The Presidency and the Political System

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4 Presidential Leadership in Political Time

Stephen Skowronek

Some scholarship on the presidency has emphasized the cyclical aspects of the office. Stephen Skowronek explains one recurring sequence in presidential history—the rise and fall of regimes, or governing coalitions—in terms of the passage of "political time." Each sequence begins when an established regime is defeated soundly in a presidential election, bringing to power a new coalition led by a new president, such as Andrew Jackson in 1828 and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. The challenges to the president who would create a regime are to undermine the "institutional support for opposition interests," to restructure "institutional relations between state and society," and to secure "the dominant position of the new political coalition." As Skowronek argues, not all presidents succeed in this endeavor, and the efforts of even those presidents who do succeed eventually crumble, as the new regime becomes old and vulnerable. Skowronek concludes by offering some thoughts about the places of the four most recent presidents—Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush—in the cyclical history of national regimes.

Three general dynamics are evident in presidential history. The locus of the first is the constitutional separation of powers. It links presidents past and present in a timeless and constant struggle over the definition of their institutional prerogatives and suggests that, although much has changed in two hundred years, the basic structure of presidential action has remained essentially the same. A second dynamic can be traced through the modernization of the nation. It links presidents past and present in an evolutionary sequence culminating in the expanded powers and governing responsibilities of the "modern presidency," and it suggests that the post–World War II incumbents stand apart—their shared leadership situation distinguished from that of earlier presidents by the scope of government concerns, the complexity of national and international issues, and the sheer size of the institutional apparatus. The third dynamic is less well-attended by students of the American presidency. Its locus is the changing shape of the political regimes that have organized state-society relations for broad periods of American history, and it links presidents past and present at parallel junctures in "political time."[1] This third dynamic is the point of departure for our investigation.

To read American history with an eye toward the dynamics of political change is to see that within the sequence of national development there have been many beginnings and many endings. Periods are marked by the rise to power of new political coalitions, one of which comes to exert a dominant influence over the federal government. The dominant coalition operates the federal government and perpetuates its position through the development of a distinctive set of institutional arrangements and approaches to public policy questions. Once established, however, coalition interests have an enervating effect on the governing capacities of these political-institutional regimes. From the outset, conflicts among interests within the dominant coalition threaten to cause political disaffection and may weaken regime support. Then—beyond the problems posed by conflicts among these established interests—more basic questions arise concerning the interests themselves. As the nation changes, the regime's traditional approach to problems appears increasingly outmoded, and the government it dominates appears increasingly hostage to sectarian interests with myopic concerns, insufferable demands, and momentary loyalties. In all, the longer a regime survives, the more its approach to national affairs becomes encumbered and distorted. Its political energies dissipate, and it becomes less competent in addressing the manifest governing demands of the day.

Thinking in terms of regime sequences rather than linear national development, one can distinguish many different political contexts for presidential leadership *within* a given historical period. Leadership situations might be characterized by the president's posture vis-à-vis the dominant political coalition. In the modern Democratic period, for example, regime outsiders like Republicans Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon faced different political problems from those confronted by regime insiders like John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Leadership situations might also be differentiated according to political time, that is, when in a regime sequence the president engages the political-institutional order. Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Jimmy Carter—all Democrats who enjoyed Democratic majorities in Congress—may be said to have faced different problems in leading the nation, as they were arrayed along a sequence of political change that encompassed the generation and degeneration of the New Deal order.

This view of the changing relationship between the presidency and the political system can easily be related to certain outstanding patterns in presidential leadership across American history. First, the presidents who traditionally make the historians' roster of America's greatest—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt—all came to power in an abrupt break from a long-established political-institutional regime; and each led a movement of new political forces into control of the federal government.[2] Second, after the initial break with the past and the consolidation of a new system of government control, a general decline in the political effectiveness of regime insiders is notable. Take, for example, the sequence of Jeffersonians. After the galvanizing performance of Jefferson's first term, we observe increasing political divisions and a managerial-style presidency under James Madison. Asserting the sanctity of an indivisible Republican majority, James Monroe opened his administration to unbridled sectarianism and oversaw a debilitating fragmentation of the federal establishment. A complete political and institutional breakdown marked the abbreviated tenure of John Quincy Adams.

But is it possible to go beyond these general observations and elaborate a historical-structural analysis of political leadership in the presidency? What characteristic political challenges face a leader at any given stage in a regime sequence? How is the quality of presidential performance related to the changing shape of the political-institutional order? These questions call for an investigation that breaks presidential history into regime segments and then compares leadership problems and presidential performances at similar stages in regime development across historical periods. Taking different regimes into account simultaneously, in this essay I will group presidents together on the basis of the parallel positions they hold in political time.

The analysis focuses on three pairs of presidents drawn from the New Deal and Jacksonian regimes: Franklin Roosevelt and Andrew Jackson, John Kennedy and James K. Polk, and Jimmy Carter and Franklin Pierce. All were Democrats and thus affiliated with the dominant coalition of their respective periods. None took a passive, caretaker view of his office. Indeed, each aspired to great national leadership. Paired comparisons have been formed by slicing into these two regime sequences at corresponding junctures and exposing a shared relationship between the presidency and the political system.

We begin with two beginnings—the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and its counterpart in political time, the presidency of Andrew Jackson. Coming to power on the displacement of an old ruling coalition, these presidents became mired in remarkably similar political struggles. Although separated by more than a century of history, they both faced the distinctive challenge of constructing a new regime. Leadership became a matter of securing the political and institutional infrastructure of a new governmental order.

Beyond the challenges of regime construction lie the ever more perplexing problems of managing an established regime in changing times. The regime manager is constrained on one side by the political imperatives of coalition maintenance and on the other by deepening divisions within the ranks. Leadership does not penetrate to the basics of political and institutional reconstruction. It is caught up in the difficulties of satisfying regime commitments while stemming the tide of internal disaffection. As a consequence, the president is challenged at the level of interest control and conflict manipulation. Our examination of the manager's dilemma focuses on John Kennedy and his counterpart in political time, James Polk.

Finally, we come to the paradoxes of establishing a credible leadership posture in an enervated regime. Jimmy Carter and Franklin Pierce both came to power at a time when the dominant coalition had degenerated into myopic sects that appeared impervious to the most basic problems facing the nation. Neither of these presidents penetrated to the level of managing coalition interests. Each found himself caught in the widening disjunction between established power and political legitimacy. Their affiliation with the old order in a new age turned their respective bids for leadership into awkward and superficial struggles to avoid the stigma of their own irrelevance.

All six of these presidents had to grapple with the erosion of political support that inevitably comes with executive action. But if this problem plagued them all, the initial relationship between the leader and his supporters was not the same, and the terms of presidential interaction with the political system changed sequentially from stage to stage. Looking within these pairs, we can identify performance challenges that are shared by leaders who addressed the political system at similar junctures. Looking across the pairs, we observe an ever more tenuous leadership situation, an ever more constricted universe of political action, and an ever more superficial penetration of the political system.

Jackson and Roosevelt: Upheaval and the Challenge of Regime Construction

The presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt were launched on the heels of major political upheavals. Preceding the election of each, a party

long established as the dominant and controlling power within the federal government had begun to flounder and fragment in an atmosphere of national crisis. Finally, the old ruling party suffered a stunning defeat at the polls, losing its dominant position in Congress as well as its control of the presidency. Jackson and Roosevelt assumed the office of chief executive with the old ruling coalition thoroughly discredited by the electorate and, at least temporarily, displaced from political power. They each led into control of the federal establishment a movement based on general discontent with the previously established order of things.

Of the two, Jackson's election in 1828 presents this crisis of the old order in a more purely political form. New economic and social conflicts had been festering in the United States since the financial panic of 1819, but Jackson's campaign gained its special meaning from the confusion and outrage unleashed by the election of 1824. In that election, the Congressional Caucus collapsed as the engine of national political unity, and the once-monolithic Republican Party disintegrated into warring factions. After an extended period of political maneuvering, an alliance between John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay secured Adams a presidential victory in the House of Representatives, despite Jackson's pluralities in both popular and electoral votes. The Adams administration was immediately and permanently engulfed in charges of conspiracy, intrigue, and profligacy in high places. Jackson, the hero of 1815, became a hero wronged in 1824. The Jackson campaign of 1828 launched a broadside assault on the degrading "corruption of manners" that had consumed Washington and on the conspiracy of interests that had captured the federal government from the people.[3]

In the election of 1932 the collapse of the old ruling party dovetailed with, and was overshadowed by, the Great Depression. The Democratic Party of 1932 offered nothing if not hope for economic recovery, and in this Roosevelt's candidacy found special meaning almost in spite of the candidate's rather conservative campaign rhetoric. The depression had made a mockery of President Herbert Hoover's early identification of his party with prosperity, and the challenge of formulating a response to the crisis broke the Republican ranks and threw the party into disarray. Roosevelt's appeal was grounded not in substantive proposals, or even partisan ideology, but in a widespread perception of Republican incompetence, if not intransigence, in the face of national economic calamity. As future secretary of state Cordell Hull outlined Roosevelt's leadership situation in January 1933, "No political party at Washington [is] in control of Congress or even itself. . . . there [is] no cohesive nationwide sentiment behind any fundamental policy or idea today. The election was an overwhelmingly negative affair."[4]

Thus Jackson and Roosevelt each engaged a political system cut from its moorings by a wave of popular discontent. Old commitments of ideology and interest were suddenly called into question. New commitments were as yet only vague appeals to some essential American value (republican virtue, economic opportunity) that had been lost in the indulgences of the old order. With old political alliances in disarray and new political energies infused into Congress, these presidents had an extraordinary opportunity to set a new course in public policy and to redefine the terms of national political debate. They recaptured the experience of being first.

But this situation is not without its characteristic leadership challenge. The leader who is propelled into office by a political upheaval in government control ultimately confronts the imperatives of establishing a new order in government and politics. This challenge is presented directly by the favored interests and residual institutional supports of the old order; once the challenge has been posed, the unencumbered leadership environment that was created by the initial break with the past quickly fades. Presidents face the choice of either abandoning their new departure or consolidating it with structural reforms. Situated just beyond the old order, presidential leadership crystallizes as a problem of regime construction.

The president as regime builder grapples with the fundamentals of political regeneration—institutional reconstruction and party building. At these moments, when national political power has been shaken to its foundational elements, we see the president join at center stage a set of activities that other leaders, less-favorably situated, engage only indirectly or piecemeal—destroying residual institutional support for opposition interests, restructuring institutional relations between state and society, and securing the dominant position of a new political coalition. Success in these tasks is hardly guaranteed. Wilson had to abandon this course when the Republicans reunited and preempted his efforts to broaden the Democratic base. Lincoln was assassinated just as the most critical questions of party building and institutional reconstruction were to be addressed, a disaster that ushered in a devastating confrontation between president and Congress and left the emergent Republican regime hanging precariously for the next three decades. Even Jackson and Roosevelt—America's quintessential regime builders—were not uniformly successful. Neither could keep the dual offensives of party building and institutional reconstruction moving in tandem long enough to complete both.

Andrew Jackson

Republican renewal was the keynote of Jackson's first term. The president was determined to ferret out the political and institutional corruption that he believed had befallen the Jeffersonian regime. This meant purging incompetence and profligacy from the civil service, initiating fiscal retrenchment in national projects, and reviving federalism as a system of vigorous state-based government.[5] Jackson's appeal for a return to Jefferson's original ideas about government certainly posed a potent indictment of the recent state of national affairs and a clear challenge to long-established interests. But there was a studied political restraint in his repudiation of the recent past that defied the attempts of his opponents to characterize it as revolutionary.[6] Indeed, while holding out an attractive standard with which to rally supporters, Jackson was careful to yield his opposition precious little ground on which to mount an effective counterattack. He used the initial upheaval in government control to cultivate an irreproachable political position as the nation's crusader in reform.

