski as Postmaster General, February 19, 1965'; Clinton, 'Remarks at the SAVER Summit, June 4, 1998'; Reagan, 'Remarks to Science Honors

The value of these quotations to the speechwriter seems clear. Timelessly pertinent and appealing to the ear, they represent a persistently usable source of memorable rhetoric. They illustrate too the enduring picture of Franklin as a wise counsellor and a man, in the words of the historian Carla Mulford, ‘well worth emulating’.⁴¹ As the brief examples above suggest, Franklin’s words have been applied by presidents in diverse contexts. There are, however, two specific subjects with regard to which he has repeatedly been quoted.

The first relates to Franklin’s established association with diplomacy and foreign affairs. In the 1960s, notably, presidents found value in reminding audiences of the Founder’s global outlook as the United States sought to establish itself as an ally of the world’s democratic nations. Kennedy, first during his 1960 campaign and on at least two further occasions during his presidency, told the story of an exchange between Franklin and Thomas Paine in which the former reputedly declared, ‘Where freedom lives, there is my home’. Together with Paine’s response – ‘Where freedom is not, there is my home’ – the anecdote allowed Kennedy to reinforce his recurring message of support to countries striving to preserve democracy. Correspondingly, the story appeared in a speech to African diplomats in April 1961 and again, two years later, during an address to workers in West Berlin. In respectively celebrating the democratic advances of African nations and offering a message of support to West Germans living in the shadow of their communist neighbours, the Founders’ words were pertinent.⁴² Valuable too have been allusions to Franklin’s close association with Europe. Having spent much of his career across the Atlantic, he was, as Wood noted, the ‘most European’ of the Founders.⁴³ Both Kennedy and Nixon found Franklin’s connection to France, in particular, to be worthy of comment during their respective visits to Paris. Admired with deeper affection in France than in America during his lifetime, there are few American historical figures more likely to resonate with a French audience. Such, indeed, was the desire of the two presidents’ speechwriters to make the connection that both Kennedy and Nixon misattributed a quotation to Franklin upon arriving in the French capital. The ‘influence’ of France on the western world in the eighteenth century, said Kennedy at Orly Airport in May 1961, was such that Franklin

Students on the Supercollider Program, March 30, 1988’; Clinton, ‘Remarks at Mayer Sulzberger Middle School in Philadelphia, May 19, 2000’.

⁴¹ Carla Mulford, ‘Figuring Benjamin Franklin in American Cultural Memory’, *New England Quarterly* 72:3 (1999), p. 423.

⁴² Kennedy, ‘125 - Remarks at a Reception Marking African Freedom Day, April 15, 1961’; ‘268 - Remarks in Berlin to the Trade Union Congress of German Construction Workers, June 26, 1963’. The Franklin/Paine exchange may in fact be apocryphal. I have found no written record of it, despite its appearance in several presidential speeches and elsewhere. For Kennedy’s purpose, however, it only mattered that he and his audience believed he was quoting the Founders.

⁴³ Wood, p. 9.

could declare, ‘Every man has two countries: France and his own.’⁴⁴ These words, also wrongly assigned on occasion to Thomas Jefferson, are in fact thought to have originated in Henri de Bornier’s 1875 play, *La Fille de Roland*.⁴⁵ However, the efforts of Kennedy and Nixon to claim them for Franklin illustrate the extent to which the latter is associated with France and foreign affairs more broadly. Indeed, firmly established as a useful source for discussions of this theme, Franklin’s name reappeared in the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan as the president addressed the human rights practices of foreign states in 1987. Stressing as Kennedy had the obligation of the United States to support the expansion of its democratic ideals abroad, Reagan quoted, this time correctly, the ‘grand old man of the Revolution’:

God, grant that not only the love of liberty but a thorough knowledge of the rights of man may pervade all the nations of the Earth so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on its surface and say, “This is my country”.⁴⁶

While infrequent, these examples demonstrate that Franklin has an established and specific association into which presidents have been able to tap. The same is true of his connection to science and technology. Few images of Franklin are more familiar than that immortalised in Benjamin West’s painting in 1816, of the bold inventor using a kite to capture lightning.⁴⁷ A renowned student of science, his words on the subject have been referenced in several presidential speeches concerned with scientific research and technological advancement. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, for example, cited Franklin in addresses delivered, respectively, to the National Academy of Sciences and recipients of the National Medal of Science Awards.⁴⁸ Nixon, first upon swearing in a new Science Adviser to the president and later during a speech on atomic energy, referenced Franklin’s passion for science directly in affirming the nation’s commitment to scientific progress:

I am reminded of what Benjamin Franklin replied when a balloon was first floated and someone said to him, “What possible use could there be for

⁴⁴ Kennedy, ‘216 - Remarks Upon Arrival at Orly Airport in Paris, May 31, 1961’; Nixon, ‘87 - Remarks on Arrival at the Airport in Paris, February 28, 1969’.

⁴⁵ ‘Spurious Quotations’, *Monticello* (<http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/every-man-has-two-countries-his-own-and-france-quotation>) [05/05/13].

⁴⁶ Reagan, ‘Remarks at a White House Briefing for Human Rights Supporters, December 3, 1987’; Franklin’s words are drawn from a letter penned to David Hartley, December 4, 1789. See *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 10, ed. by Albert H. Smyth (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1907), p. 72.

⁴⁷ Wood described it as one the ‘unforgettable images’ of Franklin that have entered ‘American mythology and folklore’. Wood, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, ‘145 - Remarks Before the National Academy of Sciences, April 25, 1961’; Johnson, ‘695 - Remarks at the Presentation of the National Medal of Science Awards for 1968, January 17, 1969’.

that?” And Franklin's advice was, “Well, what use is a newborn baby?”⁴⁹

Reagan and Clinton, meanwhile, were later each to recall Franklin's regret that he could not live to witness the advancements of the future. ‘I have’, quoted Reagan in June 1987, ‘sometimes almost wished it had been my destiny to be born two or three centuries hence. For invention and improvement are prolific and beget more of their kind.’ Observing the pace of scientific progress in the United States, Reagan suggested, as Clinton later would, that his generation could share Franklin's frustration that they would not live to see the great gains of the twentieth century driven forward further still.⁵⁰

The images of Franklin as the wise sage, the diplomat and the scientist are therefore sufficiently well established in the public consciousness that presidents can allude to them in relevant circumstances. Such is Franklin's prominence in the familiar folklore of the founding heritage, however, that his words have represented a usable source with regard to more diverse issues than these. Reagan, for example, quoted Franklin's support for free trade in a national address following the signing of the United States-Canada Free Trade Agreement in 1988; Ford, Bush senior and Clinton each invoked the Founder with regard to education policy; George W. Bush, more recently, cited Franklin's establishment of community and voluntary organisations in Philadelphia in discussing his own administration's encouragement of volunteerism.⁵¹ Franklin is, as Wood suggested, ‘so many-sided’ that he can be ‘everything to everyone’.⁵² Despite the ambiguity of his personal religious views, for example, he has regularly been cited in speeches pertaining to the role of religion in American life.⁵³ Eisenhower, Johnson, Ford, Reagan and Bush senior all alluded to Franklin's religious belief, most commonly quoting his proposal during the Constitutional Convention that the delegates should hold prayers on the morning of each session. In speeches addressed to religious groups, on days of religious significance and

⁴⁹ Nixon, ‘292 - Remarks at the Swearing In of Dr. Edward E. David, Jr., as Science Adviser to the President and Director, Office of Science and Technology, September 14, 1970’; ‘305 - Remarks at the Atomic Energy Commission's Hanford Works Near Richland, Washington, September 26, 1971’.

⁵⁰ Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony for the National Medals of Science and Technology, June 25, 1987’; Clinton, ‘Remarks on Presenting the National Medals of Science and Technology, December 16, 1997’.

⁵¹ Reagan, ‘Radio Address to the Nation on the United States-Canada Free Trade Agreement, January 9, 1988’; Ford, ‘264 - Commencement Address at the University of Pennsylvania, May 18, 1975’; H.W. Bush, ‘Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the Business Roundtable, June 5, 1989’; Clinton, ‘Remarks at Mayer Sulzberger Middle School in Philadelphia, May 19, 2000’; Bush, ‘Remarks on National Volunteer Week, April 29, 2008’.

⁵² Wood, p. 16.

⁵³ As Morgan explained, Franklin, though certainly not an atheist, was a ‘convinced deist’ and never a member of a church. (Morgan, p. 17.) Indeed, in their efforts to install Franklin as a spotless national hero in the decades after his death, early historians thought it necessary to exaggerate his piety and religious convictions. See Mulford, pp. 424, 439.

with regard to their own stance on the role of faith in society, these presidents cited Franklin's reported affirmation that God 'governs in the affairs of men'.⁵⁴

As this miscellany of examples suggests, such is the breadth of subjects on which Franklin commented that his writings are a particularly fertile source for presidential speechwriters. His words would not be cited with such frequency, however, if his name was not so firmly installed in the collective memory of Americans. Franklin is inseparable from the mythology of America's origin story. It is perhaps no surprise then that the two most common Franklin anecdotes to which presidents have referred in their public rhetoric relate directly to the framing of the Constitution. Both convey the significance and uniqueness of the nation's founding and the optimistic ideals that the Founders bestowed to future generations.

The first is the story, recorded originally in the notes of the Maryland delegate James McHenry, of the elderly Franklin who, upon emerging from the Convention in 1787, was asked by a passing woman what form of government the delegates had settled on. 'A Republic, madam', came Franklin's reply, 'if you can keep it.'⁵⁵ Presidents Truman, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Clinton and Obama all retold the tale on at least one occasion, employing it as an eloquent reminder that Americans are obliged to preserve the political ideals established by the Founders and maintained, in the face of myriad challenges, ever since. Obama recently recounted the anecdote before explaining the resonance of its message to graduating students at the University of Michigan:

Well, for more than 200 years, we have kept [the Republic]. Through revolution and civil war, our democracy has survived. Through depression and world war, it has prevailed. Through periods of great social and economic unrest, from civil rights to women's rights, it has allowed us slowly, sometimes painfully, to move towards a more perfect union.

And so now, class of 2010, the question for your generation is this: How will you keep our democracy going?⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Eisenhower, '8 - Remarks at the Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast of the International Christian Leadership, February 5, 1953'; Johnson, '45 - Remarks at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast, February 4, 1965'; Ford, '37 - Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, January 29, 1976'; Reagan, 'Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, January 31, 1983'; H.W. Bush, 'Address on Administration Goals Before a Joint Session of Congress, February 9, 1989'. Franklin's quotation is drawn from his address at the Constitutional Convention on June 28, 1787, recorded in James Madison's records: Benjamin Franklin, 'Constitutional Convention Address on Prayer, June 28, 1787', *American Rhetoric* (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/benfranklin.htm>) [13/10/13].

⁵⁵ Max Farrand ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, Vol. III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911), appendix A, p. 85.

⁵⁶ Obama, '329 - Commencement Address at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 1, 2010'; Other examples include: Truman, 'Address to the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen, September 28, 1951'; Nixon, '147 - Remarks at the 80th Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 19, 1971'; Ford, '187 - Remarks at the Annual Republican Party Senate-House Fundraising Dinner, April 15, 1975'; Reagan, 'Remarks at the Dedication of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential

As Chapter 2 introduced, this concept of continuity from the founding era, of a responsibility to preserve the defining principles then established, is perhaps the most persistent sense in which presidents have invoked the founding heritage. Franklin's comment in Philadelphia could scarcely advance the message more clearly.

The same is true of the second, recurring Franklin anecdote. Invoked with similar regularity, it draws on James Madison's record of the Constitutional Convention. President Johnson recounted the familiar tale during an address in Kentucky in September 1968:

When the Constitution was finally signed, Franklin called the attention of the delegates to a painting of the sun that was behind the President's chair in Convention Hall.

Franklin said to the delegates that he had been looking at that sun during the Convention, and said he had not been able to tell whether it was a rising sun or a setting sun. "But now at length," he said, "I have the happiness to know that it is a rising, and not a setting sun."

For Johnson, as for Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton, Franklin's observation was symbolic of the optimism with which the Founders beheld the republic they had created. It was symbolic, said Johnson as the morale-sapping war in Vietnam approached its height, of the continuing 'faith that this Nation's best days still lie ahead'. 'You can bet [the sun is] rising,' echoed Reagan with typical optimism after retelling the story in his 1987 State of the Union address, 'because, my fellow citizens, America isn't finished. Her best days have just begun.'⁵⁷

As the persistent recurrence of these two memorable tales indicates, Franklin, though less frequently cited than Washington and Thomas Jefferson, is nevertheless a central fixture in the founding heritage presented by American leaders. His opinions on a range of subjects, from science to commerce, have provided every president since 1945 with pithy and often pertinent quotations that lend colour and support to their public speeches. However, most distinctive about Franklin's employment in presidential rhetoric is the sense that he, more than any of the other Founders, is accessible. 'Old Benjamin

Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, September 18, 1981'; Clinton, 'Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the Presidents' Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia, April 28, 1997'.

⁵⁷ Johnson, '499 - Remarks at the Dedication of Thomas More College, Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, September 28, 1968'; Reagan, 'Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union, January 27, 1987'; Other examples include: Eisenhower, '283 - Address in Convention Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 1, 1956'; Kennedy, '452 - Remarks at Fitzgerald Field House, University of Pittsburgh, October 12, 1962'; Clinton, 'Remarks Announcing the Presidents' Summit for America's Future, January 24, 1997'. Franklin's speech was recorded in James Madison's records of the Constitutional Convention. See 'Madison Debates, September 17, 1787', *The Avalon Project* (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/debates_917.asp) [15/10/13].

Franklin', as Truman described him, is not quite portrayed in the language of reverence reserved for Washington, but he is regularly recalled with fondness as a figure familiar to Americans and a reliable source of wit and wisdom.⁵⁸

Paine, the wordsmith

Writing to Robert Morris in February 1782, Thomas Paine expressed little doubt of his own importance in the founding of the United States: 'I have honest pride in thinking and ranking myself among the founders of a new independent world.'⁵⁹ His confidence was not without justification. The publication of his revolutionary pamphlet, *Common Sense*, in January 1776 was heralded by his contemporaries as a crucial factor in turning the American colonists in the direction of independence.⁶⁰ Thereafter, Paine continued to be a central figure during the Revolutionary War. Employed as secretary of the Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs and later deployed as an aide to Colonel Nathanael Greene, he nevertheless remained most prominent as a propagandist. His *American Crisis* papers, the source of several of his most memorable words, served to rally the troops and citizenry during the years of conflict. Reflecting in 1805 on the continued fame that Paine attained on the world stage through the radical writings he produced during the French Revolution, John Adams was forced to concede that he did not know 'any man of the world' who had 'had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine'.⁶¹

However, by the time of Paine's death in 1809, there was little reason to predict that his legacy would be recalled in the public speeches of American presidents a century and a half later. Indeed, given his reputation in the intervening years, there was every reason to expect that Paine would not feature in post-war presidential rhetoric at all. He died an isolated figure, shunned on his return to America by a people unable to accept the fierce anticlericalism displayed in his provocative treatise, *The Age of Reason*, and

⁵⁸ Truman, '210 - Informal Remarks in San Antonio, Texas, September 26, 1948'.

⁵⁹ 'Thomas Paine to Robert Morris, February 20, 1782', *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, Vol. II, ed. by Philip S. Foner, pp. 1206-09.

⁶⁰ A record-breaking bestseller, with more than 100,000 copies reputedly sold in its first year, *Common Sense* articulated for the first time in language accessible to the populace, a comprehensive argument in favour of an independent America. Edmund Randolph of Virginia would later recall that, in response to Paine's arguments, 'public sentiment, which a few weeks before had shuddered at the tremendous obstacles with which independence was environed, overleaped every barrier.' Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 137, 153.

