Project Group B4

"New Washingtons?" The Heroization of American Presidents from the Early Republic to Reconstruction

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Based on a corpus of nearly 2,000 poems and songs, the project group explored the heroization of American presidents from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln. The project group focused on two hypotheses: (1) With the heroization of George Washington, a new model of the hero emerged that was tailored to the specific needs of the newly independent country in which Washington was cast as a republican hero in an explicit differentiation to the monarchal heroes of Europe; (2) this type of hero went on to become a kind of model in subsequent decades.

The project built on the interest in heroic figures and their social functions that has prevailed in American Studies for some time, shifting the focus to the process of heroization – in other words, to the construction of heroism – from a decidedly historical perspective. Most current research, however, still focuses primarily on the present time. The study was nevertheless able to draw on several works that address the heroization of George Washington.[1] The project group expanded on already existing research and added a new perspective based on the question of what aspects of Washington's heroic persona have become part of the model. The group project also made the heroization of Washington's successors a key focus, as it had not been previously researched. The only studies that existed when the project group began were concerned with the presentation of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln.[2] The group project thus ventured into unchartered territory.

The group's research confirmed the hypotheses formulated in the grant application. The heroization of George Washington established a heroic model and a certain heroic language that had an immense impact on how his successors were presented. Over time, the model and the codes it was based on naturally underwent certain modifications, although these remained dominant until shortly before the Civil War. It was not until Lincoln ran for office that a

[1] Bryan, W. A. 1952: George Washington in American Literature, 1775–1865, New York; Cuncliffe, M. 1982: George Washington. Man and Monument, New York; Hay, R. P. 1969: George Washington. American Moses, in: American Quarterly 21, S. 780–791; Schwartz, B. 1987: George Washington. The Making of an American Symbol, New York; Wills, G. 1984: Cincinnatus. George Washington and the Enlightenment, Garden City, NY; Depkat, V. 2008: Die Erfindung der republikanischen Präsidentschaft im Zeichen des Geschichtsbruchs. George Washington und die Ausformung eines demokratischen Herrscherbildes, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 56, pp. 728–742; Depkat, V. 2011: The Grammar of Postrevolutionary Visual Politics. Comparing Presidential Stances of George Washington and Friedrich Ebert, in: U. Hebel / C. Wagner (eds.), Pictorial Cultures and Political Iconographies. Approaches, Perspectives, Case Studies from Europe and America, Berlin, pp. 176–197; Fitz, K. 2010: The American Revolution Remembered, 1830s to 1850s. Competing Images and Conflicting Narratives, Heidelberg; Niggemann, U. 2009: Normative Modelle für die amerikanische Präsidentschaft: George Washington in der Funeralliteratur von 1799 und 1800, in: Historisches Jahrbuch 129, pp. 101–130; Niggemann, U. 2011: Von einer Oppositionsfigur zum staatstragenden Modell: Cincinnatus in der anglo-amerikanischen Publizistik des 18. Jahrhunderts, in: id. / K. Ruffing (ed.), Antike als Modell in Nordamerika? Konstruktion und Verargumentierung, 1763-1809 (Historische Zeitschrift Beiheft 55), Munich, pp. 249–273.

[2] Ward, J. W. 1962: Andrew Jackson. Symbol for an Age, Oxford/New York; Fenton, E. 2009: Whitman, Lincoln, and the Union of Men, in: ESQ. A Journal of the American Renaissance 55, pp. 237–267.

pluralization of heroic forms occurred. The project group established that the dominant media of heroization were poetry and songs, between which there is often a seamless transition in the period researched. This can be seen in both the unexpectedly large corpus of texts that were collected during research, and in the fact that not only heroization, but also de-heroization was practiced in these media more pointedly than in the other media referred to for comparison.

The project group achieved the following results. First, the heroization of George Washington could be described in a more systematic manner than had been the case in previous studies, which concentrated more on individual aspects of his heroic persona. The project group also differentiated between those qualities that, while ascribed to Washington, did not become part of the heroic model, and those that were relevant for the heroization of his successors according to his model. The "Cincinnatus pose," for example, became part of the "Washington model," while references to Moses did not. Second, heroization based on the Washington model can already be observed in the case of his immediate successors John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Military heroism did not play a dominant role until later, after the War of 1812, therefore Adams and Jefferson could be represented as true successors of Washington, although they had not served as soldiers. Furthermore, the competition between Adams and Jefferson and their parties triggered a development that was characteristic for the entire period of the project group's research. Each of the two candidates was heroized by his party as Washington's legitimate successor, while portraying the candidate of the other party as lacking all relevant qualities, thereby de-heroizing him. Third, the War of 1812 marked an important turning point in the development of this heroic model. In the course of the war, military heroism increasingly became an important quality for both current and potential future presidents. While military heroism was not enough to be regarded as a new Washington, it increasingly became a necessary condition. Presidents such as James Madison and John Quincy Adams, who lacked this trait, were hence seen as deficient by many people and were criticized accordingly. A successful military general such as Andrew Jackson, on the other hand, was regarded as a second Washington in the public eye. This point was especially relevant to the project group because previous research tended to emphasize the differences in habitus and orientation between Washington and Jackson. Fourth, for the presidential elections in the two decades leading up to the Civil War, the Whig party, impressed by Jackson's enormous popularity, continued to nominate successful generals who were military heroes and could be ascribed other qualities of the heroic model. The heroization of William Henry Harrison during the presidential campaign of 1840 is especially important in this regard because it marks another modification of the "Washington code." Harrison was presented as a simple man of the people to a much greater extent than Andrew Jackson had been a few years earlier. The heroic Washington model was thus democratized even more, which also effected the heroization of later presidents like Zachary Taylor.

Publications by the Project Group
Butter, M. 2016: Der Washington-Code. Heroisierungen amerikanischer Präsidenten (Figurationen des Heroischen 3), Göttingen.

Butter, M. 2014: Cincinnatus Popularized: The Heroization of William Henry Harrison during the Election Campaign of 1840, in: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 2.1: Populärkultur, pp. 16–28, DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2014/01/03.

Datenbank: Poems on American Presidents, 1789-1865, https://presidents.ub.uni-freiburg.de/index.php.