The transformation of Jackson's presidency from a moral crusade into a radical program of political reconstruction was instigated not by the president himself but by the premier institution of the old regime, the Bank of the United States.[7] At the time of Jackson's election, the bank was long established as both the most powerful institution in America and the most important link between state and society. It dominated the nation's credit system, maintained extensive ties of material interest with political elites, and actively involved itself in electoral campaigns to sustain its own political support. It embodied all the problems of institutional corruption and political degradation toward which Jackson addressed his administration. The bank was a concentration of political and economic power able to tyrannize over people's lives and to control the will of their elected representatives.

During his first years in office Jackson spoke vaguely of the need for some modification of the bank's charter. But because the charter did not expire until 1836, there appeared to be plenty of time to consider appropriate changes. Indeed, although Jackson was personally inclined toward radical hard-money views, he recognized the dangers of impromptu tinkering with an institution so firmly entrenched in the nation's economic life and hesitated to embrace untested alternatives. Moreover, he foresaw an overwhelming reelection endorsement for his early achievements and knew that to press the bank issue before the election of 1832 could only hurt him politically. After a rout of Henry Clay, the architect of the bank and the obvious challenger in the forthcoming campaign, Jackson anticipated a free hand to deal with the institution as he saw fit.

But Jackson's apparent commitment to some kind of bank reform and the obvious political calculations surrounding the issue led the bank president, Nicholas Biddle, to join forces with Clay. They orchestrated a preelection push to recharter the institution without any reforms a full four years before its charter expired. Biddle feared for the bank's future in a Jackson second term, and Clay needed to break Jackson's irreproachable image as a national leader and to expose his political weaknesses. An early recharter bill promised to splinter Jackson's support in Congress. If the president signed the bill, his integrity as a reformer would be destroyed; if he vetoed it, he would provide a sorely needed coherence to anti-Jackson sentiment.

As expected, the recharter bill threw Jackson enthusiasts into a quandary and passed through Congress. The bill pushed Jackson beyond the possibility of controlling the modification of extant institutions without significant opposition and forced him to choose between retreat and an irrevocable break with established government arrangements. He saw the bill not only as a blatant attempt by those attached to the old order to destroy him politically but also as proof certain that the bank's political power threatened the very survival of republican government. Accepting the challenge, he set out to destroy the bank. The 1828 crusade for republican renewal became in 1832 an all-fronts offensive to establish an entirely new political and institutional order.

The president's veto of the recharter bill clearly marked this transition. The political themes of 1828 were turned against the bank with a vengeance. Jackson said his stand would extricate the federal government from the interests of the privileged and protect the states from encroaching federal domination. He appealed directly to the interests of the nation's farmers, mechanics, and laborers, claiming that this great political majority stood to lose control over the government to the influential few. This call to the "common man" for a defense of the Republic had long been a Jacksonian theme, but now it carried the portent of sweeping government changes. Jackson not only was declaring open war on the premier institution of the old order but was also challenging long-settled questions of governance. The Supreme Court, for example, had upheld the constitutionality of the bank decades before. Jackson's veto challenged the assumption of executive deference to the Court and asserted presidential authority to make an independent and contrary judgment about judicial decisions. Jackson also challenged executive deference to Congress, perhaps the central operating principle of the Jeffersonian regime. His veto message went

beyond constitutional objections to the recharter bill and asserted the president's authority to make an independent evaluation of the social, economic, and political implications of congressional action. In all, the message was a regime builder's manifesto for mobilizing a broad-based political coalition, shattering established institutional relationships between state and society, and transforming power arrangements within the government itself.

New political regimes, however, are not built by presidential proclamation. Jackson had his work cut out for him at the beginning of his second term. His victory over Clay in 1832 was certainly sweeping enough to reaffirm his leadership. In addition, having used the veto as a campaign document, Jackson could now claim a mandate to complete the work it outlined. But Clay had also used the veto as an issue, and the threat to the bank was fueling organized political opposition in all sectors of the country.[8] More important still, the Senate, which had been shaky enough in Jackson's first term, moved completely beyond his control in 1833, and his party's majority in the House returned in a highly volatile condition. Finally, the bank's charter had three more years, and bank president Biddle had every intention of exploiting Jackson's political vulnerabilities in the hope of securing his own future.

The election victory drew Jackson deeper into the politics of reconstruction. To maintain his leadership, he needed to neutralize the bank's significance for the remainder of its charter and to prevent any new recharter movement from emerging in Congress. His plan was to remove the federal government's deposits from the bank on his own authority and to transfer them to a select group of politically friendly state banks. The president would thus simultaneously circumvent his opponents and offer the nation an alternative banking system. The new banking structure had several potential advantages. It promised to work under the direct supervision of the executive branch, to forge direct institutional connections between the presidency and local centers of political power, and to secure broad political support against a revival of the national bank.

This plan faced formidable opposition from the Treasury Department, the Senate, and, most of all, from the Bank of the United States. Biddle responded to the removal of federal deposits with an abrupt and severe curtailment of loans. By squeezing the nation into a financial panic, Biddle hoped to turn public opinion against Jackson. The Senate followed suit with a formal censure of the president, denouncing his pretensions to independent action on the presumption of a direct mandate from the people.

The so-called Panic Session of Congress (1833–1834) posed the ultimate test of Jackson's resolve to forge a new regime. Success now hinged on consolidating the

Democratic Party in Congress and reaffirming its control over the national government. The president moved quickly to assign blame for the panic to the bank. Having destroyed Biddle's credibility, he was able by the spring of 1834 to solidify Democratic support in the House and to gain an endorsement of his actions (and implicitly, his authority to act) from that chamber. Then, undertaking a major, grassroots party-building effort in the midterm elections of 1834, Jackson and his political lieutenants were able to secure a loyal Democratic majority in the Senate. The struggle was over, and in a final acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the new order, the Democratic Senate expunged its censure of the president from the record.

But even as Congress was falling into line, the limitations of the president's achievement were manifesting themselves throughout the nation. Jackson had successfully repudiated the old government order, consolidated a new political party behind his policies, secured that party's control over the entire federal establishment, and redefined the position of the presidency in its relations with Congress, the courts, the states, and the electorate. The problem lay with his institutional alternative for reconstructing financial relations between state and society. From the outset, the state deposit system proved a dismal failure.

In truth, Jackson had latched onto the deposit banking scheme as much out of political necessity as principle. The president had been caught between his opponents' determination to save the bank and his supporters' need for a clear and attractive alternative to it. Opposition to Biddle and Clay merged with opposition to any national banking structure, and what might otherwise have been an interim experiment with state banking quickly became a political commitment. Unfortunately, the infusion of federal deposits into the pet state banks fueled a speculative boom and threatened a major financial collapse.

Hoping to stem this disaster, the Treasury Department began to choose banks of deposit less for their political soundness than for their financial health. Jackson threw his support behind a gradual conversion to hard money. In the end, however, the president was forced to accept the grim irony of his success as a regime builder. As Congress moved more solidly behind him, its members began to see for themselves the special political attractions of the state deposit system. With the passage of the Deposit Act of 1836, Congress expanded the number of state depositories and explicitly limited executive discretion in controlling them.[9]

Thus, although Jackson had reconstructed American government and politics, he merely substituted one irresponsible and uncontrollable financial system for another. Institutional ties between state and society emerged as the weak link in the new order. Jackson's chosen successor, Martin Van Buren, understood this all too well as he struggled to extricate the federal government from the state banks in the midst of the nation's first great depression.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

As a political personality, the moralistic, vindictive, and tortured Jackson stands in marked contrast to the pragmatic, engaging, and buoyant Franklin Roosevelt. Yet their initial triumphs over long-established ruling parties and the sustained popular enthusiasm that accompanied their victories propelled them into grappling with similar sets of leadership challenges. By late 1934 Roosevelt himself seemed to sense the parallels, writing to Vice President John Nance Garner, "The more I learn about Andy Jackson, the more I love him."[10]

The timing of this remark is noteworthy. In 1934 and 1935 Roosevelt's emergency program caused mounting discontent among the favored interests of the old order. Moreover, the president saw that the residual institutional bulwark of that order was capable of simply sweeping his programs aside. Like Jackson in 1832, Roosevelt was being challenged either to reconstruct the political and institutional foundations of the national government or to abandon the initiative he had sustained virtually without opposition in his early years of power.

The revival of the economy had been the keynote of Roosevelt's early program.[11] Although collectivist in approach and boldly assertive of a positive role for the federal government, the early policies of the New Deal did not present a broadside challenge to long-established political and economic interests. Roosevelt had adopted the role of a bipartisan national leader reaching out to all interests in a time of crisis. He carefully courted the southern Bourbons, who controlled the old Democratic Party, and directly incorporated big business into the government's recovery program. But if Roosevelt's program did not ignore the interests attached to and supported by the government arrangements of the past, it did implicate those interests in a broader coalition. The New Deal had also bestowed legitimacy on the interests of organized labor, the poor, and the unemployed, leaving southern Bourbons and northern industrialists feeling threatened and increasingly insecure.

This unease manifested itself politically in summer 1934 with the organization of the American Liberty League. Although the league mounted an aggressive assault on Roosevelt and the New Deal, Roosevelt's party received a resounding endorsement in the midterm elections, actually broadening the base of enthusiastic New Dealers in Congress. The congressional elections vividly demonstrated the futility of political opposition, but in spring 1935 a more potent adversary arose within the government itself. The Supreme Court, keeper of the rules of governance for the old regime, handed down a series of anti–New Deal decisions. The most important of these nullified the centerpiece of Roosevelt's recovery program, the National Industrial Recovery Act.

With the American Liberty League clarifying the stakes of the New Deal departure and the Court pulling the rug out from under the cooperative approach to economic recovery, Roosevelt turned his administration toward structural reform. If he could no longer lead all interests toward economic recovery, he could still secure the interests of a great political majority within the new government order.

Roosevelt began the transition from national leader to regime builder with a considerable advantage over Jackson. He could restructure institutional relations between state and society simply by reaching out to the radical and irrepressibly zealous Seventy-fourth Congress (1935–1937) and offering it sorely needed coherence and direction. The result was a second round of New Deal legislation. The federal government extended new services and permanent institutional supports to organized labor, small business, the aged, the unemployed, and later, the rural poor. At the same time, the president revealed a new approach to big business and the affluent by pressing for tighter regulation and graduated taxation.[12]

The scope and vision of these achievements far surpassed the makeshift and flawed arrangements that Jackson had improvised to restructure institutional relations between state and society in the bank war. But Roosevelt's comparatively early and more thoroughgoing success on this score proved a dubious advantage in subsequent efforts to consolidate the new order. After his overwhelming reelection victory in 1936, Roosevelt pressed a series of consolidation initiatives. Like Jackson in his second term, he began with an effort to neutralize the remaining threat within the government.

Roosevelt's target was the Supreme Court. He was wise not to follow Jackson's example in the bank war by launching a direct ideological attack on the Court. After all, Roosevelt was challenging a constitutional branch of government and could hardly succeed in labeling that branch a threat to the survival of the Republic. The president decided instead to kill his institutional opposition with kindness. He called for an increase in the size of the Court, ostensibly to ease the burden on the elder justices and to increase overall efficiency. Unfortunately, the real stakes of the contest never were made explicit, and the chief justice deflected the attack by simply denying the need for help. More important, the Court, unlike the bank, did not further exacerbate the situation. Instead, it

reversed course in the middle of the battle and displayed a willingness to accept the policies of the second New Deal.