⁶¹ 'John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, October 29, 1805' in *The Founders on the Founders: Word Portraits from the American Revolutionary Era* ed. by John P. Kaminski (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 458.

appalled by his bitter criticism of George Washington in 1796.⁶² His reputation declined to such an extent that, for many decades, no major American politician would have considered citing his name in positive terms. Indeed, almost a century after his death, Paine famously remained in the assessment of Teddy Roosevelt, a ‘filthy little atheist’.⁶³ Those who did invoke him with admiration, moreover, were not of a character comfortably suited to mainstream American politics. As Sophia Rosenfeld explained in her recent study, by the mid-nineteenth century Paine had become ‘a patron saint of radicals and revolutionaries everywhere’.⁶⁴ On the basis of the egalitarian proposals advanced in the second part of his *Rights of Man* and in his last major work, *Agrarian Justice*, he became in time a hero of the political left.⁶⁵ From the 1820s, Paine’s name was invoked by labour unionists, freethinkers, feminists, abolitionists and radical reformers. By the early years of the twentieth century, his legacy was celebrated by socialists too. Indeed, in 1937, the Communist Party of the United States commemorated Paine by publishing an anthology of his writings in which he was praised for looking ‘beyond the limits of the bourgeois revolution’.⁶⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no record of an American president citing Paine’s name directly in a public address prior to the 1940s. Given his firm association with radical left-wing causes, it could reasonably have been assumed that his name would remain absent from presidential rhetoric thereafter. And yet, on February 23, 1942, President Roosevelt, delivering a ‘fireside chat’ to a nation embroiled in World War II, contradicted these expectations. Quoting from *The Crisis* essays in reflecting on the spirit of sacrifice that Americans must replicate in order to win the war, Roosevelt affirmed that, ‘These are the times that try men’s souls.’ Invoking the image of ‘Tom Paine’, writing these words ‘on a drumhead’ during the Revolutionary War, Roosevelt continued: ‘the harder the sacrifice, the more glorious the triumph.’⁶⁷ It is likely that by the mid-twentieth

⁶² Embittered by Washington’s failure to rescue him from his imprisonment in France in 1793, Paine’s *Letter to George Washington* accused the president of elitism and incompetence. Given Washington’s stature in the eyes of Americans, Paine’s attack was effectively political suicide. See Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine: Firebrand of the Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 127-8, 133.

⁶³ Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 270.

⁶⁴ Rosenfeld, p. 255.

⁶⁵ As Eric Foner noted, in proposing a system of social security funded by higher taxation on landed wealth and property, *The Rights of Man* presented ‘an economic program as close to a welfare state as could be imagined in the eighteenth century’. Paine’s strikingly modern vision was developed further in *Agrarian Justice* in which he outlined, among other provisions, a pension scheme. See Foner, p. 218, Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* ed. by Henry Collins (New York: Penguin, 1984), pp. 239-259, and Thomas Paine, *Agrarian justice opposed to agrarian law, and to agrarian monopoly; being a plan for meliorating the condition of man...* (Paris: W. Adlard, 1797), p.1.

⁶⁶ Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), pp. 184, 213-6.

⁶⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘23 - Fireside Chat, February 23, 1942’. Prior to Roosevelt, *The American Presidency Project* archive records no instance in which a president cited Paine in a public address.

century Paine's perceived anticlericalism mattered less to Americans than in earlier periods. Perhaps, moreover, as the volume and reach of presidential oratory expanded, Paine's writings, a source of highly quotable language, comprised a source too useful for speechwriters to ignore. What is certain is that in the decades since Roosevelt's first usage, Paine has been a striking feature of post-war presidential rhetoric on several notable occasions. Ultimately cited by presidents on opposite sides of the political spectrum, his legacy has been adapted in a manner comparable only to that of the multifaceted Thomas Jefferson. Given his neglected status in pre-war presidential rhetoric, no other figure of the founding era has experienced such a reversal of fortune.

There remain aspects of Paine's literary legacy on which presidents will not draw. The more radical ideas espoused in *The Age of Reason*, *The Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice* would still sit uncomfortably with many Americans. *The Crisis* and *Common Sense*, however, became appropriate sources in the wake of World War II as presidents addressed the nation's increasing role on the world stage as a defender of democracy. Significantly, allusions to Paine in these years were confined to the speeches of Democratic presidents. Perhaps conscious of Paine's continued association with left-wing causes well into the 1960s, Republican presidents made no reference to him.⁶⁸

Truman followed the example of his predecessor in drawing on the rousing language of *The Crisis*. Just as Roosevelt had found value in quoting Paine's words during World War II, Truman applied them to the new conflict in Korea. Addressing an audience in February 1951, the president proclaimed that success in Korea, as in the Revolutionary War, required not 'summer soldiers and sunshine patriots' but those willing to make 'sacrifices' in their 'stand...against Communist aggression'.⁶⁹ We cannot quite conclude, as the historian Harvey Kaye has, that Roosevelt's invocation of *The Crisis* with regard to the ensuing battle against fascism was evidence that he saw Paine as 'the original and persistent voice of the American spirit'.⁷⁰ However, both the Roosevelt and Truman examples do illustrate that, in the context of war, Paine's words could provide a pertinent source. *The Crisis*, since the time of its composition, represents the single best articulation of the challenges facing Americans during the war for independence. Written in an effort

⁶⁸ During the 'red hunts' of the late 1940s and 1950s, the celebration of Paine in the writings of communist authors drew the eye of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Although less toxic, moreover, the prominence of Paine's name among the heroes of Students for a Democratic Society and others within the New Left in the 1960s maintained the alignment of the Founder with the more radical edge of the nation's politics. See Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, pp. 230, 243.

⁶⁹ Truman, '30 - Address in Philadelphia at the Dedication of the Chapel of the Four Chaplains, February 3, 1951'.

⁷⁰ Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, p. 195.

to boost the morale of the fledgling nation, Paine's rhetoric offered a message of endurance, sacrifice and optimism. Furthermore, it positioned America, as *Common Sense* had, as a defender of democratic values, fighting to preserve liberty. Given the circumstances in which Roosevelt and Truman spoke, therefore, Paine provided an appropriate and effective voice of patriotism and resolve.

It was in similar terms that President Johnson was to cite Paine during the Vietnam War. Speaking against the backdrop of the escalating conflict, Johnson found in *The Crisis* words that bolstered his efforts to justify America's military intervention and encourage optimism in its ultimate success. In a speech in Sacramento in September 1964, one month after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had licensed the use of direct military force in Vietnam and just weeks before a presidential election, Johnson invoked the nation's first conflict: 'We know, as Tom Paine put it, "those who would reap the benefits of liberty must bear like men the hardships of defending it." This we are doing, and this we shall always do.' Two years later, addressing an audience in Australia, he spoke of his hopes for a stable and democratic Asia in the future. The first of Paine's wartime essays offered a valuable message:

Free Asia is in the hands of a generation of leaders unfettered by the past and unafraid of the future. They are men who would agree with Thomas Paine, the American patriot, who said in the time of our own country's great Revolution, "If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace."⁷¹

Crucially, there is little of Paine's political radicalism in *The Crisis*. Johnson could recall these extracts, as Truman had, without implying any deeper association with the Founder. Above all, Paine's essays provided rhetorically appealing language, pertinent to the context in which these presidents spoke.

John F. Kennedy's speechwriters were presumably aware of the same benefits in 1960 when a quotation from Paine's *Common Sense* became a consistent fixture in the presidential candidate's campaign speeches. Before and after his election, much of Kennedy's public rhetoric was concerned with positioning the United States as the world's primary defender of democracy. He envisaged an active America, aiding other nations in their struggles for liberty. Paine's declaration in 1776 that 'the cause of America is in a

⁷¹ Johnson, '579 - Remarks in Sacramento on the Steps of the State Capitol, September 17, 1964'; '542 - Remarks at the Parliamentary Luncheon, Canberra, Australia, October 21, 1966'; Quotations from Thomas Paine, *The American crisis, and a letter to Sir Guy Carleton, on the murder of Captain Huddy, and the intended retaliation on Captain Asgill, of the Guards* (London: W.T. Sherwin, 1817), pp. 112, 18.

great measure the cause of all mankind' was therefore a particularly fitting statement.⁷² Echoing Paine's efforts to align the Revolution with the democratic impulses of the whole world, Kennedy used these words in his numerous campaign speeches to emphasise the responsibility that the United States bore as a model to other nations. An address in Alaska in September 1960 was typical:

When the American Revolution came about, Thomas Paine wrote that "the cause of America is the cause of all mankind." But the cause of all mankind in the revolution of 1960 is the cause of America. What we do here affects what people will do in every place. This is a responsibility which I believe we are glad to assume.⁷³

Paine's international outlook was an apposite point of reference for the prospective president as the United States continued to shape a political discourse responsive to the new responsibilities conferred upon the nation in the decade after World War II. In the wake subsequently of the Cuban Revolution and the construction of the Berlin Wall, Kennedy as president was at pains to assert the nation's commitment to opposing the threat of communism. As we have heard, in speeches delivered to German trade union delegates and Latin American diplomats among others, Kennedy returned to Paine in voicing this message. The story of Paine's alleged exchange with Benjamin Franklin perfectly suited the president's purposes. Speaking in June 1963, the tale offered an ideal accompaniment to his famous statement in the German capital, 'Ich bin ein Berliner':

Benjamin Franklin once said to Thomas Paine, the great American revolutionary, "Where freedom is, there is where I live." And Paine replied, "Where freedom is not, there is where I live, because no man or country can be really free unless all men and all countries are free."⁷⁴

Given Kennedy's persistent efforts to present the United States as a symbol and defender of democratic ideals, Paine's language held significant value, particularly in the many speeches in which the president addressed, directly or indirectly, foreign audiences. The internationalism of Thomas Paine's writing is roundly accepted. His own assertion in *The Rights of Man* that 'my country is the world' was reflected in his activities on both

⁷² Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Philadelphia: W. and T. Bradford, 1776).

⁷³ Kennedy, 'Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, the Edgewater, Anchorage, AK, September 3, 1960'.

⁷⁴ Kennedy, '78 - Address at a White House Reception for Members of Congress and for the Diplomatic Corps of the Latin American Republics, March 13, 1961'; '268 - Remarks in Berlin to the Trade Union Congress of German Construction Workers, June 26, 1963'.

sides of the Atlantic.⁷⁵ Perhaps more importantly, however, there was a universality to his words on liberty and responsibility. He spoke, as Kennedy highlighted, of ‘the cause of all mankind’. And yet, Paine’s absence from the speeches of Eisenhower and Nixon suggests that the appeal and resonance of the Founder’s words on American endurance and the defence of liberty may have been insufficient to outweigh a Republican leader’s uneasiness at invoking the memory of a man still firmly associated with the political left. It took the occasion of the Bicentennial of American independence in 1976 for a modern Republican president to reference Paine in a public address for the first time. Gerald Ford in his State of the Union message that year returned to *The Crisis* in considering the uncertainty experienced by the nation in the wake of Vietnam, Watergate and Nixon’s resignation. He reflected that ‘1975 was not a year for summer soldiers and sunshine patriots’ and encouraged Americans, as ‘Tom Paine’ did in 1776, ‘to stand up to the times that try men’s souls’.⁷⁶ It would be wrong to assume, however, that Ford’s speech marked a turning point in presidential invocations of Paine. Few of the leading figures in the nation’s founding went unmentioned in the rhetoric of the Bicentennial. Ford’s allusion certainly confirms the adaptability of Paine’s words to contemporary periods of challenge and uncertainty. The real watershed, however, came five years later with Ronald Reagan’s arrival in the White House.

Urging the American colonists towards independence in 1776, Paine’s *Common Sense* presented the moment as a unique opportunity, the dawn of a new era: ‘We have it in our power to begin the world over again’. It is not difficult to understand why such bold, optimistic statements provoked ‘a powerful change’, as George Washington put it, in the minds of Americans.⁷⁷ Two centuries later the United States’ most boldly optimistic post-war president adopted Paine’s phrase as a favourite mantra of his own speeches. Addressing audiences as diverse as the United Nations General Assembly and the National Association of Evangelicals, President Reagan persistently delivered these words. Why, after two hundred years in which Thomas Paine had been associated almost exclusively with left-wing causes, did a Republican president, a subsequent icon of American conservatism, choose to appropriate Paine’s words? Reagan did not do so infrequently or discreetly; he recorded, by a distance, the most public references to Paine of any president in American history. More than this, he afforded Paine a loftier position among

⁷⁵ See, for example, Ian Dyck, ‘Local Attachments, National Identities and World Citizenship in the Thought of Thomas Paine’, *History Workshop Journal* 35 (1993); Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 228.

⁷⁶ Ford, ‘19 - Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 19, 1976’.

⁷⁷ Paine, *Common Sense*; Washington quoted in Rosenfeld, p. 153.

the nation's Founders than Americans prior to Reagan's presidency were accustomed to hearing.⁷⁸ We must conclude that Reagan and his speechwriters found in Paine's language and legacy a value that their predecessors did not, a utility that outweighed the risk of leftist associations.

It related in part to the president's emphasis on novelty and optimism. Reagan hoped the 1980s would be remembered as 'golden years, when the American Revolution was reborn'; he spoke always of a fresh start for the nation, a period of renewal, a 'rendezvous with destiny'.⁷⁹ He berated President Carter and others for questioning, as he saw it, the virtue and reach of America and took it upon himself to restore confidence in America's greatness. No other among the Founding Fathers offered statements on this theme quite as emphatic as did Thomas Paine. Even Jefferson and Washington, who loudly proclaimed the nation's potential, expressed concerns that Paine's language did not countenance. Reagan wanted a voice from their era that could match his tone of unwavering optimism. He found it in Paine.

Accepting his party's nomination for the presidency at the Republican National Convention in July 1980, Reagan invoked the phrase that was to become a recurring fixture in his speeches as president. Describing the shared concerns and values of the American people, citizens whom he hoped to represent, he explained:

They are the kind of men and women Tom Paine had in mind when he wrote - during the darkest days of the American Revolution - "We have it in our power to begin the world over again."⁸⁰

Throughout his presidency Reagan sought to emphasise that his administration represented such a new beginning. Indeed, on occasion, he tied Paine's words directly to his policy agenda. Announcing the second phase of his economic recovery programme in September 1981, he outlined plans to tackle inflation through cuts to federal spending before ending with an affirmation of the new start that these changes would denote: 'As Tom Paine said 200 years ago, "We have it within our power to begin the world over again." What are we waiting for?' The same message concluded the president's famous speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in March 1983, this time in relation to America's firm stance

⁷⁸ Reagan consistently presented Paine as 'one of the Founding Fathers', a central protagonist in the Revolution. As Kaye observed, rarely had Paine been ranked alongside Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. The English-born radical existed for most outside this elite band. See Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, pp. 3-4.

⁷⁹ Reagan, 'Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985'; 'Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit, July 17, 1980'.

⁸⁰ Reagan, 'Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit'.

against the ‘evil empire’ of Soviet communism. The following year the phrase appeared an appropriate ending to Reagan’s oration at the United Nations General Assembly, during which he had spoken of America’s concern for international diplomacy, human rights and an easing of tensions with the Soviet Union:

One of the Founding Fathers of our nation, Thomas Paine, spoke words that apply to all of us gathered here today. They apply directly to all sitting here in this room. He said, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

The president returned to the phrase on several other occasions, from Republican Party fundraisers to citizenship ceremonies.⁸¹

One cannot deny how comfortably Paine’s phrase sat within Reagan’s wider rhetoric of optimism and rebirth. However, in citing the Founder with such frequency, Reagan fostered an association with Paine strikingly at odds with pre-existing political discourse. Commentators at the time and since struggled to reconcile the radical and the conservative. For many, indeed, Reagan’s appropriation of Paine represented a complete misreading of the latter’s politics and legacy. Commenting in October 1984 on the persistence with which the president invoked the Founder, an article in the *Baltimore Sun* posed the question, ‘Would Tom recognize himself?:

Paine, the passionate propagandist for the American Revolution, has been turning up frequently in the president’s speeches. This is pretty ironic. Either the White House doesn’t know what Paine stood for, or Mr Reagan is a secret advocate of the welfare state.

