

Stephen Skowronek. 2008. *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*. Lawrence, KS. Kansas University Press.

2. Presidential Leadership in Political Time

This is the oldest of the five essays collected in this volume, but though it was a very early articulation of the political time thesis, it nicely captures its historical range.¹ The original version was written in the early 1980s as a reflection on the long course of liberal leadership that had begun in the New Deal and had recently come to an end in the Reagan Revolution. Reagan's repudiation of liberal priorities in government and his call for a "New Beginning" seemed to have put the entire sequence of liberal political development in a new light. It occurred to me that the Democratic leaders of the liberal era could be aligned with Democratic leaders of the Jacksonian era to reveal parallel sets of leadership opportunities, ambitions, and challenges as they had shifted in rough sequence through each of these periods. Pointing in the end to an intimate connection between Carter's travails and Reagan's success, the essay set a research agenda that would explore typical leadership contexts that recur across the full sweep of presidential history and would consider the systemic effects of action within those contexts as they unfold in political time.

When a presidency succeeds, our natural inclination is to laud the special talents and skills the incumbent brought to the office; when things go wrong, we look for strategic missteps and character flaws. There is something comforting in these judgments, for they preserve our confidence in the office of the presidency and in the American political system at large no matter what the fallout from the particular incumbents who pass through them. Our implicit assumption is that presidents, as incumbents of the same office, are tested in similar ways and are thus equally free to show us if they have the right stuff. So long as performance is tied in this way to the incumbent's personal attributes,

success is always a possibility; it awaits only the right combination of character, agility, and acumen. So long as there are some success stories to point to, there is little reason to question the operations of the system itself. Woodrow Wilson captured the spirit of these evaluations at the dawn of the Progressive era when he proclaimed, "The American president is at liberty . . . to be as big a man as he can."²

But what if this system does not present each incumbent with the same test? What if the political demands on incumbents change in significant ways even within the same historical period? What if the leadership capacities of the office vary widely from one administration to the next? Much of what we take to be evidence of character and strategic acumen might actually be an expression of changing relationships between the presidency and the political system, and if this is the case, the workings of this system might be more deeply implicated in leadership failure and its fallout than we are wont to admit.

This essay explores these possibilities. It steps out of the narrow historical frame in which presidents present themselves to us, one after another in a linear succession, and examines more closely the changing political contours of the field of action on which successive leadership efforts play out. Taking a look back at the broad sweep of American political history, it brings into view a recurrent sequence of change—of political breakthroughs, followed by political breakups, followed by political breakdowns—and it identifies typical reconfigurations of the relationship between the presidency and the political system along the way.

American political history has been punctuated by many beginnings and many endings. Periods are marked by the rise to power of an insurgent political coalition that secures its dominance over national affairs for an extended period of time. The dominant coalition perpetuates its position by gearing the federal government to favor a particular approach to public policy questions. The political-institutional regimes they establish tend to have staying power because the Constitution, with its separation of powers and checks and balances, makes concerted change of the sort needed to dislodge these arrangements difficult and rare. Once established, however, coalition demands gradually sap the

• Intra-Party Democracy & Inter-Party Competition

energies of these regimes. From the outset, conflicts among interests within the dominant coalition threaten to cause political disaffection and weaken regime support. Then, beyond the problems posed by conflicts among established interests, more basic questions arise concerning the nature of the interests themselves. Not only does the nation change in ways that the old ruling coalition finds increasingly difficult to address, but as disaffection within the coalition makes the mobilization of political support more difficult, the regime becomes increasingly dependent on sectarian interests with myopic demands and momentary loyalties. Generally speaking, the longer a regime survives, the more its approach to national affairs is likely to become encumbered and distorted. As its political energies dissipate, its hold on power thwarts efforts to address the manifest governing demands of the day.

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Looking across these sequences reveals several distinct contexts for presidential leadership. Situations might be distinguished by whether or not the president is affiliated with the dominant political coalition. Looking at the post-New Deal period of liberal political dominance, regime outsiders like Republicans Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon might be said to have faced a different political problem in leading the nation than regime insiders like John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Leadership situations also might be distinguished in "political time," that is, by when in the sequence of sectarian unraveling the president engages the political-institutional order. Thus, presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. 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 the sequence of political change that encompassed the generation and de-generation of the liberal order.

It is not difficult to relate this view of the changing relationship between the presidency and the political system to certain outstanding patterns in presidential leadership across American history. First, the presidents who traditionally make the historians' roster of America's greatest political leaders—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt—all came

in vs out / majority vs minority party

to power in an abrupt break from a long-established political order, and each led an infusion of new political interests into control of the federal government.³ Second, after the initial break with the past and the consolidation of a new system of governmental 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 division 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 shortened tenure of John Quincy Adams.

But is it possible to go beyond these general observations to a more systematic analysis of the politics of leadership? What are the characteristic political challenges that face a leader at any given stage in a regime sequence? How is the quality of presidential performance affected by the changing shape of the political order? To what extent are the political sequences we observe constituted and driven by the leadership pretensions and follow-through actions of presidents themselves? 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, this essay 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 D. Roosevelt and Andrew Jackson; John F. 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.

Reconstruction — Jackson + FDR
Articulation — Polk + JFK (regime managers)
Disjunction — Pierce + Carter

We begin with two beginnings—the presidency of Roosevelt and its counterpart in political time, the presidency of Jackson. These are not random success stories, nor are there common character traits or shared skills that clearly set them apart as paragons of political leadership in the American system. What they shared was a moment in political time. They came to power upon the displacement of a long-established governing coalition. In those circumstances, the leadership opportunity was not so much to make the system work as to remake it altogether, and that prospect engaged these presidents in remarkably similar political struggles. Leadership became a matter of securing the political and institutional infrastructure for a new set of governing commitments. Although separated by more than a century of history, these presidents both grappled with the distinctive politics of regime construction.