The Court's turnabout was a great victory for the new regime. It relegated to the irretrievable past the old strictures surrounding legitimate government activity that Roosevelt had been repudiating from the outset of his presidency. But in so doing, the justices eliminated even the implicit justification for Roosevelt's proposed judicial reforms. With the constituent services of the New Deal secure, Congress had little reason to challenge the integrity of the Court. Bound by his own inefficiency arguments, Roosevelt did not withdraw his proposal. Although stalwart liberals stood by the president to the end, traditional Democratic conservatives deserted him. A bipartisan opposition took open ground against Roosevelt, defeated the "Court-packing" scheme, and divided the ranks of the New Deal coalition. It was a rebuke every bit as portentous as the formal censure of Jackson by the Senate.

With Roosevelt, as with Jackson, the third congressional election of his tenure called forth a major party-building initiative. Stung by his defeat, the president sought to reaffirm his hold over the Democratic Party and to strengthen its liberal commitments. This effort was hindered, ironically, by Roosevelt's early and sweeping successes. Unlike Jackson in 1834, Roosevelt in 1938 could not point to any immediate threat to his governing coalition. The liberal program was already in place. The Court had capitulated, and despite deep fissures manifested during the Court battle, the overwhelming Democratic majorities in Congress gave no indication of abandoning the New Deal. Even the southern delegations in Congress maintained majority support for Roosevelt's domestic reform initiatives.[13] Under these conditions, party building took on an aura of presidential self-indulgence. Although enormously important from the standpoint of future regime coherence, at the time it looked like heavy-handed, selective punishment of personal enemies. In this guise, it evoked little popular support, let alone enthusiasm.

The party-building initiative failed. Virtually all of the conservative Democrats targeted for defeat were reelected, and the Republicans showed a resurgence of strength. As two-party politics returned to the national scene, the awkward division within the majority party between the old southern conservatism and the new liberal orthodoxy became a permanent feature of the new regime.

Despite these setbacks, Roosevelt pressed forward with the business of consolidating a new order, and a final effort met with considerable success. In 1939 the president received congressional approval of a package of administrative reforms that promised to bolster the president's position vis-à-vis the other branches of government. Following the precepts of his Committee on Administrative Management, the president had asked for new executive offices to provide planning and direction for government operations. Congress endorsed a modest version of the scheme; although deflating Roosevelt's grand design, it clearly acknowledged the new governing demands presented by the large federal programs and permanent bureaucratic apparatus he had forged. The establishment of the Executive Office of the President closed the New Deal with a fitting symbol of the new state of affairs.[14]

Polk and Kennedy: Reaffirmation and the Dilemmas of Interest Management

The administrations of Jackson and Roosevelt shared much in both the political conditions of leadership and the challenges they undertook. An initial upheaval, the ensuing political confusion, and widespread support for a decisive break from the institutional strictures of the past framed America's quintessential regime-building presidencies. Opposition from the favored interests of the old order and their residual institutional supports eventually pushed these presidents from an original program to meet the immediate crisis at hand into structural reforms that promised to place institutional relations between state and society on an entirely new footing. After a second landslide election, Jackson and Roosevelt each moved to consolidate their new order by eliminating the institutional opposition and forging a more coherent base of party support. As the nation redivided politically, they secured a new ruling coalition, reset the political agenda, and institutionalized a new position of power for the presidency itself.

It is evident from a comparison of these performances that where Roosevelt's regime building was triumphant, Jackson's faltered, and vice versa: Roosevelt thoroughly reconstructed institutional relations between state and society, but his performance as a party builder was weak and his achievement flawed. Jackson left institutional relations between state and society in dangerous disarray, but his performance and achievement as a party builder remain unparalleled. The more important point lies, however, beyond these comparisons. It is that few presidents can engage in a wholesale political repudiation of the past and address the political system at the level of institutional reconstruction and party building. Most presidents must use their skills and resources—however extensive these may be—to work within the already established government order.

Successful regime builders leave in their wake a more constricted universe for political leadership. To their partisan successors, in particular, they leave the difficult task of keeping faith with a ruling coalition. In an established regime, the majority-party president comes to power as a representative of the dominant political alliance and is expected to offer a representative's service in delegate style. Commitments of ideology and interest are clear, and the fusion of national political legitimacy with established power arrangements argues against any attempt to tinker with the basics of government and politics. Leaders are challenged, not to break down the old order and forge a new one, but to complete the unfinished business, adapt the agenda to changing times, and defuse the potentially explosive choices among competing obligations. They are partners in a highly structured regime politics, and, to keep the partnership working, they must orchestrate the fulfillment of promises and control impending disruptions. The political problem is to get innovation without repudiation and to present creativity as a vindication of orthodoxy.

The presidencies of James Polk and John Kennedy clearly illustrate the problems and prospects of leadership that is circumscribed by the challenge of managing an established coalition. Both men came to the presidency after an interval of opposition party control and divided government. The intervening years had seen some significant changes in the tenor of public policy, but there had been no systemic transformations of government and politics. Ushering in a second era of majority-party government, Polk and Kennedy promised at once to reaffirm the commitments and revitalize the program of the dominant regime.

Neither Polk nor Kennedy could claim the leadership of any major party faction. Indeed, their credibility as regime managers rested largely on their second-rank status in regular party circles. Each schooled himself in the task of allaying mutual suspicions among the great centers of party strength. Their nominations to the presidency were the result of skillful dancing around the conflicts that divided the party. What they lacked in deep political loyalties they made up for with their freedom to cultivate widespread support.

Once the office was attained, the challenge of interest management was magnified. Each of these presidents had accepted one especially virulent bit of orthodoxy that claimed majority support within the party as a necessary part of the new regime agenda. Their ability to endorse their party's most divisive enthusiasm—Texas annexation and civil rights, respectively—without losing a broad base of credibility within the party was fitting testimony to their early education in the art of aggressive maintenance of the regime party. But their mediating skills did not alter the fact that each came into office with a clear commitment to act on an issue that had long threatened to split the party apart. In addition, Polk and Kennedy each won astonishingly close elections. There was no clear mandate for action, no discernible tide of national discontent, no mass rejection of what had gone before. The hairbreadth Democratic victories of 1844 and 1960 suggested that the opposition could continue to make a serious claim to the presidency and reinforced an already highly developed sense of executive dependence on all parts of the party coalition. With maintenance at a premium and an ideological rupture within the ranks at hand, Polk and Kennedy carried the full weight of the leadership dilemma that confronts the majority-party president of an established regime.

James K. Polk

For the Democratic Party of 1844, the long-festering issue was the annexation of Texas, with its implication of a war of aggression for the expansion of slave territory.[15] Andrew Jackson, an ardent nationalist with a passion for annexation, had steered clear of any definitive action on Texas during the last years of his presidency. He had just consolidated the Democratic Party, and the threat of dividing it anew along sectional lines argued for a passive posture of merely anticipating the inevitable.[16]

Democratic loyalists followed Jackson's lead until 1843, when the partyless "mongrel president," John Tyler, desperate to build an independent political base of support for himself, latched onto the annexation issue and presented a formal proposal on the subject to Congress. With Texas finally pushed to the forefront, expansionist fever heated up in the South and the West, and antislavery agitation accelerated in the North.

Jackson's political nightmare became a reality on the eve of his party's nominating convention in 1844. Martin Van Buren, Jackson's successor to the presidency in 1837 and still the nominal head of the Democrats, risked losing an all-but-certain nomination by coming out against the *immediate* annexation of Texas. Despite its carefully orthodox wording, the New Yorker's pronouncement roused a formidable opposition in the southern and western wings of the party and left the convention deadlocked through eight ballots. With Van Buren holding a large bloc of delegates but unable to get the leaders of the South and West to relinquish the necessary two-thirds majority, it became clear that only a "new man" could save the party from disaster. That man had to be firm on immediate annexation without being openly opposed to Van Buren. On the ninth ballot, James Knox Polk became the Democratic nominee.

Polk was well aware of the circumstances of his nomination. As leader of the Democratic Party in Tennessee and a stalwart friend of Andrew Jackson, he had unimpeachable credentials as an orthodox party regular. He had served loyally as floor leader of the House during the critical days of the bank war and had gone on to win his state's governorship. But after Polk tried and failed to gain his party's vice-presidential nomination in 1840, his political career fell on hard times.

Calculating his strategy for a political comeback in 1844, Polk made full use of his second-rank standing in high party circles. Again he posed as the perfect vice-presidential candidate and cultivated his ties to Van Buren. Knowing that this time Van Buren's nomination would be difficult, Polk also understood the special advantages of being a Texas enthusiast with Van Buren connections. As soon as that calculation paid off, Polk ventured another. In accepting the presidential nomination, he pledged that if elected he would not seek a second term. Although he thus declared himself a lame duck even before he was elected, Polk reckoned he would not serve any time in office at all unless the frustrated party giants in all sections of the nation expended every last ounce of energy for the campaign—an effort they might not make if it meant foreclosing their own prospects for eight years.[17]

The one-term declaration was a bid for party unity and a pledge of party maintenance. But the divisions that were exposed at the convention of 1844 and their uncertain resolution in a Texas platform and a dark-horse nomination suggested that the party was likely to chew itself up under a passive, caretaker presidency. If Polk was to avoid a disastrous schism in the party of Jackson, he would have to order, balance, and service the major contending interests in turn. He would have to enlist each contingent within the party in support of the policy interests of all the others. Polk submerged himself in a high-risk strategy of aggressive maintenance in which the goal was to satisfy each faction of his party enough to keep the whole from falling apart. The scheme was at once pragmatic and holistic, hardheaded and fantastic. The most startling thing of all is how well it worked.

The president opened his administration (appropriately enough) with a declaration that he would "know no divisions of the Democratic Party." He promised "equal and exact justice to every portion."[18] His first action indicated, however, that the going would be rough. Scrutinizing the cabinet selection process, Van Buren (whose electoral efforts had put Polk over the top) judged that his interests in New York had not been sufficiently recognized. The frustrated ex-president presumed a determination on the new president's part to turn the party toward the slave South. Polk tried to appease Van Buren with other patronage offers, but relations between them did not improve. From the outset Van Buren's loyalty was laden with suspicion.

The outcry over patronage suggests that any action the president took would cloud Polk's orthodoxy in charges of betrayal. Van Buren's accusations were but the first in an incessant barrage of such charges.[19] But Polk was not powerless in the face of disaffection. He had an irresistible agenda for party government to bolster his precarious political position.

Polk's program elaborated the theme of equal justice for all coalition interests. On the domestic side, he reached out to the South with support for a lower tariff, to the Northwest with support for land price reform, to the Northeast by endorsing a warehouse storage system advantageous to import merchants, and to the old Jackson radicals with a commitment to a return to hard money and a reinstatement of the independent treasury. (Van Buren had dedicated his entire administration to establishing the independent treasury as a solution to Jackson's banking dilemma, but his work had been undermined in the intervening four years.) It was in foreign affairs, however, that the president placed the highest hopes for his administration. Superimposed on his carefully balanced program of party service in the domestic arena was a missionary embrace of America's "Manifest Destiny." Reaching out to the South, Polk promised to annex Texas; to the Northwest, he promised Oregon; and to bind the whole nation together, he made a secret promise to himself to acquire California. In all, the president would complete the orthodox Jacksonian program of party services and fuse popular passions in an irresistible, jingoistic campaign to extend the Jacksonian Republic across the continent.