That the article was authored by Jack Fruchtman, a professor of political science and Paine specialist, accounts for the conviction of its argument; I have found no other example in the American press in which a post-war president’s appropriation of a Founding Father has been so directly exposed and criticised. Fruchtman went on to detail several instances in which Reagan had employed Paine’s words on beginning ‘the world over again’, noting the association the president endeavoured to draw with the professed aims of his domestic policy. Pointing, in particular, to the social welfare provisions proposed in *The Rights of Man*, Fruchtman presented Reagan’s supply-side economics – in which budget cuts to social welfare were a component – as incompatible with Paine’s theories. It was ‘doubtful’,

⁸¹ Reagan, ‘Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery, September 24, 1981; ‘Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983’; ‘Address to the 39th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York, September 24, 1984’.

the article concluded, ‘whether Paine would recognize himself in present company’.⁸² A year later, the *Baltimore Sun* returned to the theme, printing an article that questioned the ramifications of the ‘fresh start’ that Reagan continued to herald. ‘He is painfully fond’, complained the writer, ‘of the least-conservative statement conceivable, a statement taken from an anti-conservative, Thomas Paine’. Proposing a new beginning to the world was ‘nonsense’ in any age but by 1985, Reagan’s ‘fresh start’ in domestic policy, in the estimation of this writer, was responsible for a fiscal deficit. Applying the same optimism to foreign policy, meanwhile, denied the sharp differences between American economic and political values and those of, among others, the Soviet Union. Reagan’s use of Paine was therefore both inconsistent with the president’s politics and reflective of an overconfidence detrimental to the nation’s stability.⁸³ Such was the position of the *Baltimore Sun*.

However, the newspaper was not alone in questioning the compatibility of the Republican with the revolutionary. Several recent scholars of both Paine and Reagan have noted the unlikely relationship between the two. John Patrick Diggins, in his 2007 work on the Republican president, recognised as problematic the fact that ‘Tom Paine, Reagan’s hero’ remained ‘anathema to most conservative intellectuals’. Indeed, Diggins maintained, Reagan’s ‘theory of government has little reference to the principles of the American founding’. Harvey Kaye, meanwhile, understood the value that Paine’s words offered Reagan in his messages of optimistic patriotism but concluded ultimately that, try as they might, conservatives ‘truly cannot...embrace [Paine] and his arguments’.⁸⁴

Perhaps, however, they can. It is easy to dismiss Reagan’s appropriations of Paine given the overwhelming extent to which the Founder was associated with broadly left-wing voices prior to the 1980s. In fact though, there is plenty in Paine’s writing of use to conservatives. In line with the approach of other Republican leaders in the twentieth century, Reagan believed in decentralisation and deregulation, presenting governmental authority and intervention as an obstacle to individual liberty. The danger of overbearing central power was a key theme in Paine’s *Common Sense*. Its second paragraph stated the author’s opinion in clear terms: ‘Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one’.⁸⁵ Much of Paine’s message responded, of course, to the perceived oppression of the American colonists by the British government. His subsequent writings in Europe were to criticise the overbearing rule of the French crown in

⁸² Jack Fruchtman Jr., ‘Would Tom Recognize Himself?’, *Baltimore Sun*, October 9, 1984.

⁸³ George F. Will, ‘Not of This Century’, *Baltimore Sun*, October 31, 1985.

⁸⁴ John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 14; Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, p. 259.

⁸⁵ Paine, *Common Sense*.

similar terms. There is certainly something, then, for the conservative libertarian in Paine's thought. The Founder's economic theory, meanwhile, was not quite as incompatible with Reagan's as Fruchtman suggested. Despite his comments on social welfare in *The Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice*, Paine followed Adam Smith in promoting a self-regulating market, undisrupted by the interference of government. Competition between small producers would, in Paine's assessment, prevent the accumulation of excessive wealth.⁸⁶

In the context of these arguments, Reagan's appropriation of Paine seems less incongruous. Indeed, as Rosenfeld noted, Reagan's emphasis on the Founder's populist and libertarian message opened a door to the political right that is yet to close.⁸⁷ George H.W. Bush, although possessing a rhetorical style vastly different to that of his predecessor, continued to cite Paine regularly in his speeches. Once again, the Founder's optimistic language regarding the country's potential was of value. Addressing employees at an industrial firm in November 1991, Bush spoke not for the first time of the 'revolution' his administration was striving to engender in American business:

As Americans fought in the War of Independence, which was a struggle for free enterprise as well as political reform, Paine said, "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again."

Today we are celebrating a new revolution. It doesn't involve cannons and muskets and political tumult, but it is a revolution all the same.

The president's parenthetical comment on free enterprise was, of course, no accident; defining the motives of the American Revolution in these terms supported his approach to the economy and business. There was merit too in implying that his administration presided over a bold new moment in the country's history. Bush returned to Paine's phrase during his campaign for re-election in 1992. Assessing the successes of his term in office, he invoked the Founder before continuing:

Well, we have begun the world again...I take great pride in the fact that our administration has literally changed the world, made peace a reality and not a dream, made democracy on the march, made tranquillity around the world something real...If we can change the world, then I have no doubt that we can renew America.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Foner, pp. 155-7.

⁸⁷ Rosenfeld, pp. 255; For a discussion of Paine's populism, see Rosenfeld, p. 172 and Mark Jendrysik, 'Tom Paine: Utopian?', *Utopian Studies* 18:2 (2007), pp. 139-157.

⁸⁸ H.W. Bush, 'Remarks to Marlow Industries Employees in Dallas, Texas, November 1, 1991'; 'Remarks to the Community in Memphis, Tennessee, September 22, 1992'.

To these examples can be added a number of speeches during the Gulf War in which the president quoted the familiar words of Paine's *Crisis* essays in evoking the same spirit of sacrifice and hope that Truman and Johnson promoted during the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. The effort to liberate Kuwait was not the only challenge to 'try men's souls' during Bush's presidency: the president invoked the words more than once in New Jersey in an effort to rally Republican voters before the 1991 state elections.⁸⁹

Specific examples such as these clearly illustrate that Paine had become a comfortable source for Republicans. Bush maintained his predecessor's fondness for invoking the Founder, citing Paine in twelve public addresses and with regard to a variety of issues. Indeed, if we exclude Kennedy's 1960 election campaign, Reagan and Bush together made more references to Paine than every other post-war president combined. Once an icon of the radical left, the Founder had been claimed for the right. The association was to continue, reflected beyond the confines of presidential rhetoric. Members of the contemporary Tea Party movement who identify most strongly with conservative libertarianism cite Paine among their heroes. 'Today', writes Rosenfeld, 'Paine symbolizes power to the fed-up people as opposed to the powers that be'. In associating Paine with a politically conservative strand of populism, Reagan afforded the Founder 'a second American afterlife'. Kaye, as we have heard, laments the fact. Rosenfeld too joins him in recognising that the left will have to adapt in order to reappropriate Paine 'for its own ends'.⁹⁰

Perhaps, however, their concerns are exaggerated. In the two decades since Bush left office, while the Democratic presidents Clinton and Obama both found occasion to cite Paine in their speeches, the Republican George W. Bush, during his eight years in the White House, did not.⁹¹ This picture, though hardly definitive, implies that the political right have not assumed sole custody of Paine's legacy. Surely the most reasonable conclusion one can reach is that the appropriations of Paine on opposite sides of the political divide in the last seventy years illustrate that his legacy, like so much of the founding heritage, is malleable. We cannot judge, as Kaye implies, that conservatives are wrong to call on Paine; nor can we assert that they are right. In truth, Paine left through his writings an ambiguous legacy. Simultaneously a radical egalitarian and a pro-business advocate of limited government, he can with justification be appropriated on behalf of

⁸⁹ H.W. Bush, 'Address to the Nation Announcing Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf, January 16, 1991'; Remarks at a Republican Party Fundraising Dinner in East Brunswick, New Jersey, September 24, 1991'.

⁹⁰ Rosenfeld, pp. 255-6.

⁹¹ Clinton, 'Remarks at a Democratic Unity Event, August 5, 1999'; Obama, 'Commencement Address at Arizona State University in Tempe, May 13, 2009'.

quite different causes and across the political spectrum. As his employment by both communists and conservatives in the two centuries since his death testifies, Paine is, in J.G.A. Pocock's words, 'difficult to fit into any kind of category'.⁹²

Conclusion

When President Carter commented in June 1977 that Washington, Franklin and Paine were legitimately 'revered' by Americans, he alluded to the elevated status that all the Founding Fathers occupy in American culture. Whether cited by presidents as a group or individually, references to these first leaders resonate with Americans. Perceived as figures of great vision and virtue, wrote Jill Lepore, their opinions are considered almost 'incontrovertible'.⁹³ Correspondingly, there is value for presidents in invoking their memory. As this chapter has revealed, however, individuals within this group have been employed in presidential speeches in different ways and in advancing distinct messages.

Washington's value as a source lies in his enduring status as a patriotic symbol of resolute and pious leadership; Franklin's employment by modern presidents has reflected his familiar image in the minds of Americans; and Paine, in specific instances, has proved a fertile source of effective and adaptable rhetoric. Significantly, while the manner in which Washington and Franklin have been invoked by presidents has remained constant throughout the last seven decades, Paine's use has changed. The former pair have fixed and uncontroversial associations in the historical memory: regardless of any partisan ties perceived by their contemporaries, Washington and Franklin have long been viewed as neutral figures, resistant to changes in the political climate. In contrast, given Paine's reputation prior to the 1940s, his usage in the speeches of post-war presidents could not have been predicted. His eventual prominence in the rhetoric of Reagan indicates that the status of the Founding Fathers in presidential discourse is not necessarily static. Paine's previously established associations were obscured as his language became of particular value to Reagan's public message. Shifting contexts, in this instance, rendered an aspect of the founding heritage usable in a manner that it had not been before.

The adaptability evident in Paine's words and legacy is magnified significantly in the case of Thomas Jefferson, with whom the next and final chapter is concerned. A symbol of American democracy, firmly embedded in the public consciousness, and a rich

⁹² J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 276.

⁹³ Carter, 'Presidential Scholars Remarks to High School Students Selected as Presidential Scholars of 1977, June 9, 1977'; Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 14.

source of memorable and frequently pertinent language, Jefferson in many respects incorporates each of the facets exploited by presidents in their allusions to Washington, Franklin and Paine. Cited in numerous speeches across the post-war period by leaders of both parties, in varying contexts and for contrasting purposes, Jefferson has proved, by a distance, the most adaptable of all the Founders.

6. Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson lives in each of us.

President Ford, April 13, 1976¹

No one among the Founders of the United States left a more complex or ambiguous legacy than Thomas Jefferson. He was the anti-business agrarian who dreamed of national progress and scientific advancement; the wealthy antistatist who spoke of lifting up the common man; and most problematically, the slaveowner, simultaneously dismissing the possibility of racial integration while providing his generation's strongest avocation of the equal rights of man. Associated with one side in the divisive partisan politics at the turn of the nineteenth century, he divided the opinion of his contemporaries. For one supporter in 1800, he was a 'firm and steady advocate of freedom; superior to ambition; unawed by menaces; above corruption; the virtuous and independent statesman'; to his detractors he was a dangerous radical, whose partiality for the French would soon see America 'fraternizing with a nation of infidels'.² Keenly aware of the uncertainty with which his unwanted party affiliation may colour his status in the public memory, he worried in later life that he had been 'too careless' with his 'reputation'.³ Correspondingly he strove to ensure that he would be remembered for the achievements that he held highest in his own mind, above all his authorship of the Declaration of Independence. Put simply, as he wrote to his grandson in November 1808, he wished to be recalled as an 'honest advocate of [his] country's rights'. In these terms he hoped to have achieved the 'estimation of the world'.⁴

He need not have worried that he be forgotten. Over two hundred years since he wrote that letter, few figures sit more prominently in the American historical memory. Of all the icons of eighteenth and nineteenth century U.S. history, Abraham Lincoln included, only George Washington has been invoked by American presidents more often since 1945

¹ Gerald R. Ford, '338 - Remarks Upon Signing Bills Commemorating the Birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1976'.

² Tunis Wortman, *An address, to the republican citizens of New York, on the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States.* (New York, 1801); John Black, *Address to the Federal Republicans of Burlington County, recommending to them to support the present members in the legislature from that county, at the ensuing election, as friendly to the reelection of President Adams and Governor Howell.* (Trenton, 1800)

³ 'Thomas Jefferson to William Johnson, March 4, 1823', *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib024584>) [20/08/13]; Jefferson lamented the division of the early republic into opposing parties, expressing often his dislike for party politics. Famously reflecting on the Federalist-Antifederalist debate that followed the ratification of the Constitution, Jefferson wrote to Francis Hopkinson in 1789: 'If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.' 'Jefferson to Francis Hopkinson, March 13, 1789', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* ed. by Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 941.

⁴ 'Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, November 24, 1808', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1194.

than Thomas Jefferson. From education to health, farming to science, and most significantly with regard to politics, he has been quoted and recalled throughout the period and across the party divide, with far greater diversity, political resonance and specificity than the allusions to Washington.

This chapter will discuss these invocations, their nature and context, positing two central explanations for their prevalence. First, Jefferson's name, following his death and particularly by the mid-point of the twentieth century, became synonymous with American democracy itself. No other figure is so closely associated with the principles established in the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence and consistently cited as essential to the nation's political identity. Consequently his name and his words are frequently invoked in the many presidential speeches concerned with reiterating and bolstering Americans' sense of unity, patriotism and purpose.

The second explanation reflects the memorable observation published in *Niles' Register* in April 1832, that any 'principle in the political ethics' of the United States could be 'sanctioned AND refuted by the writings of Mr. Jefferson'.⁵ Such was the ambiguity and diversity of Jefferson's thought that his legacy has proved easily the most adaptable of all the Founders'. On the one hand, he spoke on such a variety of topics, with such poetic yet accessible eloquence, that his words can be applied widely. However, more importantly, as the ideological priorities of Democrats and Republicans have shifted over time, Jefferson's political opinions have proved sufficiently malleable that presidents of both parties have in different contexts been able to claim his inheritance. An icon of America's founding heritage, for national leaders Jefferson has more often than not proved a valuable figure with whom to associate their political outlook and agenda.

