
CULTURE, AMERICAN FEUDALISM, AND THE CONUNDRUM OF LEADERSHIP

GEORGE B. THOMPSON, JR.

Abstract: “American cultural feudalism” is introduced as a way to explain long-standing and broad patterns of social and political behavior in the United States. Its validity as a theory is suggested by current trends in leadership studies and international research on topics such as economic development, corruption, and perceptions of power. The article argues that cultural feudalism threatens the actual practice of leadership, tending to replace it with forms of force or concentrated power. Implications of this argument are explored for leadership in religious communities.

Of Politics, Promise, and Peril

On the 4th of November, 2008, Illinois United States Senator Barack Obama was elected the forty-fourth President of the United States of America. His election concluded a campaign that would have made history one way or another: either with the oldest person (John McCain), the first woman (Hillary Clinton), the first woman vice president (Sarah Palin), or the first African American ever to have reached the presidency. Many middle-aged and older Americans never imagined that an African American would be elected president in their lifetimes: when Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton were candidates, few political observers viewed their campaigns as realistic. The same was said of Obama’s candidacy when it was announced in Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln’s adopted hometown. Teaching at the largest African American graduate theological school, I heard students express during the primaries their fear that Obama would be

George B. Thompson, Jr., is associate professor of leadership and ministry practice at The Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.