The Lore of Lightning Rods

Criticism, Harry Truman once said, "is something [a president] gets every day, just like breakfast." Few people, if any, who have occupied that high office would disagree with Truman's judgment (although not all would be as sanguine about receiving their daily diet). Given that it is criticism rather than deference that usually goes with the office, some commentators have suggested that it behooves a president to position members of his administration on the front lines to absorb blame for unpopular policies. Presidential advisers might thereby function as "lightning rods," deflecting criticism away from the president and onto themselves.

The idea, and practice, of advisers serving as lightning rods is probably as old as governing itself. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli taught "that princes must delegate distasteful tasks to others; pleasant ones they should keep for themselves." Francis Bacon observed that one of the uses that kings make of their advisers is "to interpose them between themselves and the envy or malice of their people; for kings cannot err; that must be discharged upon the shoulders of their ministers; and those who are nearest unto them must be content to bear the greatest load."

Presidents, it hardly needs noting, are not kings. One essential difference is that to directly criticize a king (or sultan or czar or emperor or dictator) can land one in jail or worse, whereas criticizing a modern American president is more likely to land one on the front page or television news. The greater the social and political sanctions against criticizing the ruler, the greater the incentive to denounce advisers for leading the ruler astray rather than directly attacking the ruler. Because the sanctions against criticizing an American president are so radically different from those that have existed during most of the rest of world history, I have resisted the temptation to survey lightning rods of past historical eras. My analysis is instead confined
to modern American presidents, although some of my conclusions may have wider applicability.

THE CONTRADICTORY CERTAINTIES OF PRESIDENTIAL LORE

Some fifty years ago Pendleton Herring in his seminal, if seldom read, *Presidential Leadership* stated the lightning rod hypothesis in the context of the American presidency. To be effective, Herring argued, a president "must be guarded from the frictions that his administration creates." By becoming too closely identified with "policies or actions which the voters may decide to repudiate, he runs the constant danger of becoming discredited before his term of office has expired." A president can deflect blame, Herring reasoned, by acting "as a generalissimo who devolves upon his generals the responsibility for the attainment of particular objectives. If they fail they can be disgraced and removed; or kicked upstairs to posts of less crucial importance." As an example, Herring pointed to the "notable procession of scapegoats" who "retreated from office [during the New Deal] under a weight of popular disapproval," while President Roosevelt remained popular. ¹

This argument seems plausible enough. But so too does the opposite case, argued by Harold Laski in his classic *The American Presidency*, published in the same year (1940) as Herring’s treatise. An American president, Laski maintains, cannot deflect blame onto subordinates. A president’s position as head of the executive branch, Laski insists, "makes him a target to be attacked by every person or interest at all critical of his purposes. He is there, in all cases, to be blamed; and there is no one, in any real sense, who can help to bear the burden of the blame." In contrast to England, where we blame an anonymous entity ‘the Government’ if things go wrong, . . . in the United States it is the president who is blamed. A decision of the Supreme Court is regarded as adverse to his policy; a defeat in Congress is a blow to his prestige; the mid-term congressional elections affect his policy, for good or ill. No one thinks of them in terms of their effect upon his cabinet.

Laski takes the argument a step further by suggesting that those presidents who do not defer to subordinates will be more popular than those who do. "A masterful man in the White House," Laski suggests, will "be more to the liking of the multitude than one who is thought to be swayed by his colleagues. . . . The mere fact that the president insists upon being the center
of the stage continuously strengthens his position." Like Herring, Laski points to the example of Franklin Roosevelt to support his proposition.  

Who is right, and how would we decide? Are cabinet members, as Laski argues, of no help in protecting a president? Or can they, as Herring suggests, prevent him from being beaten down by daily political struggles? Is the White House, as Patrick Anderson has asserted, "so constructed that credit flows upward and blame downward," or is it the case, as Lord James Bryce insisted, that a president "cannot avoid responsibility by alleging the advice of his ministers, for he need not follow it, and they are bound to obey him or retire?" Is it true, as Arthur Krock would have it, that "subordinates are always available in profusion to take the gaff, or, without diminishing [the president], the credit," or is John Ehrlichman correct in holding that "if a Secretary makes political waves it's his President who gets wet?" Which if any of these contradictory propositions (one is tempted to say proverbs) are correct?  

Such contradictory claims are characteristic of much of the literature on the presidency. Propositions about the presidency are too often put forth as if they were self-evident truths rather than hypotheses needing to be investigated. Unsubstantiated assertions, such as those enumerated above, are often repeated in textbooks, but rarely is an attempt made to demonstrate the validity of the claim (or even to show how the claim might in principle be validated). As a result, little work on the presidency is cumulative in character.  

