Episode 2 - USSC-Bestselling Author & Historian Nathaniel Philbrick

You know, it's funny when I think about leadership. I don't know if it's because I grew up in a family of teachers, but I think there has to be an element of being a good teacher in a leader. There has to be that ability to communicate, get a sense of your audience, and then impart that information to them. There has to be a teaching element, and great teachers can be taught.

But I tell you, it's like being an actor. You have to not get yourself caught up in that seemingly panicky unfolding of events. You have to have the ability to slow it down in your own head, think about it, and then make a decision—sell it and execute it. Those are skills that can be taught.

But the thing of it is, it's also like being in combat.

Apparently, I have not only gone gray in your service, I have gone blind.

Welcome to the USS Constitution Museum Leadership Forum, a leadership podcast mini-series featuring dynamic conversations with leaders who embody the values of honor, courage, and commitment. Thank you for being here.

This episode features award-winning author and historian Nathaniel Philbrick, whose storytelling brings defining moments in American history into sharp focus. From whaleboats in the Pacific to the siege lines of Boston, Philbrick is the National Book Award–winning author of *In the Heart of the Sea* and a New York Times bestselling writer whose work reminds us that leadership is often forged before the ending is known.

In this conversation, Philbrick joins USS Constitution Museum President and CEO Jeff Drager for an exploration of decisions under uncertainty, the discipline of focus, and the humility required to keep a republic intact.

Let's step into the room as Jeff begins with a simple question that opens the door to something deeper.

"What's one item that you like to keep in your office that either helps make it feel more comfortable and personalized to you, or that gives you inspiration?"

"Yeah. Just to show you what a nerd I am, I need to have in my office—at arm's length away—Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. For me, it's my personal Bible.

It's kind of a family tradition. My dad, who's still with us at an assisted living facility on Nantucket, was an English professor at the University of Pittsburgh where I grew up—Pittsburgh, the maritime capital of the universe. He had a copy of that book in his study.

I don't know if I feel like it's a familial imperative, but for me, no matter what happens in life—no matter how good or bad it gets—if that book is nearby, I'm going to get through it."

Where would I like to be in history? San Francisco during the Vigilance Committee period.

The San Francisco Vigilance Committee—a group of vigilante San Francisco businessmen—took over the city. They formed an army and seized control. At the navy base in San Francisco was Captain David Farragut.

Talk about leadership. This was a potentially catastrophic situation. These vigilantes had an army of five thousand armed people who had taken over the city. They hanged two people and would hang two more.

So what do you do?

The governor wanted the military to go in, but the federal government had to give the order. Farragut didn't have the USS Constitution there, but he had the *John Adams*. He stationed the *John Adams* right off the waterfront of San Francisco to let people know the military was present in case something happened.

I would love to have been on those streets. It was a fascinating time in a fascinating place where history was just boiling.

From the talisman on the desk to a city on edge, let's move from color to pattern.

Across shipwrecks, revolutions, and battlefields, where does leadership reveal itself?

"Well, I tend to write about leadership issues. It really began for me with *In the Heart of the Sea*. This was a whale ship early in the history of Pacific whaling that got rammed by a whale. The men took to their whaleboats. They were 3,000 miles off the coast of South America.

No one knew anything about the Pacific islands to the west, which would become Nantucket's backyard in a matter of months. But they didn't know anything about them at the time, so they had to make a decision—what do we do next?

Captain Pollard was a brand-new captain. This was his first command at sea."

What unfolded from there became a powerful example of how pivotal moments in history hinge on leadership decisions. From that point forward, Philbrick found himself drawn again and again to the study of leaders under pressure.

He later wrote about Captain Charles Wilkes, who led America's first global exploring expedition, traveling to Antarctica, Hawaii, and the Pacific Northwest. The expedition accomplished remarkable things, but Wilkes himself was a controversial and embattled leader.

Then came William Bradford of the *Mayflower*, another leader navigating enormous uncertainty.

Philbrick points out that when you compare leaders across very different moments in history, patterns begin to emerge. George Custer, for example, was a brilliant cavalry officer during the Civil War but ran into serious trouble later on the western plains—especially at the Battle of Little Bighorn.

What fascinates historians about that battle is that Custer divided his command while facing a much larger force—a risky and ultimately disastrous decision. Everyone on what became known as Last Stand Hill died, except for a single horse named Comanche.

