

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

Justin Cavanaugh
University of Virginia
May 10, 2017

Introduction

Through millennia leaders and tyrants have appeared to seize upon social, political, and economic opportunities to gain and consolidate power. However, no leader or dictator resides within a vacuum, and his or her legacy, as a leader or tyrant, is predicated on the treatment and respect towards the philosophical beliefs of the people whom they wish to lead. As Michel Foucault argued in: *Power/Knowledge*, power creates social and economic institutions which reinforce socially agreed upon truths, which are the true motivations behind group action. Thus to enforce a leader's social agendas the recognition of the interests of the people are necessary to enforce public policies. To investigate how a leader or tyrant's role fits within Foucault's power schema it is necessary to create a chain of argumentation that can connect the influence of agreed upon philosophical truths of different societies to particular leaders in different types of governmental structures. To do this I will first focus on how a societies religion influences the institutions that expressly dictate how a leader becomes and remains in a position of authority by referencing the *Bible* and Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus*. In the next phase I will focus on secular bureaucracy's influence on a leader's rule within the context of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. By using these two phases as reference points I will focus on the presidency of Abraham Lincoln in the final phase to illuminate the transformation of philosophical beliefs within American democracy. These American beliefs, or agreed upon truths, rejected the first phase's religious claim to authority, embraced the secular nature of the second phase, and uncovered a

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

common thread in all three phases that the treatment of the people will determine if an individual with authority is a leader or tyrant.

Foucault's Power Schema and Religion's Influence on Leadership

In Michel Foucault's: *Two Lectures, Power/Knowledge*, he asserts: "...that power is neither given nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action (p.89), and further that: "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (p.93). What this means is that a society has what he calls "discourses of truth" (p.93), which produces agreed upon truths. These truths create knowledge, which in turn stabilizes and establishes institutions that exert power. What Foucault's power schema reveals is that power in itself is never truly possessed by a leader or tyrant, by his or herself, but is purely predicated on the agreed upon philosophical or religious truth of a society and its people.

In both the *Book of First Samuel* in the Bible and Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus*, similar attributes of a chosen leader are described as being tall, handsome, strong, a skilled warrior, likeable, virtuous, or noble in action. These historical attributes are meant to convey a reason behind why God chose a specific leader, or the gods influence on a chosen leader. In the case of Saul and David they were both chosen by God to be King through the Prophet Samuel, and in the case of Cyrus, his ability to personally reveal and read the signs of the gods is what supported his divine authority. In both of these cases divine providence is the precedent for the right to claim authority, however, the difference is in Cyrus's direct interpretation and Saul and David's second hand revelation. Therefore, it is the belief of the people that their leader was in a direct relationship with God, as a recognized truth, that determines their title as leader, and

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

Judaism and Greek Mythology are the institutions that support their rule. This sentiment is expressed perfectly by Cambyses, Cyrus's father and King of Persia, when he advises Cyrus on the limits of human wisdom:

“Thus human wisdom no more knows how to choose what is best than if someone, casting lots, should do whatever the lot determines. Yet the gods, son, being eternal, know all that has come to be, all that is, and what will result from each of these things. And, of human beings who seek counsel, to whomever they may be propitious, they give signs as to what they ought to do and what they ought not” (Xenophon, p.59).

For Cyrus, this meant his own interpretation of the signs of the gods and his personal attributes were what supported his authority. In all three of these cases of kingship providence would be used to justify what would come to be known as the divine right of kings.

Secular Government and Bureaucratic Advisement

The divine right of kings was used as a justification for hereditary right to rule in most monarchical and religiously backed kingships. However, this claim would eventually create a new public discourse on the truth or falsity of this divine claim to authority. Niccoló Machiavelli illuminates the skeptical sentiment on religious institutions influence when he comments on the power of the Roman Catholic Church in *The Prince*. Machiavelli states that: “...while making the Church great by adding so much temporal greatness to the spiritual one [is] that [which] gives it so much authority” (p.14). In essence Machiavelli is making a straightforward claim that the Church has too much power and is attempting to give advice to Lorenzo dé Medici based on a secular notion of power.

