

## Foreword

---

James MacGregor Burns was already an American institution when I first met him in the fall of 2003 at his home in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The occasion was our mutual interest in George Washington. He and Susan Dunn were finishing their biography, which focused on Washington's presidency, and I was doing the same with *His Excellency: George Washington*. At the end of the conversation I remember paraphrasing Humphrey Bogart in the last scene of *Casablanca*, telling Jim that "this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship." It lasted until his passing in 2014.

We agreed that Washington was, beyond much doubt, the greatest leader in American history, the role model for Jim's famous definition of "transforming" leadership. Once you read the vague language about executive power in Article II of the US Constitution, so we concurred, it becomes abundantly clear that it was Washington's conduct during his presidency that actually established and defined the powers of the office. On this elemental issue, Jim and I found ourselves in complete agreement.

Although Jim had the heart of an historian, his mind was shaped as a political scientist, so it was almost inevitable that we would agree to disagree about some features of Washington's leadership legacy. Jim admired Washington's capacity to levitate above the partisan factions of the day, but criticized his failure to understand the crucial role that political parties would play in America's emerging democracy. (He was surely contrasting Washington with his legendary "lion and fox," Franklin Roosevelt.) I thought he was reading Washington through a twentieth-century lens, that both Washington and John Adams were pre-modern and pre-democratic presidents who worshiped at the republican altar of "the public" not the democratic shrine of "the people." Political parties were alien presences in their mental universe.

Jim had a way of smiling silently while listening to alternative arguments. You didn't know *what* he was thinking, but you knew beyond any doubt that he *was* thinking. His teacherly temperament, surely a product of his years in the classroom at Williams College, created a semi-sacred space in which ideas were the secular equivalent of divine

grace, and everyone in the room was an equal member of the congregation. When I suggested that his core categories—“transactional” and “transforming” leadership—struck me as Platonic Forms that always needed to be modified to fit into specific historical contexts, he welcomed the suggestion because it deepened the dialogue. Much like Washington himself, he levitated above partisan (or pedantic) bickering and commanded the room with his sheer presence.

Our most frequent topic of conversation over the ensuing years was the inherently dysfunctional character of the current American government. Jim was on record in *The Deadlock of Democracy* (1963) as an opponent of the many Madisonian checks and balances in the Constitution, which he regarded as gateways to gridlock. He was especially critical of the kind of divided government rendered commonplace by the absence of a parliamentary system in which the executive automatically commanded a legislative majority. When pushed, he acknowledged that a constitutional amendment to correct the problem was highly unlikely, and a second Constitutional Convention was only a recipe for political chaos. He regarded the filibuster, especially in its currently “silent” version, as an unconstitutional blockage that couldn’t be blamed on Madison. That was something, he thought, we could and should work on.

Jim was most depressed about the plutocratic character of our current political culture. It was clear to him that the money-changers had taken over the temple, rendering leadership of any sort virtually impossible. He believed that *Citizens United* (2011) was the worst Supreme Court decision since *Dred Scott* (1857). A lifetime Democrat and unreconstructed New Dealer, he never abandoned his creedal conviction that government was “us” and not “them.”

Although he remained remarkably up to date until near the very end, it’s interesting that two of his last scholarly projects focused on the eighteenth century, books on Washington and the Enlightenment. It seemed to me that his frustration with the gridlock plutocracy of our time drove him to look backward at the founding era, when the ideas and institutions he so cherished first came into existence: perhaps as a way of reminding himself of the core values that had always propelled his democratic faith; or perhaps as a way of reminding his readers of the gold standard against which our debased political currency of the present should be measured.

As I watched the coverage of Republican candidates for the presidential nomination, I often wondered what Jim would say about our sorry state. If you read his enormously influential textbook, *Government by the People*, he harbored an abiding belief in the periodic resurgence of

presidential leadership to rescue American democracy when it threatened to go off the rails. FDR was his obvious North Star.

Well, at least for the present, the prospects for any semblance of leadership emerging on that front are remote in the extreme. So, I hear myself asking, what would Jim say in response?

His faith in the recuperative powers of American democracy was bottomless, and he was temperamentally incapable of surrendering to the forces of despair or defeat in any contest that he cared about deeply. So I hear him delivering a lecture to me on resilience as the most under-appreciated human quality of mind and heart. True enough, he would begin, mainstream American politics is currently closed to the better angels of our nature. (He loved Lincoln.) So we must look outside the mainstream. Join me, Joe, as we scan the historical horizon for relevant models of truly transformative leadership beyond electoral politics. I'll begin with Martin Luther King and Thomas Paine. Now, tell me, who am I forgetting? On we would go into the night.

Joseph J. Ellis