'Apostle of Freedom'

Thomas Jefferson did not live to witness the veneration with which he was later recalled and celebrated. Yet the elevation of his status in American culture began almost immediately following his death, particularly in response to the serendipitous nature of his departure on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. His many eulogists emphasised, as Jefferson had wished, his role in the nation's founding, celebrating his authorship of the principles enshrined in the Declaration. His commitment to human rights and his achievements in politics, philosophy and the sciences represented,

⁵ *Niles' Register*, April 7, 1832, cited in Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 17.

proclaimed John Tyler of Virginia, a ‘precious legacy...Let us teach our children to reverence his name, and even in infancy to lisp his principles’.⁶

The subsequent evolution of his reputation has been the subject of numerous works of scholarship. Merrill Peterson, whose classic work of 1960, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, has informed all that followed it, noted the mythologizing of the Revolutionary era following the deaths of the period’s leading figures. Jefferson’s name was, he wrote, ‘the compelling image of the fable’.⁷ Tied directly to the establishment of American independence and associated throughout his political career with the principles of republican liberty, he became a powerful symbol for those who claimed inheritance of this tradition in the decades prior to the Civil War. Francis Cogliano, Joseph Ellis and others have followed Peterson in tracking Jefferson’s rise to prominence in these years as politicians appropriated his words in debating the fractious issues of the era: states’ rights, slavery, nullification and secession. Given the Virginian’s association with the political decentralisation and agrarian values promoted by the Southern cause, however, historians have noted equally the decline of Jefferson’s star following the war as the Union victory welcomed in a new age of industrialisation and growing federal power. Indeed, despite the adulation with which Jacksonian Democrats and states’ rights advocates had earlier invoked the Founder, Jefferson’s image did not reach its peak until the mid-twentieth century. For Ellis, as for Peterson, the moment of his ‘ascent into the American version of political heaven’ can in fact be ‘dated precisely’ to April 13, 1943, the Bicentennial of his birth.⁸

Dedicating on that day the Jefferson Memorial by the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., President Franklin D. Roosevelt reflected on the moment. ‘Today, in the midst of a great war for freedom’, he said, ‘we dedicate a shrine to freedom. To Thomas Jefferson, Apostle of Freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue.’ Portrayed by the president as a universal symbol of liberty, the value for which Americans were fighting in World War II, Jefferson, argued Peterson, thereafter ‘transcended politics’. So far removed was the federal intervention inherent in Roosevelt’s New Deal from Jefferson’s comments in support of limited government that the specifics of the latter’s political theory appeared no longer relevant. Freed, therefore, of partisan associations, Jefferson became available to all

⁶ John Tyler, ‘Eulogy, pronounced at Richmond, Virginia, July 11, 1826’, *A selection of eulogies, pronounced in the several states, in honor of those illustrious patriots and statesmen, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Hartford: D.F. Robinson & Co. and Norton & Russell, 1826), p. 17.

⁷ Peterson, p. 8.

⁸ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p.8; Peterson, pp. 46-70; See also, Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Jefferson’s position on government and the federal system will be considered below.

as a ‘patriotic symbol’ inseparable from the rights he had declared inalienable in the Declaration, those values on which American national identity rests.⁹

Personal liberty, equality of opportunity, representative government: these principles belong to no party. They are the central defining keywords of American politics, together providing the ‘text of civic instruction’ elaborated in Jefferson’s first Inaugural Address. So essential, argues the historian Peter Onuf, are ‘Jeffersonian ideals’ to the ‘fabric of...national self-understanding’ that ‘we have trouble distinguishing one from the other, Jefferson from America.’¹⁰ Several presidential speeches have made direct reference to this connection in their efforts to define the nation’s sense of identity and purpose. Speaking in April 1976, Gerald Ford told an audience that, ‘Thomas Jefferson lives in each of us’. His ‘true importance’, continued Ford, ‘lies in the fact that he continues to speak of the American experience...In their search for Jefferson's spirit, Americans have sought themselves.’ It was in similar terms that Bill Clinton explained in 1994 why Jefferson ‘seems so new to us today’. He remained of such relevance to all Americans and a source, said Clinton elsewhere, of inspiration to every president, because of the ‘vitality of his spirit and his ideas’ in their ‘own lives’.¹¹

Elevated to the position of national icon, associated above all with his articulation of America’s defining principles in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson has become a favourite source for speechwriters seeking to colour the many presidential addresses concerned with rehearsing national values. More significantly though, aware of the extent to which Jefferson has become synonymous with America’s political identity and established principles, there is inevitable value for presidents in aligning themselves with him.

Perhaps the starkest illustration of this effort was seen during the presidential election of 1960. Both Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy explicitly claimed Jefferson as their ideological predecessor. Moreover, in a remarkable rhetorical exchange during a series of campaign speeches, both sought to dismiss the suggestion that their rival could make such a claim. For Kennedy, the line was well established: Jefferson was the founder

⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘37 - Address at the Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, Washington, D.C., April 13, 1943’; Peterson, pp.378-9; For Ellis, indeed, it is his authorship of the Declaration - and the articulation of the ‘American creed’ therein - that has secured Jefferson’s ‘claim on posterity’s affection’. Ellis, p.9.

¹⁰ Jefferson, ‘Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801’; Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.3.

¹¹ Ford, ‘338 - Remarks Upon Signing Bills Commemorating the Birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1976’; Clinton, ‘Remarks at the Thomas Jefferson Dinner, April 11, 1994’; William J. Clinton, ‘Remarks at a Screening of the PBS Documentary Series "The American President", April 7, 2000’.

of the Democratic Party and as such his inheritance lay self-evidently in the hands of his party successors. Nixon however portrayed a shift, indeed a reversal, in ideology since Jefferson's day, contending that the Virginian's ideological mantle was now more comfortably worn by the Republican Party. Given his preference for limited federal government, said Nixon in an address in Richmond, Jefferson 'would turn over in his grave if he thought [Kennedy's Democrats] were representing [his] position...today'.¹² Kennedy, meanwhile, resented the accusation. He was occupied elsewhere explaining to audiences the manner in which the Democratic Party 'trace their intellectual descent back to Thomas Jefferson'. On several occasions he responded to his opponent directly, berating Nixon's efforts to imply that the Democrats were 'not the heirs of...Jefferson'. Indeed, pointing to the progressive, 'ground-breaking' character of his party since its earliest beginnings, he remarked in Dallas that, 'Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson were not popular with the Nixons of their day'.¹³

There can be little doubt of the extent to which the candidates' advisers in 1960 perceived an association with Jefferson to be politically valuable.¹⁴ Indeed, the image of Jefferson post-Roosevelt – positioned above partisan politics as a universal emblem of American democracy – belies the remarkable degree to which his name has been appropriated in support of very specific presidential policies. Despite the changes wrought by the New Deal, he has still been presented as the historical face of limited government, not hovering above contemporary political debate but still relevant within it. As the remainder of this chapter will relate, Jefferson has in fact been invoked with regard to a multitude of diverse policies, from education reform to business deregulation to the conduct of foreign wars. It therefore appears that presidential rhetoric has run at odds with that of scholars who in the last sixty years have followed Peterson in stressing the incompatibility of Jeffersonian political philosophy with modern American government. Perhaps, though, Peterson's portrayal of an elevated, nonpartisan icon goes some way towards explaining the persistence of references to Jefferson in presidential speeches.¹⁵ The practical specifics of his political philosophy may no longer resonate in modern

¹² Richard Nixon, 'Speech of Vice President Richard M. Nixon, Atlanta, GA, August 26, 1960'; 'Remarks by the Vice President, Capitol Square, Richmond, VA, October 3, 1960'.

¹³ John F. Kennedy, 'Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Northland Shopping Center, Jennings, MO, October 22, 1960'; 'Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Memorial Auditorium Dallas, TX, September 13, 1960'.

¹⁴ Indeed, among the Kennedy team's campaign files are several pages of listed 'Quotations' to be exploited in speeches with regard to various policies, contexts and locations. Recurring most often among these lists were the words of Jefferson. 'Quotations: 15 April 1954-1 July 1960' and 'Quotations: Undated' in 'Issues: Richard Goodwin Working Papers, 1958-1960', *Papers of John F. Kennedy: Pre-Presidential Papers - Presidential Campaign Files, 1960 (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library Digitized Collection)*. (<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKCAMP1960-0995-011.aspx>) [05/07/13].

¹⁵ Peterson, pp. 378-9.

government but, for presidents, there is rhetorical and symbolic value in implying that their own agendas would meet with his approval. Inevitably this requires the kind of presentist assumptions about Jefferson's views and vision that historians have long warned against.

Thus, it is the light of legitimacy and patriotism cast by an association with the revered Jefferson that motivates presidents to reference his name; what allows them to do so with such frequency is the adaptability of his words and legacy. As the examples below will illustrate, such was the diversity of Jefferson's writing and the complexity of his political stance that he can be invoked across the party divide and with regard to numerous issues. He was, as Peterson so memorably described him, 'a man of many faces'.¹⁶

Jefferson: small government libertarian

Since 1945, Thomas Jefferson has been invoked by Republican presidents most frequently in support of their stance on the role and reach of government. Peterson may have been justified in questioning the relevance of Jefferson's preference for limited central power in a modern age in which, regardless of the political leanings of the president, the size and authority of the federal government far outstretched the Founders' imaginings.¹⁷ However, this element of Jeffersonian politics has remained alive and well in the language of those who favour political decentralisation and economic deregulation. Indeed, despite Jefferson's association with the Democratic Party, these Republican voices have offered perhaps the strongest and most consistent appropriations of Jefferson in the last half century.

As we have seen, Nixon's claim on Jefferson's inheritance in 1960 rested largely on the Virginian's words regarding the diffusion of power. They were generally unambiguous. Reflecting on the new Constitution in December 1787, Jefferson told its primary architect, James Madison, that he was 'not a friend to a very energetic government.' It is, he warned, 'always oppressive.' His first Inaugural Address as president, indeed, positioned his support for 'frugal', limited government as a key strand of his political theory. Such a government, he promised, 'will not take from the mouth of labour the bread it has earned.' The rebellion, predominantly of debt-ridden farm workers, in Massachusetts in 1786-7 famously did not quell Jefferson's faith in the ability of people to 'govern themselves without a master'. That Shay's Rebellion was an isolated example was proof in fact that Americans still had 'the difference between a light and a heavy

¹⁶ Ibid, p.13.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 378-9.

government as clear gain'.¹⁸ Several other quotations could further confirm the point: of Jefferson's opinion on the over-centralisation of power there can be little doubt. As such, it is no surprise that libertarian-conservative politicians and activists from Barry Goldwater in the 1960s to the contemporary Tea Party movement have found value in aligning their political stance with that of the Virginian.¹⁹

Responding to the expansion in federal spending and regulation with which the Democratic Party had become associated, first with the New Deal and later through Johnson's Great Society programme, Republicans by the late 1960s presented themselves overwhelmingly as the party of small government, low taxation and individualism. Although the party's conservative message did not reach its peak until the presidency of Ronald Reagan, its direction was well established by the Nixon and Ford administrations.

I have noted already the unique opportunity that the Bicentennial of American independence offered President Ford in 1976. His oratory was replete with references to the nation's exceptional origins, the enduring strength of its founding values and the necessity of upholding the spirit of the Revolution. However, at a time when the country was united in celebrating the virtue of the nation's Founders, Ford saw value too in stressing the loyalty of his administration to their political legacy, particularly that of Thomas Jefferson.

Locked in a continuing feud with a Democratic Congress opposed to the executive's efforts to lower federal spending, Ford repeatedly stressed Jefferson's opposition to 'excessive centralization', presenting himself as the inheritor of this principle. Always implicit within speeches outwardly concerned only with celebrating the founding heritage, Ford's words nevertheless aimed for contemporary political resonance. Addressing an audience in April 1976, the president tied the current tax and spending dispute to the Founders' priorities following independence:

Jefferson's principle of limited government, his concern about excessive centralization of governmental power at the expense of State and local

¹⁸ 'Jefferson to James Madison, December 20, 1787', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 917; Jefferson, 'Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801'; 'Jefferson to David Hartley, July 2, 1787', *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 11, ed. by Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 525–526.

¹⁹ Jefferson's stance on government was further illustrated in his support for the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 which, in declaring the federal Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional, argued that states had the right to question the constitutionality of any act of Congress. For a consideration of Jefferson's position on states' rights and his consequent value to Southern whites in the 1950s/60s, see Robert G. Parkinson, 'First from the Right: Massive Resistance and the Image of Thomas Jefferson in the 1950s', *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 112:1 (2004), pp. 2-35; For an engaging analysis of the contemporary Tea Party movement, see Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

responsibility and individual freedom are as much a part of the debate of 1976 as they were in 1776.

I believe that in this debate, the wisdom and the philosophy of Jefferson will prevail [...]

As the author of the Declaration of Independence, no leader of the Revolutionary era was more central to the rhetoric of the Bicentennial celebrations than Jefferson. He was, said Ford, the embodiment of the ‘American experience’ and ‘our national heritage’, with convictions central to how Americans understand their shared identity. Surely then, Ford implied, his administration was justified in seeking to limit ‘the role of government in the classical Jeffersonian sense.’²⁰

Ronald Reagan certainly believed so. Of the twelve presidents analysed in this project, only Clinton recorded more public references to Jefferson and, proportionate to the total number of speeches each delivered, none invoked the Founder more often. According to Reagan, indeed, Jefferson provided a model to which Americans should aspire; it was he who encouraged the public to ‘pluck a flower from Thomas Jefferson’s life and wear it on [their] soul forever’.²¹ Unsurprisingly, the majority of Reagan’s political references to Jefferson related to his decentralising, ‘New Federalism’ programme. His predecessor had in fact maintained the association emphasised by Nixon and Ford in the 1970s: atypically for a Democrat, Jimmy Carter spoke of following Jefferson’s belief in ‘frugal government’ in his efforts to reduce government bureaucracy and restore the strength of state and local government voices.²² However, it was Reagan who truly brought Jefferson to the rhetorical fore in the 1980s as a bastion of libertarian values.

The president’s writers mined Jefferson’s comments on the dangers of strong federal power, frequently including them within speeches pertaining to Reagan’s decentralisation and deregulation goals. It was a rhetorical approach established from the beginning of Reagan’s presidency. Reassuring an audience of state representatives in July 1981 that his administration was committed to strengthening state and local government – the ‘fabric of federalism’ – he quoted from two letters written by Jefferson:

²⁰ Ford, ‘338 - Remarks Upon Signing Bills Commemorating the Birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1976’; Ford’s dispute with Congress over economic policy is discussed in John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald Ford* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 68-81. For Ford’s position on federal spending and taxation during the election year of 1976, see also David Miles, ‘Political Experience and Anti-Big Government: The Making and Breaking of Themes in Gerald Ford’s 1976 Presidential Campaign’, *Michigan Historical Review* 23:1 (1997), pp. 117-20.

²¹ Quoted in Joyce Appleby, ‘Introduction: Jefferson and his Complex Legacy’ in *Jeffersonian Legacies* ed. by Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p.1.

²² Jimmy Carter, ‘Richmond, Virginia Remarks at the State Democratic Party’s Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, April 7, 1979’.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves.” And it was Jefferson who reminded us that against the invasion of the people's liberty, the only “true barriers... are the state governments.”

The ‘final investment in the power of the people’ was the ‘great daring of the American experiment’, explained Reagan. He stressed in closing that his policies represented a continuation of this spirit and ‘another great revolution’.²³ With his New Federalism programme a central pillar of Reagan’s political agenda and a key theme in his re-election campaign in 1984, the president consistently called on Jefferson for support. Speaking to one audience in Washington, D.C., for example, he explained how Jefferson had warned, ‘Were we directed from Washington when to sow and when to reap, we should soon want for bread.’ He continued:

I think during the last decade and before, we've gotten a taste of just what it was that Jefferson was warning us about. So much power had centralized in Washington that frustration and stagnation ruled the day...Over the last three years, we put a stop to this ever-increasing centralization of power’.²⁴

Reagan continued to appropriate Jefferson’s words in these terms, both during his re-election campaign and in subsequent years.²⁵ Indeed, on the eve of Independence Day in 1987, outside the Jefferson Memorial in the nation’s capital, Reagan delivered an address more explicitly aimed at aligning his policies with the Founder than any presidential speech in the last seven decades. Standing against this physical and contextual backdrop of stage-managed symbolism, Reagan launched his administration’s ‘Economic Bill of Rights’ with a speech punctuated by allusions to the man immortalised in bronze behind him. Again, Jefferson’s words on political centralisation were invoked, here in support of the initiative’s remit to reduce federal spending, limit taxation and deregulate business. Aligning his proposals with the Bill of Rights for which Jefferson had campaigned, Reagan explained that the Founders had ‘inextricably linked’ political freedoms to economic freedoms. He went on:

²³ Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Annual Convention of the National Conference of State Legislatures, July 30, 1981’; ‘Jefferson to William C. Jarvis, September 28, 1820’, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib023901>) [20/08/13]; ‘Jefferson to A.L.C. Destutt de Tracy, January 28, 1811’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1245.