Driven by the dual imperatives of maintenance and leadership, Polk sought to transform the nation without changing its politics. Party loyalty was the key to success, but it would take more than just a series of favorable party votes to make Polk's strategy of aggressive maintenance work. The sequence, pace, and symbolism of Polk's initiatives had to be assiduously controlled and coordinated with difficult foreign negotiations so that the explosive moral issues inherent in the program would not enter the debate. Sectional paranoia and ideological heresies had to be held in constant check. Mutual self-interest had to remain at the forefront so that reciprocal party obligations could be reinforced. Polk's program was much more than a laundry list of party commitments. If he did not get everything he promised, in the order he promised it, he risked a major political rupture that would threaten whatever he did achieve. Here, at the level of executive management and interest control, the president faltered.

After the patronage tiff with Van Buren demonstrated Polk's problems with the eastern radicals, disaffection over the Oregon boundary settlement exposed his difficulties in striking an agreeable balance between western and southern expansionists. The president moved forward immediately and simultaneously on his promises to acquire Oregon and Texas. In each case he pressed an aggressive, indeed belligerent, border claim. He demanded "all of Oregon" (extending north to the 54° 40' parallel) from Great Britain and "Greater Texas" (extending south of the Nueces River to the Rio Grande) from Mexico.

The pledge to get "all of Oregon" unleashed a tidal wave of popular enthusiasm in the Northwest. But Great Britain refused to play according to the presidential plan, and a potent peace movement spread across the South and the East out of fear of impending war over the Oregon boundary. Polk used the belligerence of the "54° 40' or fight" faction to counter the peace movement and to prod the British into coming to terms, but he knew the risks of war on that front. An impending war with Mexico over the Texas boundary promised to yield California in short order, but a war with both Mexico and Great Britain spelled disaster.

When the British finally agreed to settle the Oregon boundary at the forty-ninth parallel, Polk accepted the compromise. Then, after an appropriate display of Mexican aggression on the Texas border, he asked Congress for a declaration of war on Mexico. Abandoned, the 54° 40' men turned on the president, mercilessly accusing him of selling out to the South and picking on defenseless Mexico instead of standing honorably against the British. A huge part of the Oregon territory had been added to the Union, but a vociferous bloc of westerners now joined the Van Burenites in judging the president deceptive and dangerously prosouthern. Polk had miscalculated both British determination and western pride. His accomplishment deviated from the pace and scope of his grand design and in so doing undermined the delicate party balance.

Polk's designs were further complicated by the effects of wartime sensibilities on his carefully balanced legislative program. The independent treasury and warehouse storage bills were enacted easily, but old matters of principle and simple matters of interest were not enough to calm agitated eastern Democrats. They demanded the president's assurance that he was not involved in a war of conquest in the Southwest. Polk responded with an evasive definition of war aims. There was little else he could do to ease suspicions.

More portentous still was the influence of the tariff initiative on wartime politics. Polk had to court northwestern Democrats to make up for expected eastern defections on a vote for a major downward revision of rates. To do so, he not only used land price reform as an incentive to end debate but also withheld his objections to a legislative initiative brewing among representatives of the South and West to develop the Mississippi River system. The northwesterners swallowed their pride over Oregon in hopeful expectation and threw their support behind the tariff bill.

After the bill was enacted, Polk vetoed the internal improvement bill. It had never been a part of his program and was an affront to Jacksonian orthodoxy. But the president's maneuverings were an offense to the West and all but eclipsed the veto's stalwart affirmation of Jacksonian principles. To make matters worse, the land bill failed. The president made good his pledge to press the measure, but he could not secure enactment. Burned three times after offering loyal support to southern interests, the northwesterners were no longer willing to heed the counsel of mutual restraint. The president's effort to bring the war to a quick and triumphant conclusion provided them with their opportunity to strike back.

The war with Mexico was in fact only a few months old, but that was already too long for the president and his party. To speed the advent of peace, Polk decided to ask Congress for a $2 million appropriation to settle the Texas boundary dispute and to pay "for any concessions which may be made by Mexico." This open offer of money for land was the first clear indication that the United States was engaged in—perhaps had consciously provoked—a war of conquest in the Southwest. With it, the latent issue of 1844 manifested itself with a vengeance. Northern Democrats, faced with growing antislavery agitation at home, saw unequal treatment in the administration's handling of matters of interest, intolerable duplicity in presidential action, and an insufferable southern bias in national policy. They were ready to take their stand on matters of principle.

It is ironic that Polk's implicit acknowledgment of the drive for California, with its promise of fulfilling the nationalistic continental vision, would fan the fires of sectional conflict. Surely he had intended just the opposite. The president was, in fact, correct in calculating that no section of the party would oppose the great national passion for expansion to the Pacific. But he simply could not curb party disaffection in the East, and unfulfilled expectations fueled dissatisfaction in the West. He was left to watch in dismay as the malcontents joined forces to take their revenge on the South.

Northern Democrats loyally offered to support the president's effort to buy peace and land but added a demand that slavery be prohibited from entering any of the territory that might be acquired. This condition was known as the "Wilmot Proviso" after Democrat David Wilmot, a Van Buren enthusiast from

western Pennsylvania. Once introduced, it splintered the party along the dreaded sectional cleavage. An appropriations bill with the proviso was passed in the House, but it failed in the Senate when an effort to remove the proviso was successfully filibustered. Now it was Polk's turn to be bitter. In a grim confession of the failure of his grand design, he claimed he could not comprehend "what connection slavery had with making peace with Mexico."[20]

Ultimately, Polk got his peace, and with it he added California and the greater Southwest to the Union. He also delivered on tariff revision, the independent treasury, the warehouse storage system, Oregon, and Texas. Interest management by Polk had extorted a monumental program of party service from established sources of power in remarkably short order. Indeed, except for the conclusion of peace with Mexico, everything had been put in place between the spring of 1845 and the summer of 1846. But the Jacksonian party had ruptured under the pressures of enacting this most orthodox of party programs. Polk's monument to Jacksonian nationalism proved a breeding ground for sectional heresy, and his golden age of policy achievement was undermined at its political foundations.

The failure of interest management to serve the dual goals of political maintenance and policy achievement manifested itself in political disaster for the Democratic Party. By fall 1846 the New York party was divided into two irreconcilable camps, with Van Buren leading the radicals, who were in favor of the Wilmot Proviso and opposed to the administration. Although Polk maintained an official stance of neutrality toward the schism, party regulars rallied behind Lewis Cass, a westerner opposed to the proviso. Cass's alternative—"popular" or "squatter" sovereignty in the territories—promised to hold together the larger portion of the majority party by absolving the federal government of any role in settling the questions of slavery extension and regional balance that were raised by Polk's transformation of the nation. When the Democrats nominated Cass in 1848, the Van Buren delegation bolted the convention. Joining "Conscience Whigs" and "Liberty Party" men, they formed the Free Soil Party, dedicated it to the principles of the Wilmot Proviso, and nominated Van Buren as their presidential candidate.[21]

Polk abandoned his studied neutrality after the convention. In the waning months of his administration he withdrew administration favors from Free Soil sympathizers and threw his support behind the party regulars.[22] But it was Van Buren who had the last word. Four years after putting personal defeat aside, loyally supporting the party, and electing Polk, he emerged as the leader of the "heretics" and defeated Cass.

John F. Kennedy

John Kennedy had every intention of spending eight years in the White House, but this ambition only compounded the leadership dilemma inherent in his initial political situation. Kennedy's presidential campaign harked back to Roosevelt-like images of direction and energy in government. It stigmatized Republican rule as a lethargic, aimless muddle, and roused the people with a promise to "get the country moving again."

At the same time, however, the party of Roosevelt maintained its awkward division between northern liberals and southern conservatives. The candidate assiduously courted both wings, and the narrowness of his victory reinforced his debts to each. The president's prospects for eight years in the White House seemed to hinge on his ability to vindicate, in his first four, the promise of vigorous national leadership without undermining the established foundations of national political power.

Kennedy's "New Frontier" was eminently suited to these demands for aggressive maintenance. It looked outward toward placing a human being on the moon and protecting the free world from communist aggression. It looked inward toward pragmatic adaptations and selected adjustments of the New Deal consensus. Leadership in the international arena would bring the nation together behind bold demonstrations of American power and determination. In the domestic arena it would contain party conflict through presidential management and executive-controlled initiatives.

Kennedy's leadership design had more in common with Polk's pursuits than frontier imagery. Both presidents gave primacy to foreign enthusiasms and hoped the nation would do the same. Facing a politically divided people and a fractionated party, they both set out to tap the unifying potential of America's missionary stance in the world and to rivet national attention on aggressive (even provocative) international adventures. By so doing, they claimed the high ground as individuals of truly national vision. At the same time, each countered deepening conflicts of principle in the ruling coalition with an attempt to balance interests. They were engaged in a constant struggle to mute the passions that divided their supporters and to stem coalition disaffection. Resisting the notion of irreconcilable differences within the ranks, Polk and Kennedy held out their support to all interests and demanded in return the acquiescence of each in executive determination of the range, substance, and timing of policy initiatives.

Some notable differences are evident in the way these presidents approached regime management. Kennedy, not unaware of Polk's failings, avoided Polk's

tactics.[23] Polk had gone after as much as possible as quickly as possible for as many as possible, in the hope that conflicts among interests could be submerged through the ordered satisfaction of each. Kennedy seemed to feel that conflicts could best be avoided by refraining from unnecessarily divisive action. He was more circumspect in his choice of initiatives and more cautious in their pursuit. Interest balance translated into legislative restraint, and aggressive maintenance became contained advocacy. Kennedy's "politics of expectation" kept fulfillment of the liberal agenda at the level of anticipation.[24]

At the heart of Kennedy's political dilemma was the long-festering issue of civil rights for black Americans. Roosevelt had seen the fight for civil rights coming, but he refused to make it his own, fearing the devastating effect it would have on the precarious sectional balance in his newly established party coalition.[25] Harry S. Truman had seen the fight break out and temporarily rupture the party in 1948.[26] His response was a balance of executive action and legislative caution. When the Republicans made gains in southern cities during the 1950s, the prudent course Truman had outlined appeared more persuasive than ever. But by 1961 black migration into northern cities, Supreme Court support for civil rights demands, and an ever more aggressive civil rights movement in the South had made it almost impossible for a Democratic president to resist a more definitive commitment.

In his early campaign for the presidential nomination, Kennedy developed a posture of "inoffensive" support on civil rights.[27] While keeping himself abreast of the liberal position, he held back from leadership and avoided pressing the cause on southern conservatives. Such maneuvering became considerably more difficult at the party convention of 1960. The liberal-controlled platform committee presented a civil rights plank that all but committed the nominee to take the offensive. It pledged presidential leadership on behalf of new legislation, vigorous enforcement of existing laws, and reforms in congressional procedures to remove impediments to such action. Adding insult to injury, the plank lent party sanction to the civil rights demonstrations that had been accelerating throughout the South.

Although the Democratic platform tied Kennedy to the cause that had ruptured the party in 1948, it did not dampen his determination to hold onto the South. Once nominated, he reached out to the offended region and identified himself with more traditional Democratic strategies. Indeed, by offering the vice-presidential nomination to Lyndon B. Johnson, he risked a serious offense to the left. Not only was Johnson the South's first choice and Kennedy's chief rival for the presidential nomination, but his national reputation was punctuated by conspicuous efforts on behalf of ameliorative civil rights action in the Senate. Kennedy himself seems to have been a bit surprised by Johnson's acceptance of second place. The liberals were disheartened.[28] Together, however, Kennedy and Johnson made a formidable team of regime managers. Riding the horns of their party's dilemma, they balanced the boldest Democratic commitment ever on the side of civil rights with a determination not to lose the support of its most passionate opponents. Their narrow victory owed as much to those who were promised a new level of action as to those who were promised continued moderation.