Roosevelt

Beyond the challenge of regime construction lie ever-more-perplexing problems of regime management. The overriding political imperatives for affiliates of an established order are to maintain and vindicate the governing commitments of the dominant coalition. That entails serving the interests of the faithful, keeping the agenda timely and responsive to changing demands, and ameliorating factional divisions within the ranks. Whereas reconstructive leaders battle over the government's fundamental commitments of ideology and interest, regime managers are at pains to avoid such debates. They are caught up in the challenges of making good on received commitments and holding things together, on service delivery and conflict control. Our examination of these managerial dilemmas focuses on Kennedy and his counterpart in political time, Polk.

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Finally, we come to the problem of establishing a credible leadership posture in an enervated regime. Carter and Pierce 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 was able to engage the political system at the level of managing coalition interests. Each found himself caught up 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

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escape the stigma of their own irrelevance, and their hapless struggles for credibility fueled radical insurgencies.

All six of these presidents had to grapple with the erosion of political support that inevitably comes with executive action. But while this problem plagued them all, the initial relationships between the leaders and their supporters were 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 a similar juncture. Looking across the pairs, we observe an ever-more-constricted universe for political action, an ever-more-complicated leadership posture, an ever-more-attenuated opportunity for success. Last but not least, the catalytic effects of presidential leadership itself are marked all along the way.

JACKSON AND ROOSEVELT:
POLITICAL UPHEAVAL AND THE
CHALLENGE OF REGIME CONSTRUCTION

The presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Franklin D. Roosevelt were both launched on the heels of a major political upheaval. 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 a movement of general discontent with the previously established order of things into control of the federal establishment.

Of the two, Jackson's election in 1828 presents the crisis of the old order in a more purely political form. New economic and social conflicts

had been festering in America since the financial panic of 1819, but it was the confusion and outrage unleashed by the election of 1824 that gave Jackson's campaign its special meaning. In that earlier election, the Congressional Caucus collapsed as the engine of national political unity. The once-unrivaled party of Jefferson disintegrated into warring factions, and 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, and having saved the government once in a battle against the British at New Orleans, he was prompted by this political defeat to save it again, this time from itself. 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.⁴ Fed

In the election of 1932, the collapse of the old ruling party dovetailed with and was overshadowed by the Depression. The Democratic Party of 1932 offered nothing if not hope for economic recovery, and Roosevelt's candidacy found its special meaning in that prospect almost in spite of the candidate's own 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. The Roosevelt appeal was grounded not in substantive proposals or even in partisan ideology but in a widespread perception of Republican incompetence, even 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."⁵ F

Thus, Jackson and Roosevelt each engaged a political system cut

from its moorings by a wave of popular discontent. Basic commitments of ideology and interest were suddenly thrown 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 legitimate national government. They recaptured the experience of being first.

But such a situation is not without its characteristic leadership challenge. The leader who is propelled into office by a political upheaval in governmental control ultimately must confront the imperatives of establishing a new order in government and politics. Naturally enough, this challenge is presented by the favored interests and residual institutional supports of the old order, and once it has been posed, the unencumbered leadership environment that was created by the initial break with the past quickly fades. As the stakes of change are more starkly revealed, presidents in these circumstances are faced with the choice of either abandoning their revolution or consolidating it with structural reforms. Situated just beyond the old order, presidential leadership crystallizes as a problem of regime construction.

The leader as regime builder grapples with the fundamentals of political regeneration—recasting institutional relationships within the government and building a new governing coalition. The president must undermine the institutional support for opposition interests, restructure institutional relations between state and society, and secure electoral dominance. Success in these tasks is hardly guaranteed. Lincoln was assassinated just as the most critical questions of party building and institutional reconstruction were to be addressed. That disaster ushered in a devastating confrontation between his successor and Congress and left the emergent Republican regime hanging in a politically precarious position 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 together long enough to complete the work on both.

Andrew Jackson

Republican renewal was the keynote of Andrew 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.⁶ 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 initial program that defied the attempts of his opponents to characterize it as revolutionary.⁷ Indeed, while holding out an attractive standard with which to rally supporters, Jackson was careful to yield his opposition precious little ground upon which to mount an effective counterattack. He used the initial upheaval in governmental control to cultivate an irreproachable political position as the independent voice of the people, a crusader determined to restore the nation's integrity.

Significantly, 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.⁸ 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 since 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-currency views, he recognized the dangers of impromptu tinkering with an institution so firmly entrenched in the economic life of the nation and hesitated at embracing untested alternatives. Moreover, Jackson 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 routing Henry Clay, the architect of the bank and the obvious challenger in the upcoming campaign, Jackson would have 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's president, Nicholas Biddle, to join Clay in 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 Jackson's second term. 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 reputation as a reformer would be destroyed; if he vetoed it, the shock to the system would rally anti-Jackson sentiment.

As expected, the recharter bill threw Jackson enthusiasts into a quandary and passed through Congress. The president 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. He accepted the challenge and set out to destroy the bank. Pushed beyond the possibility of controlling the modification of extant institutions without significant opposition, Jackson stiffened his repudiative stance and pressed for an irrevocable break with established governmental arrangements. The 1828 crusade for republican renewal became in 1832 an all-fronts offensive for the establishment of 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 defined his stand as one that 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 governmental changes. Jackson not only was declaring open war on the premier institution of the old order, he was challenging long-settled questions of governance. The U.S. Supreme Court, for example, had affirmed the constitutionality of the bank thirteen years earlier. 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, one of the central political principles 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 that looked toward the fusion of a broad-based political coalition, the shattering of established institutional power relationships between state and society, and the transformation of governing arrangements within the federal government itself.

Of course, regime construction requires more than a declaration of presidential intent. 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 position, and having used the veto as a campaign document, Jackson could claim a strong mandate to complete the work it outlined. But the veto had also been used as an issue by Clay, and the threat to the bank was fueling organized political opposition in all sections of the country.⁹ More important still, the Senate, whose support 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 still had three years to run, and bank president Biddle had every intention of exploiting Jackson's political vulnerabilities in hope of securing his own future.