²⁴ Reagan, ‘Toasts at a White House Dinner Honoring the Nation’s Governors, February 26, 1984’; Jefferson, ‘Autobiography’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 74.

²⁵ Two further speeches in 1984, for example, quoted Jefferson’s comment on the ‘oppressive’ nature of ‘energetic government’: Reagan, ‘Remarks at Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois, February 6, 1984’; ‘Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony for the Presidential Scholars Awards, June 19, 1984’.

The working people need to know their jobs, pay, homes, and pensions are not vulnerable to the threat of an overbearing government - something Jefferson warned us about 200 years ago. It's time to finish the job Jefferson began and to protect our people and their livelihoods with restrictions on government that will ensure the fundamental economic freedom of the people.

Reagan, of course, did not mention that the Constitution which he celebrated so vocally during this, the Bicentennial year of its adoption, was in large part a response to the chaos of an unregulated economy under the failed Articles of Confederation. He presented instead an incomplete picture of the Founders' motives, adapted solely to suggest that his economic programme reflected their wishes. Indeed, he expressed complete confidence that his agenda carried the blessing of his favourite Founder: 'I'm certain if Thomas Jefferson were here, he'd be one of the most articulate and aggressive champions of this cause.'²⁶

Professing such certainty in his grasp of Jefferson's mind, Reagan referenced the Virginian in discussing a host of issues and policies, from education to the deregulation of the natural gas market.²⁷ In promoting even his campaign for the reinstatement of school prayer, Reagan found cause to cite Jefferson, seeking sanction in his assertion that 'God created the mind free'. Such, indeed, was the value which Reagan perceived in appropriating the Founder's words that he was able to declare, during an address in March 1982, 'I always agree with Jefferson.'²⁸

We can say with some confidence that Reagan would have disagreed with many of Jefferson's comments, not least his letter to Tadeusz Kosciuszko in 1811 in which he advocated targeting the wealthy in taxing imports so that, 'the farmer will see his government supported, his children educated, and the face of his country made a paradise by the contributions of the rich alone.'²⁹ Reagan would, more obviously, have disagreed

²⁶ Reagan, 'Remarks Announcing America's Economic Bill of Rights, July 3, 1987'; The problems inherent in Reagan's efforts to align his 'Economic Bill of Rights' with the Constitution's framers did not go unnoticed in the contemporary press. Reporting on the president's speech, the *Los Angeles Times* accused Reaganite conservatives of 'rewriting American history' to suggest that the Founders prioritised unregulated economic freedom. The president had, wrote the reporter, a 'simplistic notion of American history'. See 'Reading Reagan's Rights', *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1987.

²⁷ See Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Education, March 12, 1983' and 'Radio Address to the Nation on Proposed Natural Gas Deregulation Legislation, February 26, 1983'.

²⁸ Reagan, 'Remarks at a White House Ceremony in Observance of National Day of Prayer, May 6, 1982'. The Jefferson quotation is drawn from 'A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p.346; Reagan, 'Remarks at the Annual Washington Policy Meeting of the National Association of Manufacturers, March 18, 1982'.

²⁹ 'Jefferson to Tadeusz Kosciuszko, April 16, 1811', *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Vol. 3, ed. by J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 565–567.

too with Jefferson's opinions on racial and gender equality, and with many of his more sceptical remarks on Christianity.³⁰ For Reagan's purposes, however, there was value in highlighting only those comments that offered support for his political agenda.

Such was the breadth of Jefferson's writing and the complexity of his political theory that presidential speechwriters can cherry-pick relevant quotes and ignore others. In the context of a speech, they do not require further elaboration or explanation; they represent sound bites, intended to help legitimate rhetorically the direction of the president's policies. As further examples will illustrate, Jefferson has been such a consistently prevalent subject of invocation in part because his words are immensely quotable. Addressing myriad subjects, he wrote eloquently, yet accessibly, fashioning several phrases memorable for their pith, poetry and clarity. His was not an entirely typical eighteenth-century voice. While others among the Founding Fathers tended to write in the often florid and verbose language of the era, Jefferson's rhetoric was, as President Ford recognised in 1976, 'surprisingly modern'. However, while the appeal of his writing is certainly a factor, it is the continued resonance and malleability of Jefferson's legacy that most accounts for his recurring presence in presidential speeches. Inextricably linked, as we have heard, to the nation's democratic origins, Jefferson occupies a position almost mythic in American culture. Familiar to the public in these terms, the implication of Jefferson's approval consequently lends weight to any political goal. In short, Reagan could be confident of the resonance of his words when he assured an audience in 1987 that, 'We're still Jefferson's children.'³¹

Jefferson: progressive forward-thinker

With the Republican Party increasingly defining itself in terms of the small government message that Jefferson frequently promoted, Democrats in the decades since World War II have found it necessary to position their claim on the Founder's legacy in different terms. Such, however, was the breadth of subjects on which Jefferson wrote that Democratic presidents have found ample material to suit their own purposes. As the examples from Kennedy's 1960 campaign suggested, Democrats have found particular value in citing

³⁰ Notably, Jefferson stated his belief in the physical and intellectual inferiority of black people at length in Query XIV of his 'Notes on the State of Virginia'. (See *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, pp. 264-270.) He famously described Christianity, meanwhile, as the 'most perverted system that ever shone on man' and likened the 'mystical' tale of Christ's immaculate conception to 'the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter'. See 'Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestly, March 21, 1801', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1085 and 'Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823', *ibid.*, p. 1469.

³¹ Ford, '338 - Remarks Upon Signing Bills Commemorating the Birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1976'; Reagan, 'Remarks Announcing America's Economic Bill of Rights, July 3, 1987'.

Jefferson as a forward-thinker, accepting of the necessity for change and continued progress. Positioning themselves as a progressive party of reform, they have often implied that the Virginian would have approved of their approach.

Jefferson wrote often of the future. It was one of several apparent contradictions within his thought that he should both oppose the modernising forces of commerce and industrialisation while simultaneously contemplating with enthusiasm the advancement of science and his country's development into a powerful beacon of republican government, a model to the world.³² He was above all aware of the changes that advancing years would inevitably bring and of the critical need to adapt to these shifting circumstances. Writing to the historian Samuel Kercheval in 1816, Jefferson recognised that 'laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind':

As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.

While understanding, indeed, that the Revolution would be rightly celebrated by future generations, he advised against the excessive veneration of history. He preferred, as he told his old friend and Revolutionary colleague John Adams, 'the dreams of the future better than the history of the past'.³³

In reflecting on the remembrance of the founding era in American culture, the historian Joyce Appleby presented Jefferson as the inspiration for the emphasis of modern presidents on the 'newness' of their political programmes. Roosevelt's New Deal, Kennedy's New Frontier, Reagan's New Federalism, George H.W. Bush's New World Order: all of these, she suggested, echoed the optimism of Jefferson's rhetoric and implied a replication of the 'liberating act of revolution'.³⁴ Certainly, as the examples related in Chapter 2 revealed, presidents on both sides of the political divide have found value in

³² Jefferson regularly wrote of his reluctance to see America pursue a commercial and industrial economy. 'Manufacture', he wrote, 'must be resorted to, of necessity, not of choice'. He preferred to 'let our work-shops remain in Europe' while Americans focused on 'the industry of the husbandman'. A committed agrarian, he affirmed that, 'Those who labour the earth are the chosen people of God'. See Jefferson, 'Notes on the State of Virginia', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, pp. 290-1.

³³ 'Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p.1401; 'Jefferson to John Adams, August 1, 1816', *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: the complete correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, Vol. 2, ed. by Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 483-85.

³⁴ Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 37.

associating their agenda with the revolutionary spirit of the Founding Fathers. It was Reagan indeed who presented his policies as a 'second American Revolution'. However, his primary message was one of renewal, not change: Reagan followed Nixon and Ford in arguing that decentralisation would restore the United States to the governmental model envisaged by the Founders. In this sense, the image of Jefferson as a forward-looking reformer did not suit the Republicans' approach. In contrast, it has been an image to which Democratic presidents have consistently returned.

Harry Truman established the trend. Indeed, during his 'whistle-stop' campaign tour of 1948, he strove actively to present the Republican opposition as anti-Jeffersonian in their reluctance to support his programmes of reform. Berating the 'Do-Nothing', Republican-controlled Congress for its obstruction of his legislative agenda, Truman found success in portraying his administration as forward-looking and 'courageous', acting in the spirit of Jefferson's bold decision to purchase the vast Louisiana territories in 1803. 'How history repeats itself!', he told one audience. 'The men who ridiculed Jefferson... were men of small courage and big fears. Their political descendants are to be found among those who were afraid to attempt recovery in the 1930's and who are now afraid to make farsighted preparations for American prosperity'. For Truman, there was value in presenting his opponents as 'reactionary', at odds with the 'progressive liberalism' championed by Jefferson and preserved in the politics of the modern Democratic Party. Indeed, affirming the distinction, he positioned the Republicans in direct opposition to Jefferson, locating their origin among Alexander Hamilton's Federalists: a party of the 'privileged few', dedicated to the belief that government should be controlled not by the common man but by the 'rich and the well born'.³⁵

It was a theme Truman was to maintain during his second term in office. His election success had not secured a mandate for a liberal programme; strong opposition, in particular to the welfare policies proposed under his 'Fair Deal', from the Republican majority and conservative Southern Democrats in Congress continued to hinder both his legislative aims and his popularity.³⁶ Consequently, his speeches regularly sought to position his opponents as reactionary, much in the mould of those who opposed the bold advances of Jefferson's presidency. In so doing Truman further implied that his administration sought to emulate the Virginian's progressive spirit. An address launching the Democratic congressional campaign in November 1949 was typical:

³⁵ Harry S. Truman, '32 - Address at the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, February 19, 1948'.

³⁶ Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 294-7, 319-322.

Today, we can look back on the opposition to the Louisiana Purchase and laugh. We wonder how men could have been so blind as to oppose this great step forward... The reactionaries of Jefferson's time were exactly like the reactionaries of today. Whenever there is a new proposal to promote the general welfare, we always hear the same sort of arguments, from the same sort of people, for the same sort of reasons. But the propaganda of the reactionaries did not prevail in the case of the Louisiana Purchase... and it will not prevail today.³⁷

President Kennedy, as we have seen, adopted a similar approach in defining the differences between his party and that of Nixon in 1960. The Democrats' impulse 'to move' and 'to look to the future' were traits inherited, Kennedy maintained, from Jefferson, particularly evident in the Louisiana Purchase, his commissioning of an exploratory expedition to the Pacific coast, and earlier through his central role in the Revolution. Jefferson was identified, said Kennedy, 'with what was new and changing'; it was this bold spirit that his presidency, not Nixon's, intended to 'recapture'. When Johnson inherited the White House three years later, he strove to maintain the theme, stressing his own optimistic commitment to reform and progress. Likening the position of the United States in 1964 to the possibilities facing Jefferson's America as Meriweather Lewis and William Clark prepared to journey west of the Mississippi, Johnson positioned the country at 'the margin of decision'. Would the nation ride on the 'tide of change' and progress as the 'farseeing' Jefferson had, or would it keep looking 'back along the way we came'?³⁸

Allusions to Jefferson were a regular fixture in Johnson's public addresses as he aimed to promote the raft of liberal policies that comprised his Great Society programme. Johnson recognised that the federal intervention inherent in his legislative proposals ran at odds with the position of many Americans on the role of government. Correspondingly, much of his rhetoric sought justification for his approach in the words of the nation's revered political forefathers. Again, Jefferson was the favoured source. Interestingly though, in the case of Johnson, Jefferson's words were used to appease the president's critics on the one hand and to defend his approach on the other.

During his election campaign speeches in 1964, Johnson conceded his awareness that some Americans perceived the federal government as 'a major menace to individual liberty'. He recognised too that some would criticise his administration for 'taking from the

³⁷ Truman, '250 - Remarks and Address in St. Paul as Part of Minnesota's Truman Day Celebration, November 3, 1949'. The words 'promote the general welfare', subtly included here, were drawn from the Constitution. In using them, Truman aligned his policies with both Jefferson and the Constitution.

³⁸ Kennedy, 'Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Northland Shopping Center, Jennings, MO, October 22, 1960'; Lyndon B. Johnson, '751 - Remarks in Madison Square Garden, October 31, 1964'.

haves and giving to the have-nots'. To such critics, however, Johnson offered a message of reassurance: his government, he said on several occasions, was 'striving to fulfil that great Democrat Thomas Jefferson's admonition to always be wise and frugal'. He stressed too, in continuing to lift words from Jefferson's first Inaugural Address, that his government would 'not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned'.³⁹ Such were Johnson's reassurances. Yet elsewhere he found Jefferson's words just as valuable in *supporting* his welfare policies. Speaking in Pennsylvania in June 1964, the president explained:

The truth is, far from crushing the individual, government at its best liberates him from the enslaving forces of his environment. For as Thomas Jefferson said, "the care of human life and happiness is the first and only legitimate object of good government."

Jefferson's comment was drawn, in fact, from a letter written to 'the Republicans of Washington County, Maryland' in 1809, thanking them for the kind sentiments offered following his retirement from the presidency. Reflecting on his efforts to avoid involving the country in the Napoleonic Wars, Jefferson had affirmed that the object of good government was to ensure 'the care of human life', not its destruction.⁴⁰ However, the quotation has long since tended to be employed in the sense that Johnson did so. It allowed him in this context to invoke Jefferson essentially in support of two opposing positions. While his policies were loyal to Jefferson's message of frugality, implied Johnson, they reflected too the Founder's words on the necessity for compassionate government.

Johnson's approach clearly exposed the adaptability of Jefferson's language. Although the Founder's remarks on the role of government more directly suited the libertarian arguments of Republicans, Johnson could simultaneously acknowledge these words while placing emphasis on others more applicable to his agenda.⁴¹ Indeed, it is a testament to the broad appeal and malleable legacy of Jefferson that, after two decades dominated by Republican presidents keen to claim the Virginian on behalf of their

³⁹ Johnson, '391 - Address at the Centennial Commencement of Swarthmore College, June 8, 1964'; '233 - Remarks in Atlantic City at the Convention of the United Auto Workers, March 23, 1964'; '477 - Remarks at a Reception for a Group of Labor Leaders, July 24, 1964'.

⁴⁰ Johnson, '391 - Address at the Centennial Commencement of Swarthmore College, June 8, 1964'; 'Jefferson to the Republicans of Washington County, Maryland, March 31, 1809', *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Vol. 1 ed. by J. Jefferson Looney, pp. 98–99.

⁴¹ An admittedly partisan article in the *Chicago Daily Defender* in January 1965 suggested that Johnson's efforts to align himself with Jefferson had made an impact. Comparing the two men, the article explained: 'To Jefferson, as to President Johnson, liberty and equality are complimentary qualities of the condition to which man has a moral right...Like Jefferson, Johnson is creating an American creed and shaping the standards by which even this new leadership must be measured.' See 'A New Leadership', *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 26, 1965.

conservative policies, a Democrat returned to the White House loudly proclaiming Jefferson to be his favourite Founder.