The president's inaugural and State of the Union addresses directed national attention to imminent international dangers and America's world responsibilities. Civil rights received only passing mention. Stressing the need for containment in the international arena, these speeches also reflected the president's commitment to containment in the domestic sphere. In the months before the inauguration Kennedy had decided to keep civil rights off his legislative agenda. Instead, he would prod Congress along on other liberal issues, such as minimum wage, housing, area redevelopment, aid to education, mass transit, and health care. The plan was not difficult to rationalize. If on the one hand the president pressed for civil rights legislation and failed, his entire legislative program would be placed in jeopardy, and executive efforts on behalf of blacks would be subject to even closer scrutiny. If on the other he withheld the civil rights issue from Congress, southerners might show their appreciation for the president's circumspection. His other measures might have a better chance for enactment, and blacks would reap the benefits of this selected expansion of liberal legislation, as well as the benefits of Kennedy's executive-controlled civil rights initiatives.

Thus Kennedy avoided personal involvement in a preinaugural fight in the Senate over liberalization of the rules of debate. The effort failed. He did lend his support to a liberal attempt to expand the House Rules Committee, but this was a prerequisite to House action on Kennedy's chosen legislative program. The Rules Committee effort succeeded, but the new committee members gave no indication of an impending civil rights offensive.[29]

Feelings of resentment and betrayal among civil rights leaders inevitably followed the decision to forgo the bold legislative actions suggested in the party platform. But by giving substance to the promise of aggressive executive action, the president sought to allay this resentment and to demonstrate persuasively a new level of federal commitment. The administration moved forward on several fronts.

The centerpiece of the administration's strategy was to use the Justice Department to promote and protect voter registration drives among southern blacks. This promised to give blacks the power to secure their rights and also to minimize the electoral costs of any further Democratic defections among southern whites. On other fronts, the president liberalized the old Civil Rights Commission and created the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity to investigate job discrimination. When Congress moved to eliminate the poll tax, the president lent his support. When demonstrations threatened to disrupt southern transportation terminals, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy enlisted the cooperation of the Interstate Commerce Commission in desegregating the facilities. When black applicant James Meredith asserted his right to enroll at the University of Mississippi, the administration responded with protection and crisis mediation. Even more visibly, the president appointed a record number of blacks to high civil service positions.

Kennedy pressed executive action on behalf of civil rights with more vigor and greater effect than any of his predecessors. Still, civil rights enthusiasts were left with unfulfilled hopes and mounting suspicions. Ever mindful of the political imperatives of containing advocacy, the president was trying not only to serve the interests of blacks but also to manage those interests and serve the interests of civil rights opponents. Indeed, there seemed to be a deceptive qualification in each display of principle. For example, the president's patronage policies brought blacks into positions of influence in government, but they also brought new segregationist federal judges to the South. The FBI that provided support for the voter registration drive also tapped the telephone of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. The poll tax was eliminated with administration support, but the administration backed away from a contest over literacy tests. Kennedy liberalized the Civil Rights Commission, but he refused to endorse its controversial report, which recommended withholding federal funds from states that violated the Constitution. Although he encouraged the desegregation of interstate transportation terminals, the president put off action on a campaign pledge to promote the desegregation of housing by executive order. (When the housing order was finally issued, it adopted the narrowest possible application and was not made retroactive.) And although the administration ultimately saw to the integration of the University of Mississippi, the U.S. attorney general first tried to find some way to allow the racist governor of the state to save face.

Executive management allowed Kennedy to juggle mutually contradictory expectations for two years. But as an exercise in forestalling a schism within the ranks, the administration's efforts to control advocacy and to balance interests ultimately satisfied no one and offered no real hope of resolving the issue at hand. The weaknesses in the president's position became more and more apparent early in 1963 as civil rights leaders pressed ahead with their own timetable for action.

Although civil rights leaders clearly needed the president's support, they steadfastly refused to compromise their demands or to relinquish de facto control over their movement to presidential management. The president and his brother the attorney general became agitated when movement leaders contended that the administration was not doing all that it could for blacks. Civil rights groups, in turn, were outraged by the administration's implication that the movement comprised an interest like any other and that its claims could be pragmatically "balanced" against those of racism and bigotry in a purely political calculus. Independent action had already blurred the line between contained advocacy and reactive accommodation in the administration's response to the movement. Continued independence and intensified action promised to limit the president's latitude still further and to force him to shift his course from interest balancing to moral choice.

The first sign of a shift came on February 28, 1963. After a season of rising criticism of presidential tokenism, embarrassing civil rights advocacy by liberal Republicans in Congress, and portentous planning for spring demonstrations in the most racially sensitive parts of the South, the president recommended some mild civil rights measures to Congress. His message acknowledged that civil rights was indeed a moral issue and indicated that it no longer could be treated simply as another interest. But this shift was one of words more than action. Kennedy did not follow up his legislative request in any significant way.

Although civil rights agitation clearly was spilling over the banks of presidential containment, the prospect for passing civil rights legislation in Congress had improved little since Kennedy had taken office. His circumspect attitude toward civil rights matters during the first two years of his administration had succeeded in winning only modest support from southern Democrats for his other social and economic measures. On the one hand, several of the administration's most important victories—minimum wage, housing, and area redevelopment legislation—clearly demonstrated the significance of southern support. On the other, the president had already seen southern Democrats defect in droves to defeat his proposed Department of Urban Affairs, presumably because the first department head was to be black.[30] If Kennedy could no longer hope to contain the civil rights issue, he still faced the problem of

containing the political damage that would inevitably come from spearheading legislative action.

Kennedy's approach to this problem was to press legislation as an irresistible counsel of moderation. This meant holding back still longer, waiting for the extreme positions to manifest themselves fully, and then offering real change as the only prudent course available. He did not have to wait long. In 1963 a wave of spring civil rights demonstrations that began in Birmingham, Alabama, and extended throughout the South brought mass arrests and ugly displays of police brutality to the center of public attention. Capitalizing on the specter of social disintegration, the administration argued that a new legislative initiative was essential to the restoration of order and sought bipartisan support for it on that basis. Congressional Republicans were enlisted with the argument that the only way to get the protesters off the streets was to provide them with new legal remedies in the courts. Kennedy then seized an opportunity to isolate the radical right. On the evening of the day that Gov. George Wallace made his symbolic gesture in defiance of federal authority at the University of Alabama (physically barring the entrance of a prospective black student), the president gave a hastily prepared but impassioned television address on the need for new civil rights legislation.

In late June the administration sent its legislative proposal to Congress. The bill went far beyond the mild measures offered in February. It contained significantly expanded voting rights protections and for the first time called for federal protection to enforce school desegregation and to guarantee equal access to public facilities. But even with this full bow to liberal commitments, the struggle for containment continued. The administration tried to counter the zeal of urban Democrats by searching for compromises that would hold a bipartisan coalition of civil rights support. When civil rights leaders planned a march on Washington in the midst of the legislative battle, the president tried without success to dissuade them.

Containing the zeal of the left was the least of the president's problems. Kennedy had struggled continually to moderate his party's liberal commitments and thus avoid a rupture on the right. With a landmark piece of civil rights legislation inching its way through Congress, the president now turned to face the dreaded party schism. His popularity had plummeted in the South. George Wallace was contemplating a national campaign to challenge liberal control of the Democratic Party, and an ugly white backlash in the North made the prospects for such a campaign brighter than ever. Conservative reaction, party schism, and the need to hold a base in the South were foremost in the president's thinking as he embarked on his fateful trip to Texas in November 1963.

Pierce and Carter: Disjunction and the Struggle for Credibility

For Polk and Kennedy, leadership was circumscribed by a political test of aggressive maintenance and the corresponding dilemmas of interest management. With a preemptive assertion of executive control, each attempted to orchestrate a course and pace for regime development that would change the nation without changing its politics. Their governing strategies involved them in convoluted conflict manipulations that were calculated to reconcile divergent coalition interests, stave off a political rupture, and move forward on outstanding regime commitments. Grounded in established power, leadership cast a dark cloud of duplicity over its greatest achievements.

Indeed, it would be difficult to choose the greater of these two presidential performances. Polk was able to deliver on an impressive array of policy promises, but his success was premised on excluding from the political arena the basic moral issue raised by these policies. Kennedy delivered little in the way of outstanding policy, but he ultimately acknowledged the great moral choice he confronted and he made a moral decision of enormous national significance. These differences notwithstanding, Polk and Kennedy dealt with the unraveling of interest management in a similar way. Executive control and a promise of delivering significant policy support to all the interests of the majority party gave way within two years to an effort to limit the effects of an open rupture. When interest management could no longer stave off disaffection and hold the old coalition together, these presidents took their stand with the larger part and tried to isolate the heretics.

The irony in these performances is that, although upholding their respective regime commitments and affirming their party orthodoxies, Polk and Kennedy raised serious questions about the future terms of regime survival and thus left orthodoxy itself politically insecure. Because Polk's nationalism and Kennedy's liberalism ultimately came at the expense of the old majority coalition, a new appeal to the political interests of the nation seemed imperative. In vindicating orthodoxy, Polk and Kennedy set in motion a pivotal turn toward sectarianism in regime development.

For the Jacksonian Democrats, the turn toward sectarianism grew out of a political defeat. The election of 1848 exposed the weaknesses of stalwart Jacksonian nationalism and spurred party managers to overcome the political damage wrought by sectional divisiveness. In 1850 Democratic votes secured passage of a bipartisan legislative package designed to smooth the disruptions wrought by the Polk administration.[31] This incongruous series of measures, collectively labeled the "Compromise of 1850," repackaged moderation in a way that many hoped would isolate the extremists and lead to the creation of a new Union Party. But the dream of a Union Party failed to spark widespread interest, and Democratic managers grasped the sectarian alternative. Using the compromise as a point of departure, they set out to reassemble their broken coalition. While supporting government policies that were designed to silence ideological conflict, they renewed a partnership in power with interests at the ideological extremes.[32]

For the New Deal regime, the turn came on the heels of a great electoral victory. Running against a Republican extremist, Lyndon B. Johnson swept the nation. But the disaffection stemming from the Kennedy administration was clearly visible: Southern Democrat Johnson lost five states in his own region to the Republican outlier. In 1965 and 1966 Johnson tried to fuse a new consensus with policies that ranged across the extremes of ideology and interest. He dreamed of superseding the New Deal with a Great Society, but his vast expansion of services to interests added more to government fragmentation than to regime coherence. He also hoped to supplant the old Democratic Party with a "party for all Americans," but his extension of regime commitments did more to scatter political loyalties than to unify them.[33]

By the time of the next incarnations of majority-party government (1852 and 1976, respectively), the challenge of presidential leadership had shifted categorically once again. By 1852 the nationalism of Jackson had degenerated into a patchwork of suspect compromises sitting atop a seething sectional division. By 1976 the liberalism of Roosevelt had become a grab bag of special interest services all too vulnerable to political charges of burdening a troubled economy with bureaucratic overhead. Expedience eclipsed enthusiasm in the bond between the regime and the nation. Supporters of orthodoxy were placed on the defensive. The energies that once came from advancing great national purposes had dissipated. A rule of myopic sects defied the very notion of government authority.