In Machiavelli's dedicatory letter to Lorenzo dé Medici, Machiavelli asserts that: “...to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

one needs to be of the people” (p.4). This statement expressly shows the necessity of a leader to recognize the needs of the people. The people, also known as “the great” (p.40) in *The Prince* are given explicit influence on the prince. As Machiavelli asserts: “Therefore, one who becomes prince through the support of the people should keep them friendly to him, which should be easy for him because they ask of him only that they not be oppressed” (p.40).

Machiavelli has another bit of advice for the prince that falls along the notion of Foucault’s power schema and that is the use of “Arms” (p.57). For Machiavelli: “...one’s own arms are those which are composed of either subjects or citizens or your creatures: all others are mercenary or auxiliary” (p.57). This meant that one’s arms were not just military weapons of war, but were any instrument at one’s disposal to promote one’s own agendas. Thus, for Machiavelli, a prince would be held as a leader if the people were not oppressed, and that the agreed upon truth would be that the Church had too much influence in governmental matters. It is in this secular notion of government, that would foreshadow the coming Enlightenment, that would directly influence the rejection of the divine right of kings during the American Revolution and lead to the ideals in the Declaration of Independence.

Abraham Lincoln’s Presidency

During Abraham Lincoln’s presidency the Foucauldian notion of power is exemplified by the democratic institutions of government, but more specifically in the social discourse of equality that was a new agreed upon truth that was exemplified in the Declaration of Independence. No longer was there justification to claim power based on God, or the ability of a leader to personally interpret the signs of the gods to claim political authority. Now representative democracy would decide who would be chosen as a leader.

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

In Harry V. Jaffa's *A New Birth of Freedom and Crisis of the House Divided*, he outlines Abraham Lincoln's argumentation for promoting the ideals within the Declaration of Independence while recognizing the religious beliefs of the people. As Jaffa explains: "Although Abraham Lincoln did not belong to any church, he constantly appealed to the *Bible*- along with the Declaration [of Independence]- as a source of moral authority..." (Jaffa, NBF, p.155). For Lincoln, the rejection of the divine right of kings that is expressed in the Declaration of Independence, i.e. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." expressed a new philosophical truism that went beyond the notion of kinship and was adopted as a fundamental right of individuals in the "discourses of truth" of the American people. This new agreed upon truth argued that no human being was endowed by God with superior qualities which would justify their rule. As Thomas Jefferson opined in a letter to Roger Weightman: "that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God" (Jaffa, NBF, p.111). Both Jefferson and Lincoln believed in the natural rights of the individual. Therefore, Lincoln's intention to dissolve the institution of slavery is based on a legalist argument, and a morally agreed upon truth that would transform the divided institutions of government within the American system.

For Lincoln, the institution of slavery was never intended to continue in perpetuity according to the original intention of the Founding Fathers of the United States Constitution. This meant that the southern states' claim to the justness of the institution of slavery was in direct conflict with the philosophical truism of equality within the Declaration of Independence. Just as Lincoln was not a member of a specific church, he was neither initially a direct advocate for the immediate dissolution of slavery prior to his election as president. Lincoln and the

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

Abolitionist movement did not want slavery to extend into the territories West of the Mississippi river. However, after his inauguration, and the secession of the Southern States, Lincoln doubled down on the explicit contradiction of slavery in light of the claim of equality within the Declaration of Independence. As Harry Jaffa states in *A New Birth of Freedom* on the institution of slavery that: “We know that any attempt of human beings to rule other human beings, as if the former were gods, and the latter beasts is wrong” (Jaffa, NBF, p. 120). Within this context Lincoln changed the society around him by exposing the immoral nature of slavery by using religious rhetoric and using the Declaration of Independence as grounds for legal precedent. “For Lincoln, there was, indeed, ‘only one issue’, but that issue was whether or not the American people should believe that ‘all men are created equal’ in the full extent and true significance of that proposition” (Jaffa, CHD, p.309). Due to this conviction Abraham Lincoln and Northern abolitionists would be faced with Southern secession and Civil War.