Jackson seized the initiative. He set out to neutralize the significance of the bank for the remainder of its charter and to prevent any new recharter movement from emerging in Congress. His plan was to have the deposits of the federal government removed from the bank on his own authority and transferred to a select group of politically friendly state banks. The president would thus circumvent his opponents and, at the same time, 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.

The 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, the bank president 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 hinged on consolidating the Democratic Party in Congress and reaffirming its control over the national government. The president moved quickly to deflect blame for the panic onto the bank. Destroying Biddle's credibility, he was able by the spring of 1834 to solidify Democratic support in the House and gain an endorsement of his actions (and implicitly, his authority to act) from that chamber. Then, undertaking a major party-building effort at the grass roots in the midterm elections of 1834, Jack-

son 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 at large. Jackson had shattered the old governmental 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. But his institutional alternative for reconstructing financial relations between state and society—the state deposit system—was proving a dismal failure.

In truth, Jackson had latched onto the deposit banking scheme out of political necessity as much 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 the 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 the tide of this disaster, the Treasury Department began to choose banks of deposit less for their political soundness than for their financial soundness, and 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. Congress had moved solidly behind him, but in so doing members had begun 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.¹⁰

Jackson reconstructed American government and politics; through his leadership, new commitments of ideology and interest were woven

into the very fabric of national institutions. Notably, however, reconstructive leadership did not solve the nation's problems. Jackson merely substituted one irresponsible and uncontrollable financial system for another. 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 D. Roosevelt. Yet their initial victories over long-established ruling parties and the sustained popular enthusiasm that accompanied those triumphs offered similar political opportunities and propelled each into grappling with a similar set of leadership challenges. By late 1934, Roosevelt himself seemed to sense the parallels. To Vice President John Nance Garner he wrote, "The more I learn about Andy Jackson, the more I love him."¹¹

The interesting thing about this remark is its timing. In 1934 and 1935, Roosevelt faced mounting discontent with the emergency program he had implemented during his early days in office from the favored interests of the old order. Moreover, he saw that the residual bulwark of institutional support for 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 insurgent energy and leadership initiative that he had carried into power.

The revival of the economy had been the keynote of Roosevelt's early program.¹² Although collectivist in approach and bold in their assertion of a positive role for the federal government, the policies of the early New Deal did not present a broadside challenge to long-established political and economic interests. Roosevelt 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 incorporated big business directly into the government's re-

covery program. The problem was not that Roosevelt's program ignored the interests attached to and supported by the governmental arrangements of the past, but that it implicated those interests in a broader coalition. The New Deal also bestowed legitimacy on the interests of organized labor, the poor, and the unemployed, and that left southern Bourbons and northern industrialists feeling threatened and increasingly insecure.

This sense of unease manifested itself politically in the organization of the American Liberty League in the summer of 1934. The league mounted an aggressive assault on Roosevelt and the New Deal, but 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 the spring of 1935 a more potent adversary arose within the government itself. The Supreme Court, keeper of the rules 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 sorting out friend from foe and the Court pulling the rug out from under the cooperative approach to economic recovery, Roosevelt stiffened his repudiative stance and 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 a new governmental order.

Roosevelt began the transition from national healer 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" New Deal. The federal government extended new services and permanent institutional supports to organized labor, the small businessman, 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.¹³

In their scope and vision, 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.

not clear Roosevelt's target, of course, 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 coequal branch of government and could hardly succeed in labeling an arm of the Constitution a threat to the survival of the Republic. The president decided instead to kill his institutional opponent with kindness. He called for an increase in the size of the Court, ostensibly to ease the burden on the elder justices and increase the efficiency of the federal judiciary. 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 importantly, the Court, unlike the bank, did not further exacerbate the situation. Instead, it reversed course in the middle of the battle and indicated its willingness to accept the policies of the second New Deal.

The Court's turnabout was a great victory for the new regime, but it 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. Roosevelt, however, found himself bound by his own arguments about the administrative inefficiencies of the Court and suspicious of tactics that seemed to preserve claims of judicial supremacy for the future. He did not withdraw his proposal. Although stalwart liberals stood by the president to the end, traditional Democratic conservatives deserted him. A bipartisan coalition came together in opposition to Roosevelt, defeated the "court-packing" scheme, and divided the ranks of the New Deal coali-

tion. 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 the Court defeat, the president moved to reaffirm his hold over the Democratic Party and to strengthen its liberal commitments. But this effort too was handicapped by the sweeping character of Roosevelt's early successes. Unlike Jackson in 1834, Roosevelt in 1938 could not point to any immediate threat to his programmatic commitments. A 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 more conservative southern delegations in Congress maintained majority support for Roosevelt's domestic reform initiatives.¹⁴ 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 and selective punishment for the ungrateful defectors. 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 division within the majority party between the old southern conservatism and the new liberal orthodoxy became more ominous than ever.

Despite these setbacks, Roosevelt's effectiveness as a regime builder was not completely exhausted. A final effort at strengthening the new order institutionally met with considerable success. In 1939, Roosevelt received congressional approval for a package of administrative reforms that promised to bolster the position of the president in his relations with the other branches of government. Following the precepts of his Commission on Administrative Management, the president asked for new authority to control the vastly expanded federal bureaucracy and for new executive offices to provide planning and direction for govern-

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mental operations. Congress responded with a modest endorsement. While deflating Roosevelt's grand design, it clearly acknowledged the new governing demands of the enlarged federal bureaucracy and system of national services 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.¹⁵

As is often noted, the New Deal reforms did not solve the economic problems underlying the Depression. The outbreak of World War II was far more effective in that. Roosevelt did, however, redefine the terms and conditions of legitimate national government. It would be a long time before a president called into question the expansive national commitments supported by his liberal regime.