Inspired by ‘Jefferson’s ideals’, Bill Clinton once remarked that two of his ‘most prized personal possessions’ were an original printing of *Notes on the State of Virginia* and a copy of Daniel Webster’s rousing eulogy to Jefferson and John Adams. ‘From time to time’, said Clinton, ‘when I feel some sense of despair, just for the heck of it, I take them down and open the pages and start reading.’⁴² Significantly, no other president has spoken so clearly or frequently of the proximity of Jefferson’s vision to the political outlook and agenda of their administration. It was an association that Clinton and his advisers were keen to cultivate from the outset: he began his pre-inauguration festivities in January 1993 with a visit to Jefferson’s Virginian home at Monticello. Five days later, in his Inaugural Address, the president promised a period of national ‘renewal’, inspired by Thomas Jefferson’s belief that ‘to preserve the very foundations of our Nation, we would need dramatic change from time to time.’⁴³

Clinton returned to the theme on several occasions during his two terms in the White House, never more obviously than on April 13, 1993 when he exploited the celebration of Jefferson’s 250th birthday to reinforce his administration’s inheritance of the Founder’s legacy. Here, as in several other speeches, the president tied the specifics of his political agenda to Jefferson’s own vision. Implying an assured knowledge of the Founder’s opinion, Clinton noted the problems in contemporary American society with which Jefferson would be disappointed. These issues, notably unemployment, urban crime, and limitations in health care provision, were precisely those which his administration promised to tackle. Clinton asserted that Jefferson would have called for action:

In short, I think Thomas Jefferson would tell us that this is one of those times when we need to change.

Clearly, the call for change that Jefferson made, he intended to be echoed generation after generation after generation...He believed in Government constantly being reformed by reason and popular will. That is what this administration is trying to do now.

Clinton’s explicit effort to claim Jefferson’s approval of his policy agenda did not go unnoticed in the contemporary press. Newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *Houston Chronicle* recognised the president’s motive. Clinton, explained the latter, had

⁴² Clinton, ‘Remarks Following a Screening of Excerpts From the Film "Thomas Jefferson"', February 11, 1997’.

⁴³ Clinton, ‘Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993’.

‘used’ his speech upon Jefferson’s Bicentennial ‘to renew his call for economic change’. He aimed ‘to stir up support for his jobs bill by telling a large crowd that Jefferson would have been “profoundly disturbed” that America is having “a difficult time finding enough jobs” for its people.’ Certainly, few presidential addresses have appropriated the memory of the Founding Fathers in such overt terms. Drawing his speech to a close, Clinton reaffirmed that, in pursuing economic and social change, his administration would act in the spirit of ‘Jefferson’s rich legacy’, of whose ‘timeless values’ he and all Americans were ‘inheritors’.⁴⁴

Throughout his presidency, Clinton maintained the association in his public rhetoric. Jefferson’s belief, as the president put it, in ‘the absolute imperative of changing as times change’ was cited as the inspiration behind various government initiatives, from the efforts to widen access to information technology to the ‘Goals 2000’ programme in education.⁴⁵ It is interesting to consider that, on most of these occasions, Clinton was able to maintain the association of Jefferson with progress and reform without citing specific statements that the Virginian made on the subject. The reality is that, unlike his explicit remarks on the dangers of overbearing federal authority, Jefferson offered few comments directly supportive of the broadly liberal policies advanced by Clinton and his Democratic predecessors. There were exceptions: Jefferson’s aforementioned words to General Kosciusko on taxing the wealthy implied a concern for the welfare of the common citizen. Reflecting, moreover, on the economic inequality he perceived during his visits to France, he wrote to Madison in October 1785 of the division that attends the concentration of wealth and property in the hands of an elite minority. The result was ‘misery’ for ‘the bulk of mankind’. ‘The earth’, he continued, ‘is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on’; this is a ‘natural right’. As such government should install measures to ensure that ‘as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land’.⁴⁶ It has not, however, been to comments such as these that Democratic presidents have drawn attention. Instead, they have sought sanction for their progressive policies simply in Jefferson’s professed commitment to change and advancement.

⁴⁴ Greg MacDonald, ‘President renews call for stimulus/Clinton says slump in jobs would have upset Jefferson’, *Houston Chronicle*, April 14, 1993; Clinton, ‘Remarks on the Observance of the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1993’; *The Washington Post* similarly noted how Clinton had used the celebration of Jefferson’s birth to offer ‘a parable on change’, comparing the struggles Jefferson endured while building support for the Louisiana Purchase with Clinton’s efforts to push a multi-billion dollar economic stimulus package through Congress. See Ann Devroy, ‘Jefferson Would Agree U.S. Needs “Change”, Clinton Says’, *The Washington Post*, April 13, 1993.

⁴⁵ Clinton, ‘Remarks on the Observance of the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1993’; ‘Remarks on Efforts To Bridge the Digital Divide, April 4, 2000’; ‘Remarks at a Town Meeting on Goals 2000, April 13, 1993’.

⁴⁶ ‘Jefferson to James Madison, October 28, 1785’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 841.

The ‘earth belongs to the living’, affirmed Jefferson in an oft-quoted letter to Madison in September 1789. It is this forward-thinking spirit that Democrats have found cause to invoke in their public rhetoric. Jefferson’s words to Madison, said Clinton in one speech, represented the crux of the former’s outlook. It was the primary reason why ‘he seems so new to us today’.⁴⁷ Clinton touched on a critical point. While others among the nation’s Founders remain more deeply rooted in their own time, correspondingly less adaptable to the topics of modern presidential rhetoric, Jefferson can be cited as an enduring and relevant source of guidance.⁴⁸ Democrats can appeal to the Founder’s progressivism just as Republicans can invoke his libertarian stance on government. Presidents of both parties have explicitly laid claim to his ideological inheritance while positioning their opponents at odds with his vision. Writing on a wealth of subjects and recording remarks adaptable both to modern contexts and to different political arguments, Jefferson is, for presidential speechwriters, comfortably the most ‘usable’ of the Founding Fathers. Indeed, there remains an important facet of Jefferson’s ideology that we have not yet considered. Less the reserve of partisan politics, post-war presidents of both parties have found value in referencing Jefferson in discussing foreign policy.

Jefferson: democratic imperialist

Anyone familiar with American presidential rhetoric will recognise the prevalence with which the United States is presented as a unique and superior country, a model to the world and a beacon of democracy. It was a belief established during the founding era, solidified in George Washington’s Inaugural Address as he staked the ‘destiny of the republican model of government...on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.’⁴⁹ Similar sentiments can be found within the writings of all the leading Founders, such was the optimistic faith in the superiority of the government they were endeavouring to shape. However, the chief advocate of a democratic America to which other nations would forever aspire was Thomas Jefferson.

⁴⁷ ‘Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 963; Clinton, ‘Remarks at the Thomas Jefferson Dinner, April 11, 1994’.

⁴⁸ John Adams provides perhaps the most obvious contrast. Although a prominent figure of the era, his politics and his language are ill-suited to modern times. His words on constitutionalism and liberty were embedded in the ideas of the age, while he advanced an elitist perspective on politics unpalatable to either side of the modern party divide. Arguing that government and suffrage should be confined to educated and propertied men, his letter to a correspondent in May 1776 was typical: ‘Such is the frailty of the human heart that very few men, who have no property, have any judgement of their own’. See ‘John Adams to James Sullivan, May 26, 1776’, *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. IV ed. by Robert J. Taylor (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1979), p. 210.

⁴⁹ George Washington, ‘Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789’.

It was he who first described, in his Inaugural Address, the United States government as the ‘world’s best hope’.⁵⁰ Despite, moreover, the concerns that entered his thoughts on the nation’s future in his later life, Jefferson’s correspondence reveals a consistent faith in the positive influence America would continue to have on other nations. Observing in 1816 the shift towards representative government in Belgium, Prussia and elsewhere, he identified the United States as their source of inspiration:

That same light from our West seems to have spread and illuminated the very engines employed to extinguish it. It has given them a glimmering of their rights and their power. The idea of representative government has taken root and growth among them.

He was confident that, where other nations may falter, America would remain a beacon of democracy. Writing to Adams in 1821 he explained,

Should the cloud of barbarism and despotism again obscure the science and liberties of Europe, this country remains to preserve and restore light and liberty to them. In short, the flames kindled on the 4th. of July 1776, have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism.⁵¹

This confidence in the influential reach of republican values fed into Jefferson’s vision of an expanding ‘empire of liberty’, a union of republics founded in America’s image.⁵² He perceived his own Declaration of Independence to be a message to all nations, describing in the last letter he wrote before his death his hopes regarding its continued influence:

May it be to the world what I believe it will (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.⁵³

Writing in his excellent study, *Jefferson’s Empire*, Peter Onuf positioned Jefferson’s notion of an ‘empire of liberty’ at the centre of American national identity. Although subsequent generations have sought continually to redefine themselves, ‘Jefferson’s

⁵⁰ Jefferson, ‘Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801’.

⁵¹ ‘Jefferson to John Adams, January 11, 1816’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1376; ‘Jefferson to John Adams, September 12, 1821’, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 575.

⁵² Jefferson alluded to his conception of an ‘empire of liberty’ on several occasions. See ‘Jefferson to James Madison, April 27, 1809’, *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, Vol. 1, ed. by Robert A. Rutland et al (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), pp. 139–141.

⁵³ ‘Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826’, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1517.

conception of American nationhood has been the touchstone for all these definitions, their deepest source.⁵⁴ This explains in part the consistency with which presidents have drawn on Jefferson in rhetoric concerned with defining America's place in the world and the values underpinning the nation's foreign policy. His was not an imperialist vision in the conventional sense associated with the empires of Britain and others. Yet in presenting America as an example to others Jefferson established a definition of national purpose clearly audible in twentieth century portrayals of the United States as the chief defender and exporter of democracy.

With regard to each major foreign policy engagement since the mid-twentieth century, Jefferson's conception of America as a bastion of liberty has been revisited in the public rhetoric of presidents. Perhaps until the last ten years, however, this theme was at its most prominent in speeches concerning the Cold War, particularly during its early development. Roosevelt, in his portrayal of the struggle against fascism, then Truman and Eisenhower with regard to the threat of communism, established in the 1940s and 1950s a rhetoric of ideological conflict, positioning the United States as the leading exponent of liberty in a global battle against tyranny. With the Marshall Plan and the introduction of a policy of containment regarding the spread of communism, the Truman administration established America as an active defender of the world's democracies, first financially then, with the conflict in Korea, militarily. It was against this backdrop that Truman explained the relevance of Princeton University's publication of the first volumes of the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* in May 1950:

Today, when democracy is facing the greatest challenge in its history, the spirit which Jefferson expressed in his battle against tyranny, and in his search for human liberty, stands out as a beacon of inspiration for free peoples throughout the world. Jefferson lived in a time of great struggle, when this Nation was trying to establish itself as a democracy of free men. We today, in a different time and under different conditions, are in a great struggle to preserve and expand human freedom.

Presenting the Soviet Union as a threat to democracy comparable, indeed superior, to that faced by American patriots during and following the Revolution, the president affirmed that Jefferson would remain a guiding symbol of inspiration, a 'reservoir of hope and faith' during the nation's efforts to contain the spread of communism. In more than one foreign policy speech, Truman returned to Jefferson's words, stressing as he did at the Jefferson-

⁵⁴ Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire*, p. 4.

Jackson Dinner in February 1949 that, in its commitment to defending human rights across the world, America remained ‘the world’s best hope’, engaged as Jefferson had put it 150 years before, in ‘the full tide of a successful experiment’.⁵⁵

President Eisenhower maintained the sentiment, establishing at the outset of his presidency his belief that America was responsible for ‘the free world’s leadership’.⁵⁶ Indeed, as Mary Stuckey has emphasised, Eisenhower’s invocations of the founding era related almost exclusively to his presentation of the United States as an ‘exemplar of democracy’ during the Cold War. Promoting a mythologized history of the nation’s origins, he spoke as Washington had of the democratic mission then established. He then applied this conception of national character to the contemporary ‘exigencies of international political action’.⁵⁷ ‘The American experiment’, explained Eisenhower in his second Inaugural Address, had always been an inspiration to other nations, firing ‘the passion and the courage of millions...seeking freedom, equality, opportunity.’ Yet, much to the ‘amazement’ of Americans, communist states ‘rejected...[the] revolutionary doctrines of our free society’.⁵⁸ Although Jefferson’s name was largely absent from Eisenhower’s treatment of the theme, echoes of the Founder’s words remained clearly perceptible. They were employed more conspicuously in the rhetoric of Eisenhower’s Democratic successors.

Kennedy was carried to the White House on a wave of bold rhetoric, proudly proclaiming in his Inaugural Address that the nation had been granted ‘the role of defending freedom’. There was optimism then in repeating Jefferson’s observation in 1820 that ‘the disease of liberty is catching’. Subject to much scorn and criticism among his contemporary opponents, Jefferson’s faith in the infectious character of America’s model of representative government was assured. His comments to Lafayette on the political changes unfolding in southern Europe were therefore typical and provided for Kennedy in the midst of the Cold War another memorable phrase for his rhetorical arsenal.⁵⁹ Indeed, the president suggested in the days preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis that the United States’ foreign policy was predicated on ‘the strong belief that the disease of liberty, as

⁵⁵ Truman, ‘136 - Address on the Occasion of the Publication of the First Volume of the Jefferson Papers, May 17, 1950’; ‘39 - Address at the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, February 24, 1949’; Jefferson, ‘Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.’

⁵⁶ Eisenhower, ‘1 - Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953’.

⁵⁷ Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 244.

⁵⁸ Eisenhower, ‘15 - Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957’; ‘128 - Address at the Columbia University National Bicentennial Dinner, New York City, May 31, 1954’.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, ‘1 - Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961’; ‘Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette, December 26, 1820’, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib023955>) [20/08/13].

Thomas Jefferson called it, will finally catch and sweep the world'. Returning to the theme a week later in New York, Kennedy encouraged a more direct association with the policies of his administration. Efforts, for example, to build economic ties with Poland were highlighted as methods aimed at permitting 'the disease of liberty' to take root 'behind the Iron Curtain'.⁶⁰

Lyndon Johnson inherited the phrase. Frequently at pains to stress that the war in Vietnam was aimed at securing the 'fruits of freedom' for the Vietnamese people, Johnson found optimism in noting the democratic advances of other Asian countries. Returning from a two-week trip to the continent in November 1966, the president spoke of the evidence he had seen that 'the disease of liberty [was] catching'. Indeed, he continued, 'the words Thomas Jefferson spoke more than one hundred years ago are truer today than they were when he spoke them.' A year later, as opposition to the war grew, Johnson's speechwriters mined the Founder's writings further still, incorporating a pertinent quotation on national unity into the president's Veterans' Day address. Explicitly aligning the nation's aims in Vietnam with Jefferson's words, Johnson affirmed:

There is a phrase from our history that says it well. "The cement of this Union is the heart blood of every American."

Thomas Jefferson saw it truly. His faith has long been true of us...At this moment in Vietnam, thousands of young Americans march with Jefferson. Tragically, but selflessly, they spill their "heart's blood" to defend again the vital interests of our Union - and of that wider union of free men.⁶¹

As the conflict in Vietnam wore on in the face of growing opposition, the optimistic, virtuous rhetoric of the president must have sounded increasingly hollow. Nevertheless, Richard Nixon continued to draw on Jefferson's words in maintaining the virtue of the country's foreign policy objectives. Just as Kennedy's writers had, Nixon's settled upon a favourite quotation in their efforts to emphasise the selfless motives of the United States, in Vietnam and more widely. In several speeches, throughout his presidency, he returned to Jefferson's assertion in July 1802 that America, in creating a model of representative government, acted 'not for ourselves alone, but for the whole

⁶⁰ Kennedy, '439 - Remarks at the Hippodrome Arena in St. Paul, Minnesota, October 6, 1962'; '461 - Remarks at the Pulaski Day Parade, Buffalo, New York, October 14, 1962'.