During the Civil War Lincoln exemplified the attributes of a skillful leader by recognizing the agreed upon truth by the majority of Northern States that the institution of slavery was wrong. And acted to ensure that the institution was not continued in the Western territories. Just as Cyrus armed the farming peasants in his army which elevated them to a higher standing in Persian society, so too did Lincoln, by arming the newly freed slaves which allowed them a personal stake in their continued emancipation after the war. Furthermore, Lincoln and Cyrus both realized the significance of using new technologies to ensure a sense of military supremacy. Although, cartridge ammunition and more accurate rifles and artillery dramatically changed the battlefield for both the Northern and Southern States, it was Lincoln’s use of the telegraph that changed how war would be fought. No longer was a general an “Arms,” in the Machiavellian sense, an island unto himself. Civilian oversight of the military was mastered

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

through Lincoln's use of the telegraph. Faster and direct communication with the battlefield allowed Lincoln to direct and support military actions. "What is most remarkable, however, is that Abraham Lincoln applied the new telegraph technology in an absence of precedent" (civilwarstudies, p.2). Never before had this type of communication been used during a war.

During Lincoln's presidency, his use of a moral argument against slavery through a legalist perspective within the Declaration of Independence, i.e. "all men are created equal," his Emancipation Proclamation, his including and arming of African Americans into the Union Army, and his use of new technologies would appear to clearly designate him as an effective leader. However, to a large number of American citizens, at that time, Lincoln was viewed as a tyrant. After the South seceded, Lincoln imposed policies in the North and the South that were viewed as tyrannical and unconstitutional in the North and in the South.

In the North there were two specific policies that were viewed negatively by non-rebelling American citizens: 1) Revoking of Habeas Corpus, and 2) The Draft. The writ of habeas corpus, which translates as: to produce the body, is a core foundation of jurisprudence in the western world that can be traced back to Magna Carta, and is a fundamental right of any just legal system. At the heart of habeas corpus is that if an individual is charged with a crime, and is held in jail, they by a writ of habeas corpus, must be brought in front of a judge to present the evidence against him or herself. Thus, habeas corpus is a cornerstone against arbitrary and tyrannical governments that would charge and imprison citizens without trial. In Article I, Section 9, of the United States Constitution, it states that: "The privilege of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it," however, this is a power of Congress and not a power directly given to the Executive branch.

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

Thus Lincoln's executive order: Proclamation 104-Suspending the Writ of Habeas Corpus throughout the United States(presidency.ucsb.edu) was unconstitutional and unlawful.

Just as disturbing for Northern citizens was the unequal and clearly biased nature of the national draft. The forced conscription of individuals to fight for the Union would have been fair if it was applied equally to all. Especially since the core tenet of Lincoln's argument against slavery was the inherent equality of all people. However, this did not apply when it came to the draft. "The Draft Act of 1863 was the first instance of compulsory service in the federal military" (ushistory.com) which had one glaring loophole. This loophole disproportionality affected the poor and specifically new Irish immigrants. In the Draft Act a drafty could: "hire a substitute who [would] serve in his place, or he could simply pay \$300 to get out of the obligation" (ushistory.com). This policy allowed those of means to simply wait at the docks in New York City for new Irish immigrants to disembark and offer them the money. Moreover, this meant that the families and individuals of means had no direct stake in the War. This unequal application of the draft would lead to draft riots in New York City in 1863 by Irish immigrants.

In the South, Lincoln's policy of stopping the expansion of slavery into the Western territories and the Emancipation Proclamation, directly affected the Southern economy, and from the South's perspective, Lincoln was destroying their way of life. Although, some have argued that the Civil War was not about slavery, but about State's rights, the fact of the matter was that the South's entire economy was based on chattel slavery, and the destruction of that institution would destroy the Southern economy. From the South's perspective, slavery was constitutional, and was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision. In *Scott v Sanford* 60 U.S. 393, 1857, Justice Taney gave the decision for the Court, that slaves were not citizens and: "as persons whom it was morally lawful to deal in as articles of property and to hold as slaves"

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

(law.cornell.edu). This decision by the Supreme Court made it a legally binding that slaves were not considered human, but were mere chattel property. This meant that slaves had no natural rights or liberties even if they were in free States. In addition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the South believed that they had legal and natural right to continue the institution of slavery. From this perspective, Lincoln's intention to stop the spread of slavery, to which the South believed was legal and a constitutional right, along with the Emancipation Proclamation, was according to Southern slave owners and to the whole of the Southern economy an illegal seizure and release of private property. The Southern sentiment that Lincoln was a tyrant was personified at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D. C. April 14, 1865, when John Wilks Booth shot Abraham Lincoln and exclaimed: "Sic semper tyrannis! (ever thus to tyrants) the South is avenged!" (history.com).