POLK AND KENNEDY: THE DILEMMAS OF INTEREST MANAGEMENT IN AN ESTABLISHED REGIME

The administrations of Jackson and Roosevelt shared much in both the political conditions of leadership and the challenges undertaken. The initial upheaval, the ensuing political confusion, and the enduring popular enthusiasm for reform set the stage for 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 his new order by eliminating the institutional opposition and forging a more coherent base of party support. As the nation redivided politically, a new set of governing commitments took hold, a new ruling coalition emerged to back them up, and the presidency itself gained a new position of power.

It is evident from a comparison of these performances that where Rooseveltian regime building was triumphant, Jacksonian regime build-

ing faltered, and vice versa: Roosevelt left institutional relations between state and society thoroughly reconstructed, but his party-building initiative fell flat and the achievement on that score was flawed; Jackson left institutional relations between state and society in a dangerous disarray, but his performance and achievement as a party builder remain unparalleled. These differences would have important implications for the future operations of these new regimes. But the more important point for our purposes lies elsewhere. It is that few presidents have the incentive to address fundamental commitments of ideology and interest or the opportunity to secure new commitments through institutional reconstruction and party building. Most presidents must use their skills and resources—however extensive those may be—to work within an already established governmental order.

Successful regime builders leave in their wake a more constricted political universe for presidential action. To their partisan successors, in particular, they leave the difficult task of keeping faith with a ruling coalition in changing times. In established regimes, majority-party presidents come to power as representatives of the dominant political alliance and they are expected to offer a representative's service in delegate style. Commitments of ideology and interest are all too clear, and the fusion of national political legitimacy with established power relationships argues against any attempt to tinker with the basics of government and politics. These leaders are challenged not to break down the old order and forge a new one, but to complete the agenda, adapt the vision, and defuse the potentially explosive choices among competing obligations. If they are to whip up national enthusiasm behind their leadership, they must do so on other fronts that promise to unite all supporters. Presidents in these circumstances are partners to a highly structured regime politics, and to make the partnership work, they must anticipate and control impending disruptions.

The presidencies of Polk and Kennedy clearly illustrate the problems and prospects of leadership circumscribed by the challenge of managing an established regime. Each of these 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 pub-

lic policy, but there had been no systemic transformations in government or politics. Ushering in a second era of majority-party government, Polk and Kennedy promised to revive the commitments and revitalize the vision of the regime founder.

Neither Polk nor Kennedy could claim the leadership of a major party faction. Indeed, their credibility as regime managers rested in large part on their second-rank status in regular party circles. Each honed skills for allaying mutual suspicions among the great centers of party strength. Their nominations to the presidency were the result of careful posturing around the conflicts that divided contending party factions. What they lacked in deep political loyalties, they made up for with their freedom to cultivate the support of all interests.

Once the office was won, the challenge of interest management was magnified. Each of these presidents had accepted one especially controversial commitment (Texas annexation, civil rights) that held majority support within the party as a necessary part of the regime's updated agenda. Their ability to lend their support to their party's most divisive enthusiasm without losing their broad base of credibility within it was fitting testimony to their early education in the art of aggressive maintenance. But their mediating skills did not alter the fact that each had taken 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 repudiation of what had gone before. The hairbreadth Democratic victories of 1844 and 1960 suggested the opposition could continue to make a serious claim to the presidency, and that reinforced in these incumbents an already highly developed sense of executive dependence on all parts of the party coalition. With maintenance at a premium and with 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 implicit threat of prompting a war of aggres-

sion for the expansion of slave territory.¹⁶ Even Jackson, an ardent nationalist, had seen Texas as forbidden fruit. Despite his passion for annexation, Old Hickory steered clear of the issue during the last years of his presidency for fear that it would divide along sectional lines the national party he had just consolidated.¹⁷ 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 reality on the eve of his party's nominating convention in 1844. Van Buren, Jackson's successor to the presidency in 1837 and still the nominal head of the Democratic Party, risked an all-but-certain nomination by coming out against the "immediate" annexation of Texas. The New Yorker's pronouncement fused 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 sound on Texas without being openly opposed to Van Buren. On the ninth ballot, James Knox Polk became the Democratic nominee.

Van Buren
hurt
by
Texas
issue

Polk was a second-choice candidate, and he knew it. As leader of the Democratic Party in Tennessee, he had the unimpeachable credential of being a stalwart friend of Andrew Jackson. He had served loyally as floor leader of the House during the critical days of the bank war, and he 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 equivocation on the Texas issue would make his nomination more

Polk's
one
term
pledge

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 that he would not serve any time in office at all unless the frustrated party giants in each section of the nation expended every last ounce of energy for the campaign, which they might not do if it meant foreclosing their own prospects for eight years.¹⁸

The one-term declaration was a bid for party unity and a pledge of party maintenance. But the deepening 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. More than that, it almost 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."¹⁹ His first action, however, indicated that the going would be rough. Scrutinizing the cabinet-selection process, Van Buren judged that New York (whose electoral votes had put Polk over the top) had not had its interests sufficiently recognized. The frustrated ex-president thought he saw a determination on the new president's part to turn the party toward the slave South. Polk moved immediately to appease Van Buren with other patronage offers, but relations between them did not improve. From the outset Van Buren's loyalty was tinged with a heavy dose of suspicion.

The outcry over patronage distribution indicated that any action the

president took would evoke charges of favoritism. Van Buren's was but the first in an incessant barrage of such charges.²⁰ 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 Jacksonian 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 Manifest Destiny. Reaching out to the South, Polk promised to annex Texas; to the Northwest, he promised to secure the Oregon Territory; and to bind the whole nation together, he made a secret promise to himself to acquire California. In all, the president would complete the Jacksonian program of party services and fuse popular passions in an irresistible jingoistic campaign to extend the Jacksonian Republic across the continent.