In situations like these—survival situations—the decisions leaders make determine what happens to the people around them. Sometimes those decisions succeed, and sometimes they fail. But it's only in retrospect that anyone can say which was which.

Patterns help, but pressure compresses.

What traits hold up when the clock is brutal and information is incomplete?

"You know, when I think about leadership, I go back to that idea of teaching. A good leader has to be able to communicate, understand their audience, and pass along information clearly.

But it's also like being an actor. A good leader has charisma and the ability to make decisions under tremendous stress.

That's incredibly difficult when things are happening at lightning speed and everyone is asking, 'What do we do next?'"

A leader must resist being swept up in panic. Instead, they must slow the situation down mentally, evaluate what's happening, make a decision, and then calmly execute it.

Those skills can be taught—but they also require a certain innate temperament.

Philbrick remembers speaking with a retired Army major who had served in Iraq and later taught at West Point. The officer described combat as a strange experience where time seemed to slow down.

"In combat," the officer said, "it's almost like everything slows down around me and I see it clearly."

That calm clarity in chaos is rare. Some people simply aren't wired for it.

The ability to step back, understand the situation, determine what will work best, and then calmly issue orders—that's a real leadership skill.

Philbrick notes that modern leaders operate in an environment very different from leaders in the 18th century.

Today we live with constant communication. Information arrives instantly, and leaders are bombarded with data from every direction.

During the American Revolution, however, commanders often received orders knowing they would not hear back for three or four months. Circumstances on the ground could change dramatically in that time.

Leaders had to interpret orders, adapt to changing realities, and make decisions without knowing what their superiors—or their enemies—were doing.

That level of uncertainty is difficult for modern audiences to comprehend.

Ironically, Philbrick argues that modern technology has created a different challenge: distraction. With so much information constantly arriving, leaders must now determine what is essential and what is noise.

What happens when leaders face reality?

In military circles there's a saying: *No plan survives first contact.*

For Philbrick, adapting to reality is the essential test of leadership.

A real leader can recognize when circumstances differ from expectations and adjust accordingly without appearing to improvise blindly.

George Washington, in Philbrick's view, is the ultimate example.

Washington initially believed he needed to deliver a decisive military victory against the British. But early in the Revolutionary War he realized that such a victory was unlikely. The American army lacked training, equipment, and gunpowder.

Instead, Washington adapted. He shifted strategy, avoided decisive defeat, and stretched the conflict long enough for alliances—especially with France—to change the balance of power.

Washington's leadership also involved deep personal growth. As a young man, he struggled with anger and impatience. Over time he disciplined himself, studying the "Rules of Civility" and learning to control his temper.

This personal transformation allowed him to project calm authority and inspire confidence among his troops.

Perhaps the most remarkable demonstration of Washington's leadership came at the end of the Revolutionary War.

Despite pressure from some officers to seize power, Washington refused. Instead, he surrendered his military commission to Congress in 1783 and returned home to Mount Vernon.

King George III reportedly said that if Washington truly gave up power voluntarily, "he would be the greatest man in the world."

Washington's humility defined the moment.

Earlier that same year, during the tense Newburgh Conspiracy, Washington faced angry officers who had not been paid and feared Congress would abandon them.

When Washington addressed them, his speech initially failed to calm the room.

Then something unexpected happened.

Washington attempted to read a letter but struggled to see the words. He pulled out a new pair of reading glasses and said quietly:

“Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown not only gray but almost blind in the service of my country.”

The simple moment of vulnerability changed everything. The officers, many of whom had served with him for years, were moved to tears.

Humility, in that moment, restored trust.

Before closing, Philbrick reflects again on the Battle of Little Bighorn.

He describes the “still point” just before chaos erupts—the moment when leaders must make decisions with incomplete knowledge and overwhelming uncertainty.

Human beings enter these moments with biases, ambitions, fears, and hopes. Some people act in self-interest. A few act purely for the good of others.

Afterward, survivors remember events differently as time passes and perspectives change. The facts remain the same, but people change—and their interpretations change with them.

For Philbrick, this complexity lies at the heart of leadership.

Please join me in thanking Nathaniel Philbrick for sharing his insights tonight.

“Well, thank you. It was really fun. Thank you for those questions.”

This conversation is part of the USS Constitution Museum’s Leadership Forum, a flagship series of live conversations with leaders in business, civics, the military, science, and culture.

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