The People's Truth Discourse

Whether an individual is viewed as a leader or tyrant it must be expressed again that a leader or tyrant does not reside within a vacuum and requires others and institutions to implement their policies. In the context of the Lincoln presidency, it must be argued that there already existed strong open political groups, e.g. Abolitionists, and underground movements like the Underground Railroad, that were already in place and were intent on eradicating the institution of slavery. These institutions not only spoke out against slavery, but were actively involved in helping slaves get to free Northern States and even out of the country to Canada. What this illuminates is that there already was a truth discourse embodied within the citizenry of the United States. Thus, within the Foucauldian power schema, the people themselves had already moved toward an action of suppressing slavery. Moreover, within Protestant religious

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

institutions that were prominent in the Antebellum era, the argument of natural rights, and the rejection of the Roman Catholic Church's authority, and by extension the monarchical system, it was not a far reach to see that there was a contradiction in a Protestant owning slaves.

Due to institutions like the Protestant religion and the Abolitionists movement that both revolved upon the moral tenet of equality which is the foundation of American juris prudence, the "discourses of truth" of the natural rights of all human beings in the Antebellum era, was already in action. Furthermore, the willingness of those who firmly believed that the knowledge that was created through this discourse and these social institutions, were willing to sacrifice their lives to promote their beliefs. What this shows is that within the dynamic of power that Foucault proposes: the actions of the people superseded those of the government. This shows that power is not wielded by the leader or tyrant alone but requires institutions in place that promote knowledge, and within a democratic system this is a very good thing. The strength of the American democratic system of government is that it directly allows for free discourse and expression that allows the people and those on the bottom of social hierarchies to promote change through their vote and their institutions. Therefore, in regards to Lincoln's presidency, excluding the South, those that remained in the Union to vote, voted in favor for the dissolution of slavery and Lincoln himself was a result of truth discourse by the people not its catalyst.

Conclusion

The interesting dynamic of Michel Foucault's power schema is that it forces individuals to view power in a completely different way. The traditional and simplistic way to view power is that it is wielded and possessed by an individual or an organized group in charge. If we accept the Foucauldian model of power, then actions that are based on an agreed upon truth is the

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

starting point for where power comes from. However, it can be argued that both the people and a leader can influence the “discourses of truth” and through this influence direct action which creates new institutions and knowledge which exert power.

By applying the power schema in the first phase of investigation of religion’s influence on leadership we were able to see that whether the leader was Saul, David, or Cyrus, they all relied on the religious beliefs and institutions of their society to gain favor and authority. However, it was also clear that their rise to kingship was predicated on the needs of those on the bottom of society. Through the enfranchisement of the lower classes, i.e. the adoption of a monarchical system of governance making the Israelites equal to their neighbors, and Cyrus’ raising up the Persian peasants in his army to equal status of spoils, each of these leaders promoted a desire of the people. Furthermore, the agreed upon social truth that God, or the gods, existed created the institutions that were essential for the claim of divine authority. Under these conditions a leader or tyrant could claim the divine right to rule and the beliefs and institutions of religious dogma would support his or her claim.

In the second phase we applied the power schema to the secularization of governmental institutions in the form of bureaucratic advisement to a prince. As Machiavelli suggested, this consolidation of influences devoid of the church, would focus power to the secular institutions that supported the prince. Moreover, it is within this secular second phase that Machiavelli’s “Arms” become prominent and explicitly fall into Foucault’s view of power. According to Machiavelli, the key to solidifying power is the ability of the prince to recognize and use his own arms. This meant that outside influences or others’ arms would be detrimental to the prince’s authority. Nonetheless, if we apply the concept that power is not a force or substance that can be owned or wielded, then it will suggest that the true key factor for a prince to maintain authority is

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

to allow the institutions that the people support to be the guiding force upon which to hitch his wagon to.