Driven by a keen sense of the dual imperatives of maintenance and leadership, Polk embarked on a course of action designed 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 this 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 achieve everything he promised in the order he promised it, he risked a major party rupture. 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 with Great Britain 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 below 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 he could not risk 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 threatened 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 against that nation. 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 to be willfully 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 a vague and 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 held out his promised land-price reform as an incentive to bring debate to a close, he also withheld his objections to a legislative initiative brewing among representatives of the South and the 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 tariff bill was enacted, Polk vetoed the internal improvement bill. It had never been a part of his program, and it was an offense to all orthodox Jacksonians. Needless to say, the deviousness of the president's maneuverings was an offense to the West that 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 no longer were willing to heed the counsels 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 already was too long for the president and his party. To speed the 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."²¹ 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 the growing threat of 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 nationalist 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 stem the tide of party disaffection in the East, and unfulfilled expectations fueled disaffection in the West. He was thus left to watch in dismay as the disaffected 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 thus be acquired. This condition, known as the Wilmot Proviso after Pennsylvania Democrat David Wilmot, splintered the party along the dreaded sectional cleavage. An appropriation bill with the proviso passed in the House, but it failed in the Senate when an effort to remove the proviso was filibustered successfully. Now it was Polk's turn to be bitter. In a grim confession of the failure of his grand design, he claimed that he could not comprehend "what connection slavery had with making peace with Mexico."²²

Ultimately Polk got his peace with Mexico, 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 was ruptured in the very course of enacting its national vision. Polk's monument to Jacksonian nationalism proved to be a breeding ground for sectional heresy.

The shortfall in Polk's efforts at interest management manifested itself in political disaster for the Democratic Party. By the fall of 1846, the New York party had divided into two irreconcilable camps, with Van Buren leading the radicals who were sympathetic to the Wilmot Proviso and opposed to the administration. While the president 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 resolving 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.²³

After the convention, Polk abandoned his studied neutrality. In the waning months of his administration, he withdrew administration favors from Free Soil sympathizers and threw his support behind the party regulars.²⁴ But it was Van Buren who had the last word. Four years after putting aside personal defeat, loyally supporting the party, and helping elect Polk, he emerged as the leader of the "heretics" and ensured Cass's defeat.

John F. Kennedy

John F. Kennedy had every intention of spending eight years in the White House, but this ambition only compounded the dilemma inherent in his leadership position. Kennedy's presidential campaign harkened back to Rooseveltian images of direction and energy in government. It stigma-

tized the Republican interregnum under Eisenhower as a lethargic, aimless muddle, and it 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. Kennedy 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 whether or not he could, in his first four, vindicate the promise of vigorous national leadership without shattering an already fractured political base.

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

This leadership design shared more in common with Polk's pursuits than a frontier imagery. Both presidents gave primacy to foreign enthusiasms and hoped that the nation would do the same. Facing a politically divided people and an internally factionalized party, they set out to tap the unifying potential of America's missionary stance in the world and to rivet national attention on muscle-flexing adventures on the world stage. By so doing, they claimed the high ground as men of truly national vision. At the same time, each countered deepening conflicts of principle within the ruling coalition with an attempt to balance interests at home. They were engaged in a constant struggle to mute the passions that divided their supporters and stem the tide of coalition disaffection. Resisting the specter of irreconcilable differences within the ranks, Polk and Kennedy held out their support to all interests and demanded in return that each agree to allow the executive to determine the range, substance, and timing of policy initiatives.

Of course, there were notable differences in the way these presidents

approached regime management. Kennedy, who was not unaware of Polk's failings, avoided Polk's tactics.²⁵ 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 be avoided best by refraining from unnecessarily divisive action. He was more circumspect in his choice of initiatives and more cautious in their pursuit. The task of balancing interests was translated into legislative restraint, and aggressive maintenance into carefully contained advocacy. Kennedy's "politics of expectation" kept fulfillment of the liberal agenda at the level of anticipation.²⁶

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 had refused to make it his own, fearing the devastating effect it would have on the precarious sectional balance in his newly established party coalition.²⁷ Harry S. Truman had seen the fight break out and temporarily rupture the party in 1948.²⁸ 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 increasingly difficult 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 for civil rights.²⁹ While keeping himself abreast of liberal orthodoxy, he held back from leadership and avoided pressing the cause upon 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 on to 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 Johnson, he risked a serious offense to his left wing. Not only was Johnson the South's first choice and Kennedy's chief rival for the presidential nomination, but his national reputation was also 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.³⁰ Together, however, Kennedy and Johnson were to make a formidable team of regime managers. Riding the horns of their party's dilemma, they balanced the boldest Democratic commitment ever on 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 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 arena. In the months before the inauguration, Kennedy had decided to keep civil rights off the legislative agenda. Instead, he would prod Congress along on other liberal issues such as a minimum wage, housing, aid to education, mass transit, and health care. The plan was not difficult to rationalize. If 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 he withheld the civil rights issue from Congress, southerners might show their appreciation for the president's circumspection. His other measures thus would have a better chance for enact-

ment, and blacks would reap the benefits of these programs as well as of Kennedy's executive-centered civil rights initiatives.

Accordingly, Kennedy avoided a preinaugural fight in the Senate to liberalize the rules of debate. The liberalization 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.³¹

Feelings of resentment and betrayal among civil rights leaders inevitably followed the decision to forgo the bold legislative actions suggested in the party platform. Poised to affirm commitments to all regime interests, the administration seemed determined to avoid a debate on fundamentals. The question was whether the promise of aggressive executive action could allay resentment, persuasively demonstrate a new level of commitment to civil rights, and still contain the threatened political rupture. The administration moved forward on several fronts. The centerpiece of its strategy was to use the Justice Department to promote and protect black-voter-registration drives in the South. This approach 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. In other initiatives, the president liberalized the old Civil Rights Commission and created a Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity to investigate job discrimination. When liberals in Congress moved to eliminate the poll tax, the president lent his support. When demonstrations threatened to disrupt southern transportation terminals, Attorney General Robert 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 expectations 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 acknowledge the interests of civil rights opponents as well. 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 provided support for the voter-registration drive, yet it also tapped the phone 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 recommending the withholding of federal funds from states that violated the Constitution. While he encouraged the desegregation of interstate transportation terminals, the president put off action on a key 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 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 contradictory expectations for two years. But as an exercise in forestalling a schism within the ranks, the administration's efforts to control advocacy and 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.