Expedience also eclipsed enthusiasm in the bond between the majority party and its president. Franklin Pierce and Jimmy Carter each took the term *dark horse* to new depths of obscurity. Each was a minor, local figure, far removed from the centers of party strength and interest. Indeed, each hailed from the region of greatest erosion in majority-party support. Pierce, a New Hampshire attorney, who had retired from the Senate almost a decade before, was called to head the Democratic ticket in 1852 after forty-eight convention ballots failed to yield a consensus on anyone who might have been expected to actually lead the party. His appeal (if it may be so called) within regular party circles lay first in his uniquely inoffensive availability and, second, in his potential to bring northeastern Free Soil Democrats back to the standard they had so recently branded as proslavery. Carter, a former governor of Georgia, was chosen to head the Democratic ticket in 1976 after mounting a broadside assault on the national political establishment. To say he appealed to regular party circles would be to mistake the nature of his campaign and to exaggerate the coherence of the Democratic organization at that time. Still, Carter offered the Democrats a candidate untainted by two decades of divisive national politics, and one capable of bringing the South back to the party of liberalism.

The successful reassembling of broken coalitions left Pierce and Carter to ponder the peculiar challenge of leading an enervated regime. These presidents engaged the political system at a step removed from a claim to managing coalition interests and orchestrating agenda fulfillment. Tenuously attached to a government establishment that itself appeared dangerously out of step with the most pressing problems of the day, their leadership turned on a question so narrow that it is really prerequisite to leadership—that of their own credibility. Despite determined efforts to establish trustworthiness, neither Pierce nor Carter could reconcile his own awkward position in the old order with the awkward position of the old order in the nation at large. Caught between the incessant demands of regime interests and the bankruptcy of the assumptions about the government and the nation that had supported those interests in the past, neither could find secure ground on which to make a stand and limit the political unraveling that comes with executive action. What began in expedience simply dissolved into irrelevance.

Franklin Pierce

In 1852 Franklin Pierce carried twenty-seven of the thirty-one states for a hefty 250 out of 296 electoral votes.[34] In the process, the Democratic Party strengthened its hold over both houses of Congress. Still, the Pierce landslide was more apparent than real, and the election was anything but a mandate for action. As a presidential candidate, Pierce had merely endorsed the work of a bipartisan group of Senate moderates. His campaign was confined to a simple declaration of support for the Compromise of 1850 and a pledge to resist any further agitation on slavery, the issue that underlay all other national concerns. The Pierce campaign was nothing if not a dutiful bow to senatorial authority and moderate political opinion.

It is possible that the new president might have enhanced his position at the start of his term by making a second bow to the center and placing the largesse of his office at the disposal of the Senate moderates. But other aspects of the election argued against this strategy. Pierce actually had received less than 51 percent of the popular vote. He won the presidency not because the moderate center of national opinion rallied to his standard but because the party managers working in the field had reassembled support at the extremes of Democratic Party opinion. To the extremists, the Compromise of 1850 was a cause for suspicion rather than satisfaction; it was a matter of reluctant acquiescence rather than loyal support.

Pierce was sensitive to the precariousness of his victory but thought the logic of his situation was fairly clear. He believed the election of 1848 had shown it was not enough for the Democratic Party to stand with the moderates and let the extremes go their own way and that the narrow victory of 1852 amply demonstrated the electoral imperative of consolidating party loyalties across the spectrum of party opinion. He was gratified by the election's renewed display of party loyalty—however reluctantly given—and he found far-fetched and unimpressive the possibility that the centrists of both parties might join him on independent ground in a kind of national coalition government. He therefore decided to reach out to the old party coalition in an effort to heal the wounds of 1848 once and for all.

In a bold bid for leadership, Pierce held himself aloof from the moderate senators and set out to rebuild the political machinery of Jacksonian government under presidential auspices. As the mastermind of a party restoration, he hoped to gain respectability in his dealings with Congress, to take charge of national affairs, and ultimately—in 1856—to lay claim to the mantle of Andrew Jackson. The basic problem with this plan for establishing a credible leadership posture was that no interest of any significance depended on the president's success. Pierce had exhausted his party's national strength and legitimacy simply by letting the various party leaders elect him. These leaders had no stake in following their own creation and no intention of suspending their mutual suspicions to enhance the president's position. Pierce quickly discovered that his claim to the office of Andrew Jackson had no political foundation and that by asserting his independence at the outset, he had robbed the alternative strategy—a bow to senatorial power—of any possible advantage.

As for political vision, Pierce's goal of resuscitating the old party machinery was ideologically and programmatically vacuous. It was conceived as a purely mechanical exercise in repairing and perfecting the regime's core institutional apparatus and thereby restoring its operational vitality. There was no reference to any of the substantive concerns that had caused the vitality of the party apparatus to dissipate in the first place. Those concerns were simply to be forgotten. Pierce recalled Polk's dictum of "equal and exact justice" for every portion of the party but neglected the wide-ranging appeal to unfinished party business that had driven Polk's administration. He held up to the nation the vision of a political machine restored and purged of all political content.[35]

The rapid unraveling of the Pierce administration began with the president's initial offer to forget the Free Soil heresy of 1848 and provide all party factions in the North their due measure of presidential favor for support given in 1852. Much to the president's dismay, many of the New York Democrats who had remained loyal in 1848 refused to forgive the heretics and share the bounty. The New York party disintegrated at a touch, and in 1853 the Whigs swept the state elections.

Within months of Pierce's inauguration, then, the president's strategy for establishing his credibility as a leader was in a shambles. The Senate had not yet confirmed his candidate for the collectorship of the Port of New York, an important post, and if the party leaders withheld their endorsement (a prospect that Pierce's early standoffishness and the New York electoral debacle made all too real), the rebuke to the fledgling administration would be devastating. Pierce was at the mercy of the Senate. Worse, he had placed the Senate at the mercy of the radical states' rights advocates of the South. This small but potent faction of southern senators felt shortchanged by the distribution of patronage in their own region and resolved to use the president's appeal for the restoration of Free Soilers as a basis for their revenge. The administration's distribution of rewards in the North, they said, represented a heightened level of commitment to the Free Soil element, and they challenged their more moderate southern cohorts to extract an equal commitment to their region as well.

The radical southerners found their opportunity in Illinois senator Stephen Douglas's bill to organize the Nebraska Territory. Douglas pushed the Nebraska bill because it would open a transcontinental railroad route through the center of his own political base. His bill followed the orthodox party posture, a stance confirmed in the Compromise of 1850, stipulating that the new territory would be organized without reference to slavery and that the people of the territory would decide the issue. Southerners who had ostensibly accepted this formula for settling new lands by electing Pierce in 1852 were offended by the president's northern political strategy in 1853 and felt compelled to raise the price of their support in 1854. They demanded that the Douglas bill include a repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and thus explicitly acknowledge that slavery could become permanently established anywhere in the national

domain. Douglas evidently convinced himself that the expected benefits of his Nebraska bill were worth the price extracted by the South. After all, it could be argued that the repeal would only articulate something already implicit in the doctrine of squatter sovereignty. The change in the formal terms of sectional peace would be more symbolic than real. In any case, Douglas accepted the repeal, and by dividing the Nebraska Territory in two (Nebraska and Kansas) hinted that both sections might peacefully lay claim to part of the new land.

In January 1854, less than a year into Pierce's administration, Douglas led his southern collaborators to the White House to secure a presidential endorsement for the Kansas-Nebraska bill. With Douglas's railroad and the confirmation of Pierce's New York collector nominee hanging in the balance, the cornerstone of the Pierce presidency gave way. In his very first legislative decision, the president was being told to disregard his electoral pledge not to reopen the issue of slavery and to tie his leadership to the repudiation of the Missouri Compromise. To endorse the handiwork of the party leaders was to risk his credibility in the nation at large. But if he chose to stand by his pledge, he was certain to lose all credibility within the party. Pierce chose to stand with the party leaders. Like Douglas, he apparently had convinced himself that the Kansas-Nebraska bill was consistent enough with the spirit of the Compromise of 1850 to not raise any new issues concerning slavery. He then offered to help Douglas convince the northern wing of the party. The administration's candidate for collector of the Port of New York was confirmed.

Between March 1853 and January 1854 Pierce tried and failed to prove himself to his party on his own terms; between January and May of 1854 he struggled to prove himself to his party on the Senate's terms. The president threw all the resources of the administration behind passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill in the House. Despite a Democratic majority of 159 to 76, he fought a no-win battle to discipline a party vote. Midway into the proceedings, sixty-six of the ninety northern Democrats stood in open revolt against this northern Democratic president. A no-holds-barred use of presidential patronage ultimately persuaded forty-four representatives to give a final assent. Instead of perfecting the political machine, Pierce found himself defying a political revolution. Passage of the bill was secured through the support of southern Whigs. Forty-two northern Democrats openly voted no. Not one northern Whig voted yes.[36]

Pierce lost his gamble with national credibility in winter 1854. Exhausted after the passage of Douglas's bill, the administration suffered northern revenge for the broken pledge of 1852. The Democrats lost every northern state except

New Hampshire and California in the elections of 1854. The once huge Democratic majority in the House disappeared, and a curious new amalgam of political forces prepared to take over. Adding to the rebuke was the threat of civil war in the territories. Free Soil and proslavery factions rushed into Kansas and squared off in a contest for control. The president called for order, but his plea was ignored.

Pierce never gave up hope that his party would turn to him. But once the North had rejected his administration, the South had no more use for him, and the party Pierce wanted so desperately to lead became more anxious to get rid of him. When faced with the unmitigated failure of his leadership and his political impotence at midterm, Pierce seemed to gain his first sense of a higher purpose. He threw his hat into the ring for a second term with a spirited defense of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and a biting indictment of the critics of the Missouri Compromise repeal. He appealed to the nation to reject treason in Kansas, wrapped his party in the Constitution, and cast its enemies in the role of uncompromising disunionists bent on civil war.[37]

This was the president's shining hour. Rejecting the specter of party illegitimacy and the stigma of his own irrelevance, standing firm with the establishment against the forces that would destroy it, Pierce pressed the case for his party in the nation and with it, his own case for party leadership. Still, no one rallied to his side. The party took up the "friends of the Constitution" sentiment, but it hastened to bury the memory of the man who had articulated it. Pierce's unceasing effort to prove his significance to those who had called him to power never bore fruit. The Democratic convention was an "anybody but Pierce" affair.

Jimmy Carter

There is no better rationale for Jimmy Carter's mugwumpish approach to political leadership than Franklin Pierce's unmitigated failure. No sooner had Pierce identified his prospects for gaining credibility with revitalizing the old party machinery under presidential auspices than he fell victim to party interests so factious that the desperate state of national affairs was all but ignored. The sect-ridden party of Jackson proved itself bankrupt as a governing instrument. Its operators could not even recognize that they were toying with explosive moral issues of national significance. Pierce's plan to claim party leadership first and then to take charge of the nation dissolved with its initial action, pushing the president down a path as demoralizing for the nation as it was degrading to the office. The quest for credibility degenerated into saving face with the

Senate over patronage appointments, toeing the line on volatile territorial legislation for the sake of Douglas's railroad, and forswearing a solemn pledge to the nation.

It was Jimmy Carter's peculiar genius to treat his remoteness from his party and its institutional power centers as a distinctive asset rather than his chief liability in his quest for a credible leadership posture. He called attention to moral degeneration in government and politics, made it his issue, and then compelled the political coalition that had built that government to indulge his crusade against it. In a style reminiscent of Andrew Jackson, Carter identified himself with popular disillusionment with political insiders, entrenched special interests, and the corruption of manners in Washington. He let the liberals of the Democratic Party flounder in their own disarray until it became clear that liberalism could no longer take the political offensive on its own terms. Then, in the 1976 Florida primary, Carter pressed his southern advantage. The party either had to fall in line behind his campaign against the establishment or risk another confrontation with the still greater heresies of George Wallace.