By investigating these two phases we were able to see how the power schema applies to religion's influence on leadership, its application to secular bureaucracy, and finally how in the third phase it applied to a specific leader during a specific moment in time. By choosing a complex individual, like Abraham Lincoln, during a moment of immense governmental instability, along with increasing breakthroughs in technology, we were able to strip apart the opposing arguments based on their agreed upon truth down to a fundamental question for the North and the South: Is the institution of slavery just or unjust?

Through the lens of the power schema we can see that both the North and South had opposing agreed upon truths on the foundation of natural and fundamental rights of the individual. As both of these geographic areas had completely different foundations for their economies, one based on slavery and the other on manufacturing and paid workers, the institutions that supported and exerted power in these areas were intimately intertwined to their philosophical belief systems. Moreover, in this third phase we are able to see that two polar opposite belief systems, in identical representative democracies, produced two inherently different governments. One based on the equality of all men, and the other, where the color of your skin dictated your fate. This dynamic proves that the system of government alone does not dictate a free and morally just society.

To decide then if an individual in a position of authority is a leader or tyrant, we need only to look at the commonly accepted agreed upon truth of a society, and the extension of that truth into its institutions, and see if that agreed upon truth has a moral philosophy that supports the equal rights of all individuals in that society. This dictates that if an individual is chosen to a

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

position of authority under the premise of an immoral agreed upon truth, e.g. slavery is natural and moral, that individual is de facto a tyrant. In contrast, if an individual is chosen to a position of authority where the agreed upon truth supports a moral truth of natural rights that applies equally to the best and worst off in society, that individual is a leader as long as they continue to support and promote that agreed upon moral truth. However, a caveat here is that objective moral truths can often be on shaky and non universalizable premises.

Within this specific context we are able to make a judgment upon Abraham Lincoln's presidency as an influential and important leader in American democracy. Due to his willingness to support and force upon the political stage the moral issue of slavery, and by connecting the issue of slavery to moral philosophical claims within the Declaration of Independence, he changed American juris prudence. Along with the Congress, Abraham Lincoln brought the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution that forced the Bill of Rights onto the States. With the 14th Amendments equal protection clause, the rule of law was reinforced based on the tenets of liberty, freedom, and equality, that supported the philosophical claims within the Declaration of Independence: "that all men are created equal". Thus, Abraham Lincoln's role as a leader, in the context of Foucault's power schema, was a result of a discussed truth within institutions that were already in place that advocated for the equality of all people, and for the dissolution of slavery. Moreover, Lincoln's recognition of these institution's philosophical claims as part of a legal precedent defined in the Declaration of Independence, would elevate him into a position of authority. Once in this position Lincoln used new technologies and directly worked towards the enfranchisement of African Americans. This explicitly shows that attending to the needs of those on the bottom of society, or those who are

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

being oppressed, are keys to mobilizing people, which in turn create new institutions and opportunities that promote a discussed truth of the people that exert power.

Work Cited

Bible. "*From the Book of Samuel.*" UVA Collab. 2017. Web

Foucault. Michel. "*Power Knowledge.*" Ed. Colin Gordon. Pantheon Books, New York.
1972-1977. 89.93. Print

history.com. "*John Wilkes Booth shoots Abraham Lincoln.*" This Day in History.2017.1. Web
<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/john-wilkes-booth-shoots-abraham-lincoln>

Jaffa. Harry V. "*Crisis of the House Divided.*" The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and
London. 1959,1982, 2009. 309. Print

---. "*A New Birth of Freedom.*" Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc. Lanham, Boulder, New
York, Oxford. 2000. 111, 120, 155. Print

Machiavelli, Niccoló. *The Prince.*" 2nd edition. Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield. The University of
Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 1985, 1998. 4, 14, 40, 57. Print

Power: Leadership, Lincoln, and the People

Ushistory.com. *The Draft in the Civil War.* " United States History. Web

<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h249.html>

Wooley, John., and Gerhard Peters. *Abraham Lincoln XVI President of the United States 1861-186.* " The American Presidency Project. University of California. Web

<http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/?pid=69898>

Wheeler, Tom. "*In the Original Situation Room-Abraham Lincoln and the Telegraph*".

The Smithsonian Associates. 2006. 1. Web

http://civilwarstudies.org/articles/Vol_8/situation-room.shtm

Xenophon. "*The Education of Cyrus.*" Trans. Wayne Ambler. Cornell University Press. Ithaca and London. 2001. 59. Print