While 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 became extremely agitated when movement leaders contended that the administration was not doing all that it

could for blacks. Civil rights groups, in turn, were outraged at the implications that the movement represented an interest like any other and that claims of moral right could be pragmatically "balanced" against the power 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 still further the president's room to maneuver and to force him to shift his course from interest balancing to moral choice.

The first sign of a shift came on 28 February 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 could no longer 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 was clearly spilling over the channels of presidential containment, the prospect for passing civil rights legislation in Congress had improved little since the president had taken office. Kennedy's circumspect attitude on civil rights matters during the first two years of his administration had been only moderately successful in winning support from southern Democrats for his other social and economic measures. Several of the administration's most important successes—minimum-wage, housing, and area-redevelopment legislation—clearly indicated the significance of southern support. On the other hand, 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.³² 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 intractable problem was to press legisla-

tion as an irresistible counsel of moderation. This meant holding back still longer, waiting for the extreme positions to manifest themselves more fully, and then offering real change as the only prudent course available. He did not have to wait long. 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 this basis. Congressional Republicans were enlisted with the argument that the only way to get the protesters off the streets was by providing 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 Governor 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 new 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 compromise in order to 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 continually struggled to moderate his party's liberal commitments and thus avoid a rupture on the right. Now, as a landmark piece of civil rights legislation inched its way uncertainly through Congress, the president 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. As the Republican Party itself prepared for a sharp move to the right under the banner of Barry Goldwater, civil rights leaders feared that the political logic of Democratic accommodation might once again rear its ugly head and that the president's determination might wane as the inevitable legislative showdown in the Senate heated up. 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: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY IN AN ENERVATED REGIME

For Polk and Kennedy, leadership was circumscribed by the dilemmas of interest management and the test of aggressive maintenance. With a hands-on assertion of executive authority, each determined to orchestrate the redemption of political promises, to control the course and pace of regime development, to hold the old coalition together as best they could through changing times. Their political strategies involved them in convoluted manipulations calculated to accommodate conflicting interests while upholding controversial commitments and staving off a schism within the ranks. 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 performances. Polk was able to deliver on an extraordinary array of policy promises, but his success was premised on excluding the basic moral issue inherent in these policies from the arena of political debate. Kennedy delivered little in the way of outstanding policy, but he eventually came around to acknowledging the great moral choice he confronted, and he ultimately made a moral decision of immense national

significance. Despite these manifest differences, Polk's and Kennedy's limited claims to greatness actually rest on similar responses to the dilemmas of interest management. These presidents began with a credible claim to executive control and a promise of respectful service to all the interests of the majority party. Within two years, however, the delicate interest balance they had been at pains to maintain began to unravel, and the effort to stave off coalition disaffection became a matter of limiting the effects of an open rupture. When interest management could no longer hold the old majority coalition together, these presidents took their stand with their party orthodoxies and moved to secure the greater part.

The irony in these performances is that while upholding their respective regime commitments and vindicating their party orthodoxies, Polk and Kennedy raised serious questions about the future terms of regime survival and left orthodoxy itself politically insecure. Because Polk's nationalism and Kennedy's liberalism ultimately came at the expense of the old majority coalitions, 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 that had rumbled out of the Polk administration.³³ This incongruous series of measures, collectively labeled the Compromise of 1850, repackaged moderation in a way that many hoped would isolate the extremes 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 the disparate parts of their broken coalition. While supporting governmental policies that were designed to silence ideological conflict,

they renewed a partnership in power with interests at the ideological extremes.³⁴

For the New Deal regime, the turn came on the heels of a great electoral victory. Running against a Republican extremist, Lyndon 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 forge a new consensus with policies that would redeem the nation's commitments in foreign policy while submerging political conflict in a vast expansion of interest services. His attempt to trump the New Deal with a Great Society without, at the same time, relinquishing the fight against communism to the hard Right left the liberal regime disoriented and overextended. His hopes for superseding the old Democratic Party with a "party for all Americans" did more to scatter political loyalties than to unify them.³⁵

By the time of the next incarnation 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 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 governmental 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 former governor of New Hampshire, 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 within regular party circles (if it may be so called) 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 that he appealed to party regulars 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 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 an assertion of managerial control over the interests with which they were affiliated. Because they were tenuously attached to a governmental establishment that itself appeared barren of any interest in addressing the most pressing problems of the day, their leadership turned on a question so narrow that it really is prerequisite to leadership—that of their own credibility. Despite determined efforts to establish credibility, 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 festering questions about the governing assumptions that had supported those interests in the past, neither could find secure ground on which to make a stand to limit the inevitable political fallout that comes from 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.³⁶ In the process, the Democratic Party strengthened its hold over both houses of Congress. But the Pierce landslide was more apparent than real, and the election was anything but a mandate for action. As a presidential candidate, Pierce had simply

endorsed the past work of a bipartisan group of Senate moderates. His campaign was confined to a declaration of support for the Compromise of 1850 as the "final" solution to the slavery issue and a pledge to resist any further agitation on this, 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 taking a second bow to the center and placing the full largesse of his office at the disposal of the Senate moderates. But there were other aspects of the election that argued against this approach. Pierce had actually received less than 51 percent of the popular vote. He had won the presidency not because the moderate center of national opinion had rallied to his standard, but because the party managers working in the field had reassembled support at the political extremes. To these extremes, the Compromise of 1850 was a source of 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 that the election of 1848 had demonstrated that it was not enough for the Democratic Party to stand with the moderates and let the extremes go their own way. As he saw it, the narrow victory of 1852 had amply demonstrated the electoral imperative of consolidating party loyalties at the extremes. Pierce refused to ignore these renewed displays of Democratic support—however reluctantly given—in the vague hope that the centrists of both parties might join him in a national coalition government. He decided to reach out to the old party coalition and to try to heal the wounds of 1848 once and for all.