⁶¹ Johnson, '86 - Remarks in New York City Upon Receiving the National Freedom Award, February 23, 1966'; '573 - Remarks Upon Signing Bills Relating to Health and Education, November 3, 1966'; '485 - The President's Veterans Day Tour of Military Installations, November 10, 1967'. Jefferson's 'heart blood' quotation is drawn from 'Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette, February 14, 1815', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1364.

human race'.⁶² Nixon had accepted his party's nomination for the presidency with an affirmation of these words; they were repeated in his first State of the Union address, and again in numerous speeches concerned with the nation's role in the world. It had been, he liked to comment, a 'presumptuous thing' for Jefferson to say of a fledgling nation. Such language had however instilled Americans with a 'sense of greatness' essential to their subsequent development and intrinsic to the inspirational influence they were to have on other nations. Renewing this 'sense of mission', Nixon told one conservative audience, was a key aim of his administration.⁶³

This patriotic assumption of American greatness is of course almost a prerequisite of presidential rhetoric. As Seymour Lipset and others have explored, the language of American nationalism relies on a continued belief in the strength, indeed the superiority, of their society.⁶⁴ This then is a universally appealing and necessary theme in the oratory of the president. Some though have elected to emphasise it more than others. The confident bombast of Reagan's foreign policy rhetoric is an obvious example. Yet, despite his fondness for both invoking Jefferson and presenting the United States as a model to others – John Winthrop's 'city on a hill' – Reagan rarely combined the two, preferring, as we have heard, to draw on the words of Thomas Paine in considering America's role in the world.⁶⁵ In contrast, George W. Bush, in many respects Reagan's successor as a preacher of the nation's ideological superiority and democratizing influence, found Jefferson to be a useful source in defending the foreign policy approach of his administration. Speaking during, he conceded, his first visit to Monticello on July 4, 2008, Bush stressed, as Nixon had, that Jefferson intended the rights of which he wrote to be secured by 'all mankind'. Aligning this objective with the nation's then current military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush reiterated Jefferson's hopes regarding the 'chain-bursting' influence of the Declaration of Independence, before continuing:

⁶² 'Jefferson to David Hall, July 6, 1802', *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib011517>) [20/08/13].

⁶³ Nixon, 'Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago July 28, 1960'; '201 - Remarks at the 50th Anniversary Convention of the United States Jaycees in St. Louis, Missouri, June 25, 1970'; '113 - Remarks at the 83d Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 18, 1974'.

⁶⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996); Michael Kammen, 'The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration', *American Quarterly* 45:1 (1993).

⁶⁵ Reagan famously cited Winthrop's words in numerous speeches. The United States remained, he affirmed, 'a shining city on a hill'. See, for example, Reagan, 'Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, August 23, 1984'. For an analysis of Reagan's 'civil religious' language on American exceptionalism, see Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey, Edward Yager and Saadi Lahlou, 'Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique - But Statistically, How Unique?', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42:3 (2012).

We honor Jefferson's legacy by aiding the rise of liberty in lands that do not know the blessings of freedom. And on this Fourth of July, we pay tribute to the brave men and women who wear the uniform of the United States of America.⁶⁶

Given Jefferson's intrinsic link to the democratic principles enshrined in the Declaration, ideals which he believed could be a liberating 'light' to all nations, he represented an apposite reference point in Bush's address. The Virginian has commonly been perceived, as Clinton once put it, as 'the embodiment of [America's] eternal quest for democracy'.⁶⁷ One cannot help but wonder, however, how comfortable Jefferson would have been to hear his name appropriated essentially in justification of military action. Without doubt, a restless nationalism can be detected in his frequent comments promoting and foreseeing the expansion of America's republican ideals. However, it is notable that the two presidents of the post-war period most concerned with softening American foreign policy rhetoric turned also to Jefferson for support.

Presidents Carter and Obama both entered the presidency with a self-consciously more humble and conciliatory voice regarding the country's role in the world than that adopted by their predecessors.⁶⁸ Carter, speaking in celebration of the peace preserved during his administration, and Obama, promoting in Cairo the primacy of diplomacy in alleviating tension between the United States and Muslim countries, both quoted a letter sent by Jefferson to the Pennsylvanian politician and businessman, Thomas Leiper, in 1815. Therein Jefferson, reflecting on Napoleon Bonaparte's return to power in France, recognised the likelihood that the United States would in the future enjoy sufficient strength to wield power over other nations, to 'shake the rod over the heads of all'. His hope though, as Carter and Obama reminded their audiences, was that 'our wisdom will grow with our power and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be.'⁶⁹

More than anything, what Carter and Obama's usage of Jefferson confirmed again was the malleability of the Founder's words and legacy. A voice of sanction as Johnson and later Bush sought to justify the nation's engagement in war, Jefferson could equally provide words of caution and restraint. Indeed, citing the message of isolationism famously

⁶⁶ Bush, 'Remarks at an Independence Day Celebration and Naturalization Ceremony in Charlottesville, Virginia, July 4, 2008'.

⁶⁷ Clinton, 'Remarks at a Reception for Members of the Diplomatic Corps, June 15, 1993'.

⁶⁸ Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp. 37-9; John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 113-5.

⁶⁹ Carter, 'Remarks at the State Democratic Party's Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, April 7, 1979'; Obama, 'Remarks in Cairo, June 4, 2009'; 'Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, June 12, 1815, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib022066>) [20/08/13].

promoted in the Virginian's first Inaugural Address, a recent commentary on Obama's foreign policy described the president's 'soft power' approach as 'Jeffersonian'.⁷⁰ It is not my aim, however, to judge the relative merit of these presidents' competing claims to Jefferson's legacy. On the contrary, the most significant conclusion that emerges from the diversity of subjects and positions with regard to which Jefferson has been invoked, is that there are innumerable contexts in which his words can appear pertinent. Progressive and libertarian, 'imperialist' and isolationist, the ambiguous and multifaceted Virginian represents a persistently usable source.

Conclusion

Writing to James Madison in the last months of his life, Jefferson asked of his friend a final favour: 'Take care of me when dead'. Rarely doubtful of the nation's future success, Jefferson nevertheless worried about the distortion of the history of its birth. His reputation and that of his fellow Founders was precious to him. He wished to be celebrated for his considerable achievements as a politician and a scholar, not as the saint-like symbol of American democracy that he was to become. Indeed, he kept, as we have seen, an insistent eye on the future, promoting change and constant evolution in line with the progress of human society. Governments, for Jefferson, should not be burdened by the past but prepared to respond to their own experience and circumstances. 'Forty years of experience in government', he affirmed, 'is worth a century of book-reading; and this [the founding generation] would say themselves, were they to rise from the dead'.⁷¹

Contrary to Jefferson's wishes, a mythologised history of the nation's origins remains a prevalent component of presidential rhetoric, the words and deeds of the Founders consistently presented as a guide to contemporary Americans. Within this heritage, no figure has been invoked more widely than Jefferson himself as speechwriters have mined his extensive writings for language appropriate to a diverse range of issues, contexts and agendas. Doubtless the eloquence and accessibility of his prose appeals to those responsible for penning the president's speeches. Jefferson's writing, recalled one eulogist in 1826, was 'consummately beautiful'.⁷² Certainly he was responsible for many

⁷⁰ Scott Horton, 'Jefferson on the Utility of Soft Power', *Harper's Magazine* (March 11, 2008). See also, Walter Russell Meade, 'The Carter Syndrome', *Foreign Policy Magazine* (Jan/Feb. 2010); Jefferson famously warned against forming 'entangling alliances': Jefferson, 'Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801'.

⁷¹ 'Jefferson to James Madison, February 17, 1826', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1515; 'Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816', *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p.1401.

⁷² Caleb Cushing, 'Eulogy, pronounced at Newburyport, Massachusetts, July 15, 1826', *A selection of eulogies*, p. 28.

of the most memorable phrases of the era, several of which have appeared recurrently in the mouths of modern presidents. However, this chapter has suggested that the primary explanation for the prevalence of Jefferson and his writings in presidential rhetoric relates, first, to his elevated status as a symbol of American democracy and second, to the unique malleability of his words and legacy.

Merrill Peterson summarised well the reasons for Jefferson's posthumous elevation in the nineteenth century, placing him at the centre of the mythology under which the Founding Fathers were increasingly shrouded. 'The habits of patriotic ritual', explained Peterson, 'combined with the force of his thought and example kept Jefferson's memory green. Ironically, the rebel against the past was fated to become the great idol of republican tradition.'⁷³ Inseparable from the principles he had articulated in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson became synonymous with the democratic values deemed to unite and guide the nation. On the many occasions in which American presidents reflect upon the nation's democratic heritage in their public rhetoric, Jefferson is consequently a common source of reference. More significant though is the remarkable diversity of contexts in which his name has been invoked, across the political spectrum. We have heard his words referenced with regard to liberal reform and conservative taxation, government decentralisation and foreign policy. Indeed, the numerous examples I have presented represent only a fraction of the occasions in which presidents have cited Jefferson's name in the last seven decades. I could have added, for instance, the persistence with which the Virginian has been invoked in relation to education policy. Firmly associated with learning and the liberating benefits of education, his many words on the subject have been cited by presidents across the period.⁷⁴ In short, the breadth of issues on which he wrote, together with his close connection to the defining acts and driving principles of the founding era, have made Jefferson the most adaptable source for presidential speechwriters of all the Founding Fathers.

Given the manner in which presidents have employed Jefferson's words in their speeches, there is no doubting the value they have perceived in associating their political position and, very often, their specific policies with the Founder's legacy. Indeed, I have noted several occasions in which efforts have been made to delegitimize the claims that

⁷³ Peterson, p.8.

⁷⁴ Most commonly quoted on the subject of education was Jefferson's 1816 observation, 'If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was and never will be'. ('Jefferson to Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816', *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1: General Correspondence* (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib022264>) [20/08/13].) Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan and Bush senior each cited the quotation in promoting their education policies. See, for example, Kennedy, '499 - Address in Miami at the Opening of the AFL-CIO Convention, December 7, 1961' and Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Education, March 12, 1983'.

opponents might make to Jefferson's political inheritance. The explanation lies in the Virginian's continued status as an emblem of the nation's political traditions. He recorded statements, as we have seen, capable of reflecting the arguments of modern Republicans and Democrats alike. While Reagan, for example, could cite Jefferson's libertarian pronouncements, Johnson could note his progressive spirit; both, in this sense, could claim the Founder's ideological mantle. In the assessment of Garry Wills, it is the flexibility – indeed, the ambiguity – of Jefferson's political legacy that has made him such a persistently usable figure in American politics. Above all a 'vague idealist', he has been 'hard to understand but easy to use'. Regardless of the specifics of Jefferson's political thought, his connection to the undisputed principles stated in the Declaration of Independence ensures that, for most Americans, he represents a resonant voice of wisdom and virtue. It is on this basis that presidents have turned to him for support and sanction. As Peter Onuf explained in noting the sense of legitimacy that appropriations of the Founder could lend discussions of foreign policy, 'by invoking Jefferson's vision Americans could assure themselves that their great power would only be exercised for good purposes, to serve the interest of mankind'.⁷⁵

Significantly, presidents continued to appropriate Jefferson's words and legacy throughout the post-war period despite fluctuations in the Founder's reputation as political scholars and historians have perceived it. As Francis Cogliano noted, Jefferson's status was at its height in the 1940s and 1950s. His sculpted face on Mount Rushmore, his memorial in the capital, and the publication of the first volumes of Dumas Malone's admiring biography and Princeton University's *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*: together these helped to establish Jefferson as an American hero, the champion of democracy and freedom so applicable to the rhetoric of Roosevelt and Truman during the last years of World War II and the onset of the Cold War.⁷⁶ More notable though is the persistence of adulatory references to Jefferson during the 1960s, despite the backdrop of the civil rights struggle and increasingly critical new scholarship. Work by Leonard Levy, Winthrop Jordan and William Cohen exposed the incompatibility of Jefferson's words on equality with his attitude to race and slavery.⁷⁷ Indeed, despite the continued interjection of more favourable

⁷⁵ Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Double-Day & Co, 1978), p. 362; Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire*, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Cogliano, pp.6-7.

⁷⁷ Leonard Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); William Cohen, 'Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery', *The Journal of American History* 56:3 (1969), pp. 503-526.

appraisals, these studies marked the beginning of a more critical trend in historiography that was to continue into the last decade of the century.⁷⁸

Yet, presidents throughout this period continued to invoke Jefferson in positive terms, from the competing efforts of Nixon and Kennedy to claim his inheritance in the 1960s, to the speeches in which Clinton presented the Virginian as a personal source of inspiration in the 1990s. The explanation lies, I suggest, in the relative importance of academic and public opinion to politicians and speechwriters. Presidents can continue to reference Jefferson because, despite the criticism and ambiguity debated among scholars, his image in the public mind remains largely untainted. His unbreakable connection to the nation's celebrated origins and the political principles then enshrined ensures that his popular image remains, as Joseph Ellis put it, 'immune to scholarly scepticism'.⁷⁹ As a source, moreover, of myriad memorable quotations still pertinent to a wealth of subjects and political arguments, Jefferson's usefulness to presidential speechwriters simply outweighs any concerns regarding academic opinion. He is a uniquely malleable figure. Of all the celebrated Founders of the United States, the legacy of no other has been cited, manipulated, claimed and counter-claimed quite like that of Peterson's 'man of many faces'.

⁷⁸ In 1996, Conor Cruise O'Brien offered a striking statement of criticism that provoked responses within the academy illustrative of what Cogliano deemed the new 'defence/attack paradigm' in scholarly treatments of Jefferson. O'Brien's article, 'Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist', predicted the imminent removal of the Virginian from the 'American civil religion' as his vision of a 'monoracial' and radically libertarian nation became inescapably incompatible with a political culture aspiring to be both multiracial and politically moderate. See Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist', *The Atlantic* 278:4 (1996) and Cogliano, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Ellis, p. 10.

IV. Conclusion

On the morning of September 12, 2010 I stood on a traffic island in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. with a notebook and a camera, watching the approach of a 'Taxpayer March' organised by the Tea Party movement. On this, my first visit to the United States, I was reminded of the Canadian scholar Sacvan Bercovitch's comment that he encountered American political culture in the 1960s with 'an anthropologist's sense of wonder at the symbols of the tribe'.¹ Bedecked in red, white and blue, the flood of marchers approached, holding aloft a host of placards. 'Return to the Founders', proclaimed one; 'Protect the Constitution', read several others. Patrick Henry's words, 'Give me liberty or give me death', were emblazoned across a banner; another showed an image of George Washington, shedding a tear at the tax policies of the Obama administration. Thousands of similar images and messages accompanied the march on its way to the Capitol building, beneath which a series of speakers denounced the government's federal spending plans as a betrayal of the Founding Fathers' vision for America.

One could find in the rise of the Tea Party during Obama's first term in the White House several lessons about contemporary American political culture: a disillusionment with party politics, the strong appeal to many Americans of libertarian ideology and social conservatism, and, for some, a distrust of an individual president on the basis of beliefs ranging from the political to the racist. Perhaps more than anything though, the Tea Party demonstrated the centrality of the founding heritage in American culture and political discourse. For Jill Lepore, the arguments of the movement's devotees could be described as 'historical fundamentalism'. From 'the point of view of historical analysis', she wrote, "'What would the founders do?'" is...an ill-considered, unanswerable question, and pointless, too.² However, asking this question, recalling the achievements of the leaders who shaped the nation, and celebrating the continued relevance of their legacy is not solely the reserve of a 'fundamentalist' political movement. On the contrary, this thesis has

¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, 'The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual and the Ideology of American Consensus' in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* ed. by Sam B. Girgus (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), p. 6.

² Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 124. For the opinions of Tea Party activists on Obama, see Lepore, p. 136.

demonstrated that such allusions to the founding heritage are a regular and meaningful fixture in the speeches of modern American presidents.

As the examples considered over the course of these pages have revealed, in post-1945 presidential discourse, references to the memory of the Founding Fathers, their writings and their deeds have been far from ‘pointless’. This is not hollow rhetoric, employed without motive or merit. The persistent prevalence of this language and the diversity of circumstances in which it has been employed indicate that presidents and their speechwriters have perceived real value in its use. I have argued that the founding era has represented a distinctly usable past for modern American leaders, invoked in their public speeches for particular purposes and in specific contexts. Indeed, by reflecting on the manner in which different elements of this heritage have been invoked by presidents across the last seven decades, we can conclude that this rhetoric has served three, sometimes overlapping, purposes in presidential oratory. It has been employed, firstly, in reaffirmations of national identity, secondly, in discussing specific issues with regard to which the Founders and their work are associated in the collective memory of Americans and, thirdly, as presidents have sought to legitimate and promote their political agenda.

Certainly the most persistent allusions to the founding heritage in post-war presidential rhetoric have pertained to the rehearsal of national values. Reinforcing the public’s perception of national identity is a central obligation of what Jeffrey Tulis called ‘the rhetorical presidency’. In countless speeches throughout the period, presidents of both parties have reaffirmed that the nation’s sense of purpose and identity is rooted in the continued commitment of Americans to the democratic principles established by the Founding Fathers and enshrined in the founding documents. While recent scholarship has rightly challenged the notion of ideological consensus established by Louis Hartz and others in the mid-twentieth century, it is still in terms of a core set of political values that presidents articulate a sense of national purpose.³ ‘There is no American race’, explained George W. Bush following a naturalization ceremony in July 2008, ‘just an American creed’. Invoking the Declaration of Independence in which the principles of this creed are most precisely articulated, Jimmy Carter emphasised during his Farewell Address in January 1981 the obligation of Americans to preserve their founding ideals. ‘Our American values are not luxuries’, he affirmed, ‘but necessities - not the salt in our bread, but the

³ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); As discussed in Chapter 1, several scholars have noted the impact that inequalities and tensions in American society have had on the character of political discourse. See, notably, Michael Foley, *American Credo: The Place of Ideas in US Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Rogers S. Smith, ‘Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: the Multiple Traditions in America’, *American Political Science Review* 87:3 (1993).

bread itself. Our common vision of a free and just society is our greatest source of cohesion'. This suggestion that a set of ideals defines the aspirations of all Americans is a powerful, unifying message. It irons over the significant differences and divisions within American society, promoting, as Mary Stuckey put it, 'a univocal understanding' of identity and 'a sense of national mission'.⁴

Consistently, presidents have reiterated this message by reminding audiences that the Revolutionary era was the source of the democratic principles that continue to guide the nation. Indeed, so established is the notion that the unity and direction of the country is reliant on the preservation of these principles that presidents have frequently sought to emphasise the continuity and inheritance of the Founders' values. As Chapter 2 illustrated, this rhetoric has often formed an effective response to contemporary problems and periods of uncertainty. Both Truman and Eisenhower, for example, reassured the public that Americans would overcome the threat of communism by retaining 'faith' in their founding values. Later, for Nixon, a rededication to the 'principles set down in the founding documents' and to the 'Spirit of '76' was presented as an antidote to the division engendered by the Vietnam War. Confidence, then, in the endurance and future prospects of the nation has repeatedly been encouraged through reference to the achievements of the Founders and the maintenance of the ideals they established. One affirmation by Eisenhower in 1959 was typical: 'so long as we never waver in our devotion to the values on which these men began the building of this new nation', America will continue 'on her upward course'.⁵

The founding heritage therefore provides an intrinsically patriotic rhetoric and an essential source during the innumerable speeches in which presidents reflect on the character and continued relevance of the nation's defining values. To suggest, as Nixon did, that the American Revolution was 'unfinished' and 'permanent', persistently expanding with the progress of the nation, is an appealing message; so too is the insistence, as Johnson put it in 1965, that Americans must continue to 'earn' the 'heritage' bequeathed by the Founders, bringing 'new meaning' to an 'old mission'. Such language, common to the speeches of every president since 1945, reinforces the sense that the nation's founding heritage is not confined to the past but rather remains central to both the direction of

⁴ George W. Bush, 'The President's Radio Address, July 5, 2008'; Jimmy Carter, 'Farewell Address to the Nation, January 14, 1981'; Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 16.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, 'Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801'; Harry S. Truman, '366 - Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 7, 1953'; Richard Nixon, '220 - Remarks of the President, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and Speaker of the House Carl Albert at a Ceremony Opening the American Revolution Bicentennial Era, July 3, 1971'; Dwight D. Eisenhower, '151 - Remarks at the Cornerstone-Laying Ceremony for the Extension of the United States Capitol, July 4, 1959'.

American politics and the responsibilities of citizenship. It represents, as Truman so memorably put it, ‘a living faith’.⁶ Indeed, the history and lessons of the Revolutionary era remain sufficiently prominent in the consciousness of Americans that presidents have been able to invoke this heritage with regard to specific contemporary issues and circumstances.

By considering the manner in which distinct elements of the founding heritage have been employed in presidential speeches, I have shown that these elements have specific associations that presidents have been able to exploit in addressing particular issues. In their frequent discussions of national identity, it is to the founding documents that presidents most consistently turn. Gerald Ford explained the connection most succinctly during the United States’ Bicentennial: ‘To be an American is to subscribe to those principles which the Declaration of Independence proclaims and the Constitution protects’. Since 1945 we have repeatedly heard presidents assert that these documents must be regarded as more than historical relics. As George H.W. Bush affirmed in 1991, echoing the words with which Truman had dedicated the rotunda at the National Archives in the 1950s, these texts ‘are not simply dry ink markings on a brittle, old parchment; they [represent] the spirit that animates the American Nation’.⁷ Perceived as a distinct statement of timeless principles and containing eloquent language familiar to all Americans, the Declaration is a favourite source for speechwriters. In calling for a renewal of the Founders’ values in times of difficulty, in defining America’s role in the world, and in stating the overarching principles that guide the government’s approach to policymaking, presidents across the party divide have frequently invoked Jefferson’s revered text. References to the Constitution, meanwhile, have featured most prominently in speeches related to the character and endurance of the American political system itself.

I have illustrated too that individual figures among the nation’s Founders have associations that have rendered them a usable source of reference in specific circumstances. None have been invoked in post-war presidential rhetoric more often than George Washington. Recalled as the ‘Father of the Country’, his name has often been cited as American leaders have reflected upon the nation’s origins and the continued traditions of

⁶ Nixon, ‘220 - Remarks of the President, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and Speaker of the House Carl Albert at a Ceremony Opening the American Revolution Bicentennial Era, July 3, 1971’; Nixon, ‘147 - Remarks at the 80th Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, April 19, 1971’; Lyndon B. Johnson, ‘27 - The President’s Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965’; Truman, ‘347 - Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, December 15, 1952’.

⁷ Gerald R. Ford, ‘649 - Remarks at Naturalization Ceremonies at Monticello, Virginia, July 5, 1976’; George H.W. Bush, ‘Remarks at the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights Luncheon at Montpelier in Orange County, Virginia, December 16, 1991’.

the presidency. It is upon the popular, symbolic image of the military hero and the virtuous leader that presidents have drawn more specifically. Allusions to the sacrifice and resolve displayed by Washington and his army during the Revolutionary War have recurrently been used to instil confidence in the ability of Americans to overcome contemporary challenges, from the communist threat during the Cold War to the economic crisis of recent years. The venerated first president has been portrayed as a model to be emulated, both as an emblem of national endurance and as a figure of pious and virtuous character. In addressing the specific issues of national defence and the role of religion in society, Washington's words have proved apposite. Benjamin Franklin, meanwhile, has proved a rich source of pithy and pertinent quotations with regard to topics ranging from international diplomacy to science. A familiar figure in the minds of Americans and more accessible than the remote and austere Washington, modern presidents have been able to exploit the firm association that Franklin has with these and other subjects. As the example of Thomas Paine revealed, however, the employment of these figures in presidential speechwriting does not always reflect the expectations that an understanding of their eighteenth century status engenders. Less burdened in the modern era by the radical and anticlerical associations that had rendered him an undesirable source for earlier politicians, Paine has proved a prominent feature in several notable speeches in the last seven decades. His *Crisis* essays have become a favourite source of inspiring rhetoric in the face of contemporary problems. The bold optimism of his pronouncements in *Common Sense*, meanwhile, were a germane source for Kennedy as he promoted his internationalist message in the 1960s and, most strikingly, for Reagan as he sought to portray his political programme as a 'new beginning'.⁸

That presidents should return with such persistence to the Founders in their speeches is, I have suggested, evidence of the resonance that these historical figures have with the American public. So common are allusions to the founding heritage in American political discourse that this language is easily taken for granted. Consider, though, the public rhetoric of European political leaders: in few, if any, countries are the advisory words of historical figures invoked with such regularity in relation to current issues and contexts. This is, in itself, significant. Perhaps, however, the most striking observation of my thesis coalesced in my analysis of Thomas Jefferson. Such is the prominence of the founding heritage in the collective memory and the acceptance that the Founders

⁸ Ronald Reagan, 'Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit, July 17, 1980'.

established ideals essential to the continued direction of American politics that presidents have found political value in aligning their own agenda with the Founders' legacy.

The political principles enshrined in the founding documents and advanced in the writings of the Founding Fathers are considered, in essence, irrefutable. The work of several historians has established the faith which Americans place in the words of the Founders. My thesis has demonstrated that this faith presents an opportunity for presidents in their public speeches: by tying the policies of their administration to the United States' founding heritage, presidents can imply the legitimacy and virtue of their political agenda. Crucially, the adaptability of much of this heritage has allowed American leaders, of both parties and across the post-war period, to appropriate aspects of it that suit their purposes in distinct contexts and in advancing specific messages.

As a statement of abstract but cherished national principles, the Declaration of Independence has proved a particularly malleable source. In some cases its application has been common to leaders of both parties: it has repeatedly been invoked in support of foreign policy goals. From the speeches delivered by Truman in promoting the Marshall Plan, to the justifications offered by Clinton and Bush junior for the nation's military engagements in Bosnia and Afghanistan, policy aims have been framed in terms of advancing and defending the values of liberty and human rights articulated in the Declaration. It has, however, been with regard to domestic policy that the document's adaptability has been most clearly exposed. Differing interpretations of Jefferson's language have allowed presidents to align their position on various political, economic and social issues with the principles established in the text. Notably, while Republicans have defined the 'pursuit of happiness' in terms supportive of their emphasis on limited government and free enterprise, Democrats have appropriated the same phrase in promoting welfare and civil rights legislation. My intention here, as throughout the thesis, was not to judge which approach better reflected the intent and meaning of the Founders but rather to demonstrate that the Declaration *can* be appropriated on behalf of diverse and sometimes contrasting arguments as presidents seek sanction for their policies.

The persistence with which efforts have been made to align the Declaration with contemporary issues throughout the post-war period are in contrast to the picture of change that emerged from my analysis of the Constitution. Although consistently invoked as a symbol of the continuity in the American political system, the popularisation of the originalism debate in the 1980s has affected the manner in which presidents reference the document in discussing their own agenda. Crucially, for those supportive of an originalist

interpretation of the Constitution there is clear value in declaring the loyalty of their policies to the original intent of the framers. The comparative caution with which nonoriginalist Democrats have invoked the Constitution in their public rhetoric in the last twenty years stands as evidence that the founding heritage is not simply applied and adapted freely, regardless of the context, the audience and the speaker. Presidents employ elements of this history when it is pertinent to do so; the value of this rhetoric is determined by the circumstance and the manner in which it is applied.

This was demonstrated most definitively in my examination of presidential allusions to Thomas Jefferson. Such is the breadth of subjects on which the Virginian wrote and the flexibility of his political legacy that presidents on both sides of the party divide have been able to align their arguments with aspects of his character and thought. The most adaptable of all the Founders, Jefferson has correspondingly proved the most usable for presidential speechwriters. The competing and often explicit efforts of modern presidents to claim Jefferson's ideological inheritance leave the observer in little doubt of the political and rhetorical value perceived in appropriating the Founders' legacy.

Anyone familiar with American politics is well accustomed to hearing references to the nation's origins in the public oratory of presidents. However, my thesis has demonstrated that the employment of this rhetoric is more complicated than it initially appears. As the different usages recounted above make clear, modern American leaders have invoked the founding heritage for specific purposes, drawing on the elements of this history that best support their public message in distinct contexts. In fact, given the prevalence of this language in post-war presidential discourse, it seems certain that presidents and their speechwriters consider this rhetoric not only valuable, but necessary. They believe that the public expect and want to hear it. It has always been in terms of the political values established in the founding documents that Americans have been encouraged to understand their shared identity and continued sense of national purpose. The Founding Fathers, meanwhile, are firmly rooted in the public consciousness, understood as infallible figures to be admired and emulated. In this sense, American leaders must uphold the established traditions of discourse. Addressing new issues in language with which the public are familiar, presidents reaffirm the continuity in American politics and demonstrate their own fidelity to the Founders' incontestable legacy. To omit this rhetoric would be to neglect an essential facet of presidential communication: American leaders must pledge their loyalty to the nation's political heritage. Consequently, it is simply impossible to imagine a president not using this language.

In a modern era in which the reach of presidential oratory has grown in tandem with an expanding media, this established rhetoric has become ever more essential. Seeking words that can resound far beyond the ears of local audiences, the founding heritage has provided presidents with an inherently national language, yet one simultaneously capable of being adapted to suit distinct messages and contexts. Despite this overarching picture of permanence, however, we cannot be certain that the manner in which American leaders invoke specific elements of this heritage will remain static. As the impact of the originalism debate on the employment of the Constitution indicated, fluctuations in use do occur. Trends, moreover, are not always predictable: given the reputation of Thomas Paine in earlier decades, there was little reason to expect that the radical would become a favourite source for the conservative Reagan. One might speculate, for example, that John Adams' increased status in the public consciousness in recent years may prompt a greater role for him in the speeches of presidents. Perhaps in response to the popular attention afforded Adams in David McCullough's best-selling biography and HBO's *John Adams* mini-series, the Founder's name has appeared more frequently in the last decade, cited, indeed, by Presidents Bush and Obama in three July Fourth orations at the expense of the traditionally ubiquitous Jefferson.⁹

What we can be certain of is that the founding heritage will continue to be a prevalent fixture in the speeches of American presidents. This history is ingrained in the national psyche and essential to the terms in which Americans define the purpose and direction of their country. It will correspondingly remain necessary for presidents to stress each generation's inheritance of the Founders' cherished legacy. The adaptability of this uniquely usable past ensures that this task will be easily achieved, as presidents continue to appropriate the familiar elements best suited to their message. This was, affirmed Obama in May 2013, 'precisely what the Founders left us: the power...to adapt to changing times.'¹⁰

⁹ Bush, 'The President's Radio Address, July 2, 2005'; 'The President's Radio Address, July 1, 2006'; Barack Obama, '576 - Remarks at an Independence Day Celebration, July 4, 2010'; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); HBO's *John Adams*, first broadcast in 2008, was a significant ratings success, reportedly receiving an average audience of 2.3 million viewers. See Bill Gorman, 'HBO's Generation Kill Can't Touch John Adams', *TV By The Numbers* (<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2008/07/16/hbos-generation-kill-cant-touch-john-adams/4451>) [01/08/13].

¹⁰ Obama, '309 - Commencement Address at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, May 5, 2013'.

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