



Alexander William Doniphan (1808–1887), date unknown. Photograph courtesy Library of Congress.

Alexander W. Doniphan: A Path to Follow

W. Christian Sizemore

The following remarks by Dr. W. Christian Sizemore were given at the Alexander W. Doniphan Bicentennial Celebration held July 9, 2008, at William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri, commemorating the 200th anniversary of Doniphan's birth (1808–2008). Dr. Sizemore received his BA from the University of Richmond (1960), a BD from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (1963), an MSLS from the University of North Carolina (1964), and his PhD from Florida State University (1973). He is the past president (1994–2000) and chancellor (2000–2002) of William Jewell College.

Tonight we celebrate and pay tribute to leadership. What is leadership? Is it intelligence, ability, strength, station in life, being in the right place at the right time, or who you know?

In 1961, the United States had four Nobel Prize winners. President John F. Kennedy welcomed these four distinguished leaders to the White House with this observation, "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."¹

Jefferson was truly a Renaissance man, and another Renaissance man, Alexander William Doniphan, was born during Jefferson's presidency. Doniphan, who lived and worked here in Liberty, Missouri, became the Renaissance man of the western frontier.

At age fourteen, Doniphan enrolled in Augusta College in his native Kentucky. He was graduated at age eighteen and spent the next six months on his own studying ancient and modern English literature before reading law. Doniphan was admitted to the bar in Kentucky and Ohio at age twenty. Two years later, he was admitted to the bar in Missouri.

Possessing one of the greatest characteristics of leadership, Doniphan was a voracious reader, and he never stopped learning. Enlisting as a private in the Mexican-American War, Doniphan was elected colonel of the First Missouri Mounted Volunteer Regiment. On that long march into Mexico, Doniphan continued to read, studying classical military tactics. Today, West Point cadets study Doniphan's tactics.

Vision is another great leadership characteristic, and Alexander Doniphan was a visionary leader in every area he touched. In the area of education, his leadership began in his own home, where he taught his two sons to read, write, and speak French, Spanish, German, and Italian. He was the first commissioner of education in Clay County, and under his leadership the first school building in this county was constructed. Doniphan was a

founding trustee of William Jewell College, and he personally raised the initial funds to locate the college in Liberty.

Doniphan's vision for the military took him through the ranks from private, to colonel, to general, with eventual service on the board of visitors of the United States Military Academy at West Point.

In the arena of the law, Doniphan was one of the best trial lawyers of his day. United States Senator David Rice Atchison said of Doniphan, "I knew all the great men of country in the earlier days—Clay, Webster, Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, Clayton, Crittenden, and others." But of Doniphan's courtroom oratorical skills, Atchison said, "I heard him climb higher than any of them."² Doniphan also wrote the code of civil laws that forms the basis of the current constitution of the state of New Mexico.



Dr. W. Christian Sizemore delivering his remarks at the commemoration honoring Alexander W. Doniphan on the 200th anniversary of his birth. John Gano Memorial Chapel, William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri, July 9, 2008. Doniphan was one of the original founders of William Jewell College. Photograph by Lori Garcia.



Unveiling of the bust of Alexander W. Doniphan at the commemoration, July 9, 2008. Sabra Tull Meyer, pictured standing third from the left, sculpted the bust. The sculpture has since been placed in the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City, Missouri. Photograph by Lori Garcia.

In the area of politics, Doniphan served three terms in the Missouri House of Representatives.

In banking and business, Doniphan founded and was president of the bank in Richmond, Missouri.

Doniphan's vision was especially prescient in the area of economic development, for he was responsible for and planned the development of the Platte Purchase, which added six counties to the state of Missouri, including all of the territory from Platte County to St. Joseph.

In the area of community service, Doniphan's vision for the future of Liberty was farsighted, for when he arrived in the village of Liberty, there were only three hundred inhabitants. But Doniphan saw a vision for what it could become, and he helped develop the business and social structure of Liberty.

Doniphan's primary leadership characteristic was best described by his friend and Liberty attorney D. C. Allen, who said of him, "I never knew of anyone whose perception of right and wrong was so strong."³ Doniphan's willingness to take a strong stand is evidenced by his refusal to execute Mormon leader Joseph Smith in 1838, and his passionate voice on behalf of the preservation of the Union.

In December of 1860 when word of the secession of South Carolina reached Liberty, Doniphan had handbills printed at his own expense and distributed throughout the region. Six thousand citizens responded, gathered on the courthouse square in Liberty, and stood in the snow listening to Doniphan as he spoke for three hours without notes on the importance of preserving the Union.

Doniphan's strong leadership was recognized beyond the borders of Liberty, Clay County, and Missouri by none other than President Abraham Lincoln who appointed Doniphan to the Peace Commission in 1861. Lincoln, recognizing Doniphan's leadership abilities, described him in these words: "You are the only man I ever met who in appearance came up to my previous expectation."⁴

Leadership is definitely much more than native ability or intelligence or strength or being in the right place at the right time or even who you know. Leadership combines character, vision, and service. A leader leaves a path to follow.

Alexander Doniphan left a path to follow, and it is obvious that Doniphan's qualities of leadership are worthy of our emulation. May we all strive to follow in the footsteps of Alexander Doniphan, so that we, too, will leave a path to follow.



Alexander W. Doniphan bust on display in the Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City, Missouri, November 2008. The bust is displayed along with thirty other famous Missourians. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

Notes

1. John F. Kennedy, *Public Papers of the Presidents* (Washington: American Presidency Project, 1962).
2. R. Kenneth Elliott, "The Rhetoric of Alexander W. Doniphan," *The Trail Guide* 14, no. 4 (1969): 12.
3. D. C. Allen, *St. Joseph Gazette* (1887), as cited in Roger D. Launius, *Alexander William Doniphan: Portrait of a Missouri Moderate* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 280.
4. D. C. Allen, "Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan—His Life and Character," in William Elsey Connelley, ed., *Doniphan's Expedition, and the Conquest of New Mexico and California* (Topeka: Crane and Co., 1907), 39.