In a bold bid for leadership, Pierce held himself aloof from the moderate Democratic 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 a position of respectability in his dealings with Congress, to take charge of national affairs, and ultimately—in 1856—to claim 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 in order to enhance the president's position. Pierce quickly discovered that his claims to the office of 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 a 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 core institutional apparatus of the regime and thereby restoring the regime's 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 not the wide-ranging appeal to unfinished party business that had driven Polk's administration. He held up to the nation the vision of a perfect political machine purged of all political content.³⁷

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 the Whigs swept the state's elections in 1853.

Within months of his inauguration, Pierce's strategy for establishing leadership credibility was in a shambles. The president's key appointment to the collectorship of the Port of New York had yet to be confirmed by the Senate, and if the party leaders withheld their endorsement—a prospect that Pierce's early standoffishness and the New York electoral debacle made all too possible—the rebuke to the fledgling

administration would be disastrous. But Pierce had not only placed himself at the mercy of the Senate, he had also 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 seeking their revenge. They characterized the distribution of rewards in the North as representing a heightened level of commitment to the Free Soil element, and they challenged their more moderate southern cohorts to extract an equal measure of new commitment for 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 posture confirmed in the Compromise of 1850, by 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 ostensibly had accepted this formula for settling new lands by electing Pierce in 1852 were offended by his 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 establish itself permanently in any part of 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 squatter sovereignty doctrine. The change in the formal terms of sectional peace would be more symbolic than real. Whatever his rationale, Douglas accepted the repeal, and by dividing the Nebraska Territory in two (Nebraska and Kansas), he 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 gain 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 was placed on the line. Confronted with his very first legislative decision, the president was being told to disregard the one clear pledge he had made to the nation, the electoral pledge not to reopen the issue of slavery. If he chose to stand by this pledge now, he stood to lose all credibility within his party. If he endorsed the handiwork of the party leaders instead, he stood to lose all credibility in the nation at large. Pierce chose to stand with the party leaders. He convinced himself that the Kansas-Nebraska bill was faithful enough to the spirit of the Compromise of 1850 and offered to help Douglas convince the northern wing of the party. The collector of the Port of New York was confirmed.

Between March 1853 and January 1854, Pierce had tried and failed to prove himself to his party on his own terms; between January and May 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, 66 of the 90 northern Democrats stood in open revolt against this northern Democratic president. Even a no-holds-barred use of presidential patronage persuaded only 44 finally to give their assent. Instead of perfecting a political machine, Pierce found himself defying a political revolution. Presidential power helped secure passage of the bill, but only with the support of southern Whigs. Forty-two northern Democrats openly voted no. Not one northern Whig voted yes.³⁸

During the winter of 1854, Pierce lost his claim to credibility in the nation at large. Stigmatized and exhausted by its efforts to muscle Douglas's bill through, the administration turned to reap northern revenge for the broken pledge of 1852. The Democrats lost every northern state except New Hampshire and California in the elections of 1854. A huge Democratic majority in the House was wiped out, and the curious new amalgamation of political forces that was preparing to take over harbored the makings of radical insurgency. Adding to the rebuke was the threat of civil war in the territories. Free Soil and slave factions

dropped by air
Dem Party

rushed into Kansas and squared off in a contest for control. The president called for order, but the call was ignored.

Pierce never gave up hope that his party would turn to him. But once the North rejected his administration, the South had no more use for him, and the party Pierce had so desperately wanted to lead became increasingly anxious to get rid of him. Ironically, when faced at midterm with the unmitigated failure of his leadership and his political impotence, Pierce seemed to gain a sense of higher purpose for the first time. 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. He wrapped his party in the Constitution and cast its enemies in the role of uncompromising disunionists bent on civil war.³⁹

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 upon the nation and, with it, his own case for party leadership. Still, there was no rally of political support. 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 of 1856 was an "anybody but Pierce" affair.

Jimmy Carter

There is no better argument for Jimmy Carter's mugwumpish approach to political leadership than the example of Franklin Pierce's unmitigated failure. No sooner had Pierce identified his prospects for gaining credibility as a national leader with the revitalization of the old party machinery under presidential auspices than he fell victim to party interests so fractious that the desperate state of national affairs was all but ignored. Gripped by myopic sects, the party of Jackson proved itself bankrupt as a governing instrument. Its operators were no longer capable of even recognizing that they were toying with moral issues of explosive

significance for the nation as a whole. Pierce's plan for claiming party leadership first and then taking 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 his office. The quest for credibility degenerated into saving face with the Senate over patronage appointments, toeing the line on explosive territorial legislation for the sake of Douglas's railroad, and forswearing a solemn pledge to the electorate.

It was Jimmy Carter's peculiar genius as a presidential candidate to treat his remoteness from his party and its institutional power centers as a distinctive asset rather than a conspicuous liability in his quest for a credible leadership posture. Carter 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 criticisms of their handiwork. In a style reminiscent of Andrew Jackson, Carter identified himself with popular disillusionment with political insiders, entrenched special interests, and the corruption of manners that had consumed Washington. He let the liberals of the Democratic Party flounder in their own internal 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's latest presidential run.

The obvious problem in Carter's approach to the presidency was that while it claimed a high moral stance of detachment from the establishment, it also positioned itself within the established governing coalition. This awkward stance afforded Carter neither the regime outsider's freedom to oppose established interests nor the regime insider's freedom to promote them. The tension in Carter's campaign between an effort to reassemble the core constituencies of the traditional Democratic coalition and his promise to reform the governmental order that served it suggested the difficulties he would face establishing a credible leadership posture in office. Carter's narrow victory in the election 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 administrative form, procedure, and discipline rather than in the substantive content 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 rather than problems of substance.