The obvious problem in Carter's approach to the presidency was that although it claimed a high moral stance of detachment from the establishment, it also positioned itself within an established governing coalition. This curiosity afforded him neither the regime outsider's freedom to oppose established interests nor the insider's license to support them. The tension in Carter's campaign between the effort to reassemble the core constituencies of the traditional Democratic regime and the promise to reform the government order that served it suggested the difficulties he would face establishing a credible leadership posture in office. Carter's narrow victory magnified those difficulties by showing the regime's supporters in Congress to be a good deal more secure politically than their strange new affiliate in the executive mansion.

On what terms, then, did Carter propose to reconcile his outsider's appeal with his position within the old order? The answer of the campaign lay in Carter's preoccupation with problems of form, procedure, and discipline rather than with the substance of the old order. It was not bureaucratic *programs*, Carter argued, but bureaucratic *inefficiency* that left the people estranged from their government. It was not the system per se that was at fault but the way it was being run. In the eyes of this late-regime Democrat, the stifling weight and moral decay of the federal government presented problems of technique and personnel, not substance.

Like Jackson's early efforts, Carter's reform program called for government reorganization, civil service reform, and fiscal retrenchment. But because it came from an outsider affiliated with the old order, the political force and ideological energy of this revitalization program were largely nullified. What Jackson presented as an ideological indictment of the old order and a buttress for supporters newly arrived in power, Carter presented as institutional engineering plain and simple. Carter's Jackson-like appeal to the nation translated into an ideologically passionless vision of reorganizing the old order without challenging any of its core concerns.[38]

It is in this respect that the shaky ground on which Carter staked his credibility as a leader begins to appear a good deal more like that claimed by Franklin Pierce than their different party postures would at first lead us to suppose. Both pinned their hopes on the perfectibility of machinery. Carter would do for the bureaucratic apparatus of the liberal regime what Pierce had intended to do for the party apparatus of the Jacksonian regime—repair the mechanical defects and realize a new level of operational efficiency. By perfecting the apparatus, they hoped to save the old regime from its own self-destructive impulses and, at the same time, eliminate the need to make any substantive choices among interests. Political vitality was to be restored simply by making the engines of power run more efficiently.

Sharing this vision, Pierce and Carter also shared a problem of action. Neither could point to any interest of political significance that depended on his success in reorganization. Carter's plan for instilling a new level of bureaucratic discipline was not the stuff to stir the enthusiasm of established Democrats, and once the plan became concrete action, there was plenty for party interests to vehemently oppose. Carter's vision of institutional efficiency dissolved in a matter of weeks into institutional confrontation.

The Carter administration immediately engaged the nation in an elaborate display of symbolism that was designed to build a reservoir of popular faith in the president's intentions and confidence in his ability to change the tenor of government.[39] The economic difficulties the old regime faced in simply maintaining its programmatic commitments at current levels dampened whatever enthusiasm there was for reaching out to the interests with expansive new programs in orthodox Democratic style. The impulse to lead thus focused on an early redemption of the pledge to be different. With his "strategy of symbols," the president bypassed Congress and claimed authority in government as an extension of his personal credibility in the nation at large.

The first material test of this strategy came in February 1977, when Carter decided to cut nineteen local water projects from the 1978 budget. As mundane as this bid for leadership was, it placed the disjunction between the president's

appeal to the people and his political support in government in the starkest possible light. For the president, the water projects were a prime example of the wasteful expenditures inherent in the old ways government did business. The cuts offered Carter a well-founded and much-needed opportunity to demonstrate to the nation how an outsider with no attachments to established routines could bring a thrifty discipline to government without really threatening any of its programmatic concerns. Congress—and, in particular, the Democratic leadership in the Senate—saw the matter quite differently. The president's gesture was received as an irresponsible and politically pretentious assault on the bread and butter of congressional careers. Its only real purpose was to enhance the president's public standing, yet its victims were those on whom presidential success in government must ultimately depend. The Democratic leaders of the Senate pressed the confrontation. They reinstated the threatened water projects on a presidentially sponsored public works jobs bill. Carter threatened to stand his ground, and majority party government floundered at the impasse.

As relations with Congress grew tense, the president's bid for national leadership became even more dependent on public faith and confidence in his administration's integrity. By standing aloof from "politics as usual," the administration saddled itself with a moral standard that any would find it difficult to sustain. A hint of shady dealing surfaced in summer 1977, and by fall, the symbolic supports of Carter's leadership were a shambles.

Like the water projects debacle, the Bert Lance affair is remarkable for its substantive insignificance. The administration's "scandal" amounted to an investigation of financial indiscretions by one official before he took office. But the Carter administration was nothing if not the embodiment of a higher morality, and the budget director was the president's most important and trusted political appointee. The exposé of Lance, whose hand was on the tiller of the bureaucratic ship, not only indicted the administration's claim to ethical superiority but also made a mockery of the Democratic Senate's nomination review process. Shorn of its pretensions to a higher standard, the administration's outsider status became a dubious asset. Attention was now directed to the apparent inability of the outsiders to make the government work and address the nation's manifest problems.

Despite these first-year difficulties in establishing a credible leadership posture on his own terms, Carter still refused to abdicate to the party leaders. Indeed, as time went on, the intransigence of the nation's economic difficulties seemed to stiffen the president's resistance to social policy enthusiasms he felt the nation could no longer afford to support. There was to be no recapitulation of the Pierce-Douglas disaster in an alliance between Carter and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass. But what of the prospects for continued presidential resistance? The core constituencies of the Democratic Party—blacks and organized labor in particular—found the president's program of government reorganization and fiscal retrenchment tangential at best to their concerns. They had little use for a Democratic president who seemed to govern like a Republican, and their disillusionment added to the dismay of the congressional leadership. Stalwart liberals admonished the president not to forsake the traditional interests but to rally them and, in Kennedy's words, "sail against the wind."[40] If the nation's shaky economy made this message perilous for the president to embrace, his awkward political position made it equally perilous to ignore.

Following the Lance affair, Carter did attempt to dispel disillusionment with an appeal to the neoliberal theme of consumerism. He had identified himself with consumer issues during his campaign and opened the second year of his administration with a drive to establish a consumer protection agency. The proposal could hardly be said to address the demands of the old Democratic constituencies, but it had enthusiastic backing from consumer groups, a general popular appeal, support from the Democratic leadership in Congress, and the rare promise of serving all these at little direct cost to the government. In consumer protection, Carter found the makings of a great victory, one that would not only wash away the memory of the first year but also define his own brand of political leadership. But the legislation failed, and with the failure his prospects for leadership all but collapsed.

Indeed, this defeat underscored the paradox that plagued Carter's never-ending struggle for credibility. Opposition fueled by business interests turned the consumer protection issue against the administration with devastating effect. Identifying government regulation of industry with the grim state of the national economy, business made Carter's neoliberalism appear symptomatic of the problem and counterproductive to any real solution.[41] Carter's own critique of undisciplined government expansion actually became the property of his critics, and the distinctions he had drawn between himself and the old liberal establishment became hopelessly blurred. Although this most distant of Democratic presidents was alienating the liberal establishment by his neglect of its priorities, he was being inextricably linked to it in a conservative assault on the manifest failings of the New Deal liberal regime. Carter's liberalism-with-a-difference simply could not stand its ground in the sectarian controversies that racked the liberal order in the 1970s. It was as vulnerable to the conservatives for being more of the same as it was vulnerable to the liberals for being different.

As tensions between the old regime politics and new economic realities intensified, all sense of political definition was eclipsed. Notable administration victories—the Senate's ratification of a bitterly contested treaty with Panama, the endorsement of a version of the much heralded administrative reorganization, the negotiation of an accord between Israel and Egypt—offered precious little vindication of the promise of revitalization. Moreover, the president's mugwumpish resolve to find his own way through deepening crises came to be perceived as rootless floundering. His attempt to assert forceful leadership through a major cabinet shake-up in the summer of 1979 only added credence to the image of an administration out of control. His determination to support a policy of inducing recession to fight inflation shattered the political symbolism of decades past by saddling a Democratic administration with a counsel of austerity and sacrifice and passing to the Republicans the traditional Democratic promise of economic recovery and sustained prosperity.

The administration was aware of its failure to engage the political system in a meaningful way well before these momentous decisions. By early 1979 the president had turned introspective. It was readily apparent that his credibility had to be established anew and imperative that the administration be identified with some clear and compelling purpose. Carter's response to the eclipse of political definition was not a Pierce-like defense of the old order and its principles. It was, if anything, a sharpened attack on the old order and a renewed declaration of presidential political independence.

In what was to be his most dramatic public moment, Carter appeared in a nationally televised appeal to the people in July 1979 with a revised assessment of the crisis facing the nation.[42] Carter began his new bid for leadership credibility by acknowledging widespread disillusionment with the administration and its "mixed success" with Congress. But the president detached himself from the "paralysis, stagnation, and drift" that had marked his tenure. He issued a strong denunciation of the legislative process and reasserted his campaign image as an outsider continuing the people's fight against degenerate politics. Attempting to restore the people's faith in themselves and to rally them to his cause, Carter all but declared the bankruptcy of the federal government as he found it. Thirty months in office seemed to reveal to him only how deeply rooted the government's incapacities were. It was the system itself, not simply its inefficiencies, that the president now placed in question.

Trying once again to identify his leadership with the people's alienation from the government, Carter again exposed himself as the one with the most paralyzing case of estrangement. The awkward truth in this presidential homily lent credence to the regime's most vehement opponents by indicting the establishment controlled by the president's ostensible allies. On the face of it, Carter had come to embrace a leadership challenge of the greatest moment—the repudiation of an entire political-institutional order—but beneath the challenge lay the hopeless paradox of his political position. The Democratic Party tore itself apart in a revolt against him and the sentiments he articulated. It rejected his message, discredited his efforts, and then, in its most pathetic display of impotence, revealed to the nation that it had nothing more to offer. Carter finally may have seen the gravity of the problems he confronted, but as the people saw it, he was not part of the solution.

Rethinking the Politics of Leadership

The politics of leadership is often pictured as a contest between the individual and the system. Political fragmentation and institutional intransigence threaten to frustrate the would-be leader at every turn. Success, if it is possible at all, is reserved for the exceptional individual. It takes a person of rare political skill to manipulate the system in politically effective ways. It takes a person of rare character to give those manipulations national meaning and constructive purpose.

Although the significance of the particular person in office cannot be doubted, this individual-centered perspective on leadership presents a rather one-sided view of the interplay between the presidency and the larger political system. It is highly sensitive to differences among incumbents, but it tends to obscure differences in the political situations in which they act. If presidential leadership is indeed something of a struggle between the individual and the system, it must be recognized that the system changes, as well as the incumbent. Indeed, the political conditions for presidential action can shift radically from one administration to the next, and with each change the challenge of exercising political leadership is correspondingly altered.

Within any one historical period, the shifting political contexts that leaders encounter are likely to appear idiosyncratic, and the political changes that each incumbent effects, erratic. To catch the patterns and sequences in the politics of leadership, we need to adopt a much broader view of the relevant historical experience than is customary. On this larger canvas, similar kinds of situations elicit from leaders similar premises and projects for political action. Moreover, the situations, premises, and projects that tend to recur over long stretches of time have correspondingly similar political effects. Presidential history in this perspective is episodic rather than evolutionary, with leadership opportunities gradually dissipating after an initial upheaval in political control of the government. Presidents intervene in—and their leadership is mediated by—the generation and degeneration of political orders, or partisan regimes. The clock at work in presidential leadership keeps *political* rather than historical time.