Like Jackson's early efforts, Carter's reform program called for governmental reorganization, civil service reform, and fiscal retrenchment. But coming from an outsider who was nominally affiliated with the old order, it was hard to capitalize on the political force and ideological energy of this program for revitalization. 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 program for reorganizing the old order without challenging any of its core concerns.⁴⁰

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 patronage apparatus of the Jacksonian regime—repair the mechanical defects and realize a new level of operational proficiency. With their perfection of 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.⁴¹ 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 coalition interests with bold new programs in traditional 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 nation and his political support in government in the starkest possible light. For the president, the water projects were a prime example of the wasteful and unnecessary expenditures inherent in the old way 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 presi-

dent's public standing, yet its victims were those upon 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 the Democratic 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 standard of conduct that any would find difficult to sustain. A hint of shady dealing surfaced in the summer of 1977 around Bert Lance, Carter's director of the Office of Management and Budget, and by the fall, the symbolic supports of Carter's leadership were a shambles.

Like the water projects debacle, the 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 shady dealings on the part of the man whose hand was on the tiller of the bureaucratic machine not only indicted the administration on the very ground where it had asserted a distinctive purpose but also made a sham of the Democratic Senate's nomination-review process. Shorn of its pretensions to set a higher standard of conduct, the outsider status of the administration became a dubious asset. Attention now was directed to the apparent inability of the outsider 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 alliance between Carter and Senator

Edward "Ted" Kennedy to recapitulate the Pierce-Douglas disaster. But what of the prospects for continued resistance? The core constituencies of the Democratic Party—blacks and organized labor in particular—found the president's program of governmental reorganization and fiscal retrenchment tangential to their concerns at best. 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 Ted Kennedy's words, "sail against the wind."⁴² If the shaky state of the economy made this message a perilous one for the president to embrace, his awkward political position made it an equally perilous one 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 new consumer groups, a general appeal in the nation at large, and support from the Democratic leadership in Congress. Even more attractive was the fact that it posed little additional cost to the government. In consumer protection, Carter found all 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 it 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 governmental 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.⁴³ Carter's own critique of undisciplined governmental expansion actually became the property of his critics, and the distinctions he had been at pains to draw between himself and the old liberal

establishment became hopelessly blurred. While this most distant of Democratic presidents was alienating the liberal establishment by his neglect of its priorities, he was being inextricably linked to it by an insurgent conservative assault on the manifest failings of the New Deal liberal regime as a whole. 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 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 upon which to vindicate the promise of a rehabilitation of the liberal order. Moreover, the president's mugwumpish resolve to find his own way through deepening crises increasingly 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 that it was imperative to identify the administration with some clear and compelling purpose. Carter's response to the eclipse of political definition was not, of course, 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.⁴⁴ This new bid for leadership credibility opened with a candid acknowledgment of widespread disillusionment with the administration and its "mixed success" with Congress. But the president detached himself from the "paralysis and 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 a 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 only seemed to reveal to him 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 alienation of the people 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, 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.

PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP IN POLITICAL TIME

Presidential leadership is often pictured as a contest to determine whether the incumbent has the stuff to make the system work. Timeless forces of political fragmentation and institutional intransigence threaten to frustrate the would-be leader at every turn. Success is re-

served for the exceptional individual. It takes a person of rare political skill to control this system and manipulate the government in politically effective ways. It takes a person of rare character to give those manipulations constructive purpose and national resonance.

The problem is that this picture presents a rather one-sided view of the interaction between the president and the political system. It is highly sensitive to differences among individual 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. The changing universe of political action is an oft-noted but seldom explored dimension of the leadership problem.

While changes in the political conditions and challenges of presidential leadership have been incessant, they have not been entirely erratic. A broad view of American political development reveals recurrent sequences of political change; leadership problems are reconfigured in typical ways along these sequences, and each configuration yields a corresponding pattern in presidential performance. Presidential history in this reading has been episodic rather than evolutionary, with leadership opportunities gradually dissipating after an initial upheaval in political control over government. Presidents intervene in—and their leadership is mediated by—the generation and degeneration of political orders. The clock at work in presidential leadership keeps political time.

The leaders who stand out at a glance—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt—are closer to each other in the political conditions of leadership than they are to any of their respective neighbors in historical time. In political time all were first. As the analysis of the Jacksonian and New Deal regimes has shown, successive incarnations of majority-party government produced progressively more-tenuous leadership situations. Presidents approached ever-more-perplexing problems of regime governance with ever-more-superficial political options; regime supporters approached ever-more-perplexing leadership choices with ever-less forbearance.

The regime builders rode into power on an upheaval in governmental control and tested their leadership in efforts to secure the political

and institutional infrastructure for a new governing coalition. Their success created a new establishment, thrust their partisan successors into the position of regime managers, and posed the test of maintenance. These efforts, in turn, had consequences of their own, eventually saddling the regime with more controversial promises, more extensive commitments, and deeper divisions. Ultimately, visions of regime management dissolved into politically vacuous mechanical contrivances, and leadership was forestalled by the political difficulties of simply establishing presidential credibility.

Political time does not turn presidents into automatons or negate the substantive significance of the choices they make. As we have seen, Polk and Kennedy responded differently when their efforts at interest management began to unravel. Pierce and Carter made different choices as well, particularly as they became more deeply implicated in the crisis of political legitimacy engulfing their presidencies. The unique character of each president in these pairs is displayed all the more vividly by the different options they pursued in trying to address their shared political problem. But these differences only serve to underscore more basic points: Political time is a powerful determinant of leadership authority, of the range of options, of the prospects for success, and of the practical impact of the exercise of presidential power on the political system at large.

Situating presidents in political time provides a truer measure of the way our political system works and of how our leaders interact with it. Presidents within the same historical period grapple with radically different political challenges. Success in one instance constricts options in the next. Many of the political challenges periodically thrust upon our presidents are inherently intractable, and the dynamics of leadership are such that some presidents are thrust into political circumstances that are wholly untenable. Perhaps the most sobering observation of all is that the great performances—the ones that get held up as a standard for others to emulate—have been the most wrenching in their assault on the system. All told, the relationship between the presidency and the American political system is not at all a comforting one. It is always paradoxical and often perverse.