The leaders who stand out at a glance—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt—are closer to one another in the political conditions of leadership than they are to any of their respective neighbors in historical time. In political time each is a first, a regime builder. The regime builders ride into power on an upheaval in government control and test their leadership in efforts to secure the political and institutional infrastructure for a new governing coalition. Their success creates a new establishment, thrusts their partisan successors into the position of regime managers, and poses the test of aggressive maintenance.

As the analysis of the Jacksonian and New Deal regimes has shown, successive incarnations of majority-party government produce progressively more tenuous challenges for regime managers. Politically affiliated with already established commitments of ideology and interest, these presidents approach the ever more perplexing problems of managing the regime's commitments with ever more superficial governing solutions. Regime supporters, in turn, approach ever more perplexing leadership choices with ever less forbearance. Ultimately, visions of regime management dissolve into politically vacuous mechanical contrivances, and leadership is foreclosed by the political dilemmas of simply establishing the president's credibility. In this way, the exercise of presidential power drives each regime further into a crisis of legitimacy, gradually preparing the ground for another reconstructive breakthrough.

It is worth noting that the critical issue in each of the six cases I have reviewed here was not the success or failure in enacting some momentous new program for national action. Franklin Pierce, in pitched battle, succeeded in enacting the Kansas-Nebraska Act but failed miserably as a political leader; in contrast, Franklin Roosevelt, arguably the most formidable political leader of the twentieth century, was thwarted time and again on matters of program, from the voiding of the "first" New Deal by the Supreme Court to the failure of his party purge. Nor has the critical issue in these cases been the success of the policies enacted in solving national problems. After all, the New Deal failed to pull the nation out of the Great Depression, and Andrew Jackson's alternative banking scheme exacerbated an economic depression. The incumbents in these two historical sequences are distinguishable from one another—and paired individually with counterparts in very different historical periods—by their ability to set the terms and conditions of legitimate political action. In this view, the critical issue on which presidential leadership turns is their political authority, their control over the meaning of their initiatives and accomplishments in the face of the contending interpretations of friends and foes alike. A president's authority over political definitions changes with the passage of political time and hinges in large measure on the relationship between the incumbent and received governing commitments.[43]

Thus the paradigmatic expressions of political leadership in the presidency come from incumbents, such as Jackson and Roosevelt, who stand free of the commitments of the recent past and are able to define their leadership projects against the backdrop of the manifest failures of a recently displaced governing coalition. Able to hammer relentlessly against a failed and discredited course of national action, they are best situated to reset the terms and conditions of legitimate national government.

For Polk and Kennedy, whose ascension to power revived and reaffirmed commitments drawn from the recent past, leadership was quite different. It was their job to make good on long-heralded promises, to continue the work of the established regime, and to implement a robust policy agenda. Leadership was a matter of managing interests and implementing policies in the manner best calculated to stave off warfare within the ranks. In exercising power on these terms, however, Polk and Kennedy were constrained by the authority of faithful followers to challenge their particular rendition of the true meaning and implications of received commitments. Their leadership sent sectarian schisms deep into the ranks of regime supporters.

The difficulties of exercising political leadership mounted apace under Pierce and Carter. They came to power affiliated with an old orthodoxy that was on the defensive. Each offered to repair the political machinery of a faltering regime, one whose basic commitments of ideology and interest were increasingly seen as the very source of the nation's problems. Caught between the demands of their nominal supporters for further action along the old course and frontal assaults on the old course from a resurgent opposition, these leaders were unable to establish clear warrants for any course of action, and their exercises of power accelerated the crises of legitimacy they were intended to abate.

Comparisons that move across broad stretches of history help us make sense of the shifting parameters of the politics of leadership that are notable within a historical period. Still, they leave a major question outstanding: What has been

the effect of the secular changes that, over time, have transformed the organization of government power itself? Roosevelt did not simply repeat Jackson's performance. He directed his leadership against interests and institutions that were more firmly entrenched in government and more fully integrated into the social and economic life of the nation. For this reason he was more constrained as a reconstructive leader than Jackson. Although Roosevelt was able to set the general terms for a reordering of political commitments, his initiatives repeatedly went down to defeat. The new order was not imposed from the top down, as in Jackson's case, but was fashioned more systemically by interests and institutions beyond Roosevelt's direct control.

In the Pierce-Carter comparison, secular changes in the organization of American government seem to have had the opposite effect. Jimmy Carter had at his disposal institutional resources for independent action that Franklin Pierce could scarcely have imagined. When Stephen Douglas marched to the White House demanding that Pierce take on the party's latest enthusiasm as his own, the senator had the balance of government power on his side. As president, Pierce had no resources of comparable institutional weight with which to counter his party's leadership in Congress. But when Edward Kennedy demanded that Carter buck the conservative tide and take on new liberal commitments, Carter was able to resist by employing the political resources of the modern presidency to distance his administration from the liberal agenda and defeat the Kennedy challenge. It would seem then that secular changes in the organization of American government have cut in two directions at once. They serve both to delimit the possibilities for a presidentially imposed reconstruction of American government and politics and to bolster the independence of those who are nominally affiliated with previously established commitments of ideology and interest.

Comparisons among presidents at similar moments in political time provide insight into the divergent experiences of more recent incumbents as well. Taking advantage of Carter's difficulties, Ronald Reagan reclaimed the leadership stance of the great repudiator. Like Jackson and Roosevelt, Reagan used his authority as an opposition leader standing against a discredited regime to reconstruct the terms and conditions of legitimate national government. George H.W. Bush, Reagan's successor, offered to affirm and continue the "Reagan revolution," but like orthodox innovators in other periods, his leadership authority was compromised by factional disputes that erupted within his own ranks concerning the true meaning of the faith. His son, George W. Bush, has also styled himself as an orthodox innovator, and he seems determined to avoid his father's missteps by following through on that leadership stance more conscientiously. His agenda of "compassionate conservatism" seeks not only to revive and extend the commitments of the Reagan revolution—tax cuts, missile defense, regulatory relief, pro-life family values—but also to embellish them with new initiatives in education, health care, and Social Security that will broaden the regime's appeal and demonstrate the enduring vitality of orthodoxy as a source of new solutions to the problems of the day. In his forceful handling of issues such as tax cuts, education reform, and stem cell research, Bush's effort to learn from his father's mistakes was clear. Still, the defection of Vermont Republican senator Jim Jeffords on grounds of administration duplicity and obfuscation was all too characteristic of the problems that arise within this leadership stance, and for a moment it suggested a rather typical reprise.

The shock of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the launching of the war drove Republican grumbling deep underground. Even John McCain, by far the most formidable and potentially damaging of the administration's Republican critics, offered hugs to the commander in chief in wartime and campaigned with him on his reelection campaign. But it remains to be seen whether the characteristic problems of orthodox innovation were superseded by the commanding authority of the president in wartime, or merely submerged and postponed. Notwithstanding the widely reported claim that "everything changed" on 9/11, the president did not use the occasion to abandon orthodox innovation; on the contrary, he used his newfound authority to advance that agenda further. As Bush's second term began, unity within the Republican ranks was again in question, and the issue became all the more pressing. Party discontent with the administration's education policy, its prescription drug program, its plans to reform Social Security and immigration law, and perhaps most of all, its return to "big government" and an exploding national debt is indicative of an administration that is becoming burdened by its accumulating commitments, of an orthodoxy that is becoming ideologically distended, and of a party that is ripe for implosion.

It is easy to overstate historical parallels, and there can be no doubt that the advent of the "modern presidency," with its vast expansion of the office's institutional resources and its advances in technology, has had an important effect on the politics of leadership. The flip side of the familiar problems now gestating within the Republican ranks is the possibility that the party's organizational apparatus has itself changed, that its central controls and national reach have severely limited the play of factional infighting and thus made the orthodox innovator more resilient. Herein lies the real value of reflecting on the experiences of presidents back in political time. The point of identifying these patterns is not to suggest that things will forever follow the same lockstep course. Rather, it is to scrutinize the common claim that everything we see today is categorically new and to identify those features of contemporary politics that may actually be making a difference. In the final analysis, the promise of situating contemporary presidents more carefully in the range of past leadership performances is a keener sensitivity to the systemic stakes at issue in the leaders who bid for our support.

Notes

1. Other works investigating distinctly political patterns in presidential history include Erwin C. Hargrove and Michael Nelson, *Presidents, Politics, and Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1984); and James David Barber, *The Pulse of Politics: Electing Presidents in the Media Age* (New York: Norton, 1980).

2. Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1966), 23–24. Bailey critically discusses the ratings by professional historians. The important point, however, is that the presidents who rated highest in the Schlesinger surveys of 1948 and 1962 all shared this peculiarly structured leadership situation at the outset of their terms.

3. Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822–1832*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 12–38, 74–142.

4. Quoted in Frank Freidel, *FDR and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 42.

5. Remini, *Andrew Jackson*, 2:152–202, 248–256.

6. The famous veto of the Maysfield Road, for example, was notable for its limited implications. It challenged federal support for *intrastate* projects and was specifically selected as an example for its location in Henry Clay's Kentucky. On Jackson's objectives in civil service reform, see Albert Somit, "Andrew Jackson as an Administrative Reformer," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 13 (September 1954): 204–223; and Eric McKinley Erickson, "The Federal Civil Service under President Jackson," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13 (March 1927): 517–540. Also significant in this regard is Richard G. Miller, "The Tariff of 1832: The Issue that Failed," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 49 (July 1975): 221–230.

7. The analysis in this and the following paragraphs draws on the following works: Remini, *Andrew Jackson;* Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War: A Study in the Growth of Presidential Power* (New York: Norton, 1967); Marquis James, *Andrew Jackson: Portrait of a President* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1937), 283–303, 350–385; and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945), 74–131.

8. Charles Sellers Jr., "Who Were the Southern Whigs?" *American Historical Review* 49 (January 1954): 335–346.

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10. Quoted in James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), 208.

11. The analysis in this and the following paragraphs draws on Burns, *Roosevelt,* and Freidel, *FDR and the South.*

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13. Freidel, *FDR and the South.*

14. Richard Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government: The Controversy over Executive Reorganization, 1936–1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

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16. Sellers, *James K. Polk,* 50.

17. Ibid., 113–114, 123.

18. Ibid., 282–283.

19. Ibid., 162–164; Joseph G. Raybeck, "Martin Van Buren's Break with James K. Polk: The Record," *New York History* 36 (January 1955): 51–62; and Norman A. Graebner, "James K. Polk: A Study in Federal Patronage," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38 (March 1952): 613–632.

20. Sellers, *James K. Polk,* 483.

21. Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848–54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 16–80; and John Mayfield, *Rehearsal for Republicanism: Free Soil and the Politics of Antislavery* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980), 80–125.

22. McCoy, *Polk and the Presidency,* 197–198, 203–204.

23. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 675–676.

24. Carroll Kilpatrick, "The Kennedy Style and Congress," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 39 (Winter 1963): 1–11; and Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), esp. 235–263.

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29. Bauer, *John F. Kennedy,* 61–88; and Schlesinger, *Thousand Days,* 30–31.

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31. Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1964), esp. 156–164.

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37. Nichols, *Franklin Pierce,* 360–365, 425–434.

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41. Johnson, *Absence of Power,* 233–245.

42. *New York Times,* July 16, 1979, 1, 10.

43. See Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, and Belknap Press, 1997).