Instead, judgments about the presidency often swing in reaction to the travails or triumphs of the latest president. Harry Truman showed that the office ennobled the man; Lyndon Johnson showed that the office corrupted the man. Richard Nixon demonstrated that a president should not have a chief of staff blocking access to the president; Gerald Ford demonstrated that a president needs a chief of staff restricting access to the president. Jimmy Carter proved that presidents need to focus on the big picture, delegating the rest to subordinates; Ronald Reagan proved that presidents could not afford to become too detached from the details of day-to-day policy making. Franklin Roosevelt established that the public loved a political master in the White House; Dwight Eisenhower established that the public loved a detached, apolitical leader in the White House.

Surveying the state of the field, Fred Greenstein has recently written that it is "more appropriate to speak of lore than of laws in discussing the conduct of the presidency." With so few presidents and so many variables, laws may be more than we can hope for, but perhaps we can still aspire to something better than the current presidential lore. My aim is to improve upon existing lore by treating the competing claims made by Laski, Bryce, Herring, Patrick Anderson, and others as rival hypotheses to be tested. These contradic-
tory assertions can be reconciled by specifying conditions under which a president can deflect blame onto subordinates.

The task of stating such conditions is complicated by the lack of agreement among observers about which presidential advisers have served as lightning rods and which as liabilities. A first step in evaluating the competing hypotheses is to distinguish an adviser who deflects blame away from a president (and thus acts as a lightning rod) from one who attracts blame toward a president (and thus serves as a liability).

Before proceeding with this line of inquiry, however, I want to address the peculiar neglect that students of the presidency have shown toward the question of the effect that advisers (whether cabinet members, staff, or vice presidents) have on a president's public (mass or elite) support. Although one can cull a collection of suggestive, if contradictory, sentences and even paragraphs, nowhere has the subject been given sustained, let alone rigorous, analysis.

BETWEEN POLITICAL BEHAVIOR AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The topic of presidential lightning rods has been a casualty of the division within political science between public administration, which considers its proper domain of inquiry to be modes of executive decision making, management techniques, leadership styles, and the like, and political behavior, which concerns itself largely with statistical analyses of mass political attitudes and behavior. Models of presidential popularity have thus remained the province of those versed in mass political attitudes, while the study of presidential leadership styles has been left almost entirely to those with a public administration bent.

The lightning rod concept is premised on the assumption that the behavior of leaders affects how the public perceives and attributes responsibility. This possibility has been largely ignored by students of presidential popularity, who have instead focused on the impact of war, inflation, unemployment, and other real world events on the public's evaluation of presidential performance. Largely missing from the debate over the relative influence of these factors on presidential popularity is an appreciation that what cannot be explained by events may be at least as important as what can. The lightning rod hypothesis suggests that where there is only a loose fit between events and popularity, one might profitably look to leadership style for an explanation.

This neglect of the role of presidential behavior by students of presidential popularity is particularly surprising in view of the conclusion reached by John Mueller in his pioneering essay, "Presidential Popularity from Truman
to Johnson.” Mueller’s work is usually remembered, and rightly so, for intro­
ducing such variables as the “coalition of minorities,” “economic
slump,” “war,” and “rally around the flag.” Largely forgotten, however, is
Mueller’s conclusion that any “analysis of Presidential popularity cannot
rely entirely on [these] . . . variables . . . , but must also incorporate param­
eters designed to allow for the special character of each administration.”
Mueller found that a high degree of fit could be achieved only “by allowing
the special character of each Presidential administration to be expressed in
the equation.”\textsuperscript{15} Mueller’s model thus not only left plenty of scope for presi­
dential behavior, it \textit{required} that presidential behavior be incorporated.

Rather than explore what it is that more popular presidents do to main­
tain their popularity, the dominant tendency among researchers in this field
has been to try to improve the fit between events and popularity by turning
to more refined statistical techniques. This research has shown Mueller’s
findings to be marred by statistical errors and, building upon his edifice, has
constructed superior models of the effect of events on popularity.\textsuperscript{16} But as
Richard Brody, a leading student of the determinants of presidential sup­
port, has recently pointed out, “In no study—no matter how sophisticated
the econometrics employed—is the link of the economy to evaluations of the
president at a level of strength which would justify the conclusion: ‘Now we
have the explanation, we need pursue the question no further.’ ”\textsuperscript{17}

Existing models of presidential popularity are particularly poor in ac­
counting for Dwight Eisenhower’s pattern of public support. “Only for
Eisenhower,” Samuel Kernell finds, does his “equation fail to explain a sub­
stantial share of fluctuation in his public support.” A one-percentage-point
increase in prices, for instance, lowered Eisenhower’s popularity by one per­
centage point, while reducing Lyndon Johnson’s by more than four points.\textsuperscript{18}
Similarly, Charles Ostrom and Dennis Simon find that “the economic prob­
lems of the late 1950s . . . cost President Eisenhower significantly fewer
points . . . than the penalty imposed on President Nixon for similar condi­
tions in the 1970s.”\textsuperscript{19} Because Eisenhower’s popularity was not a hostage to
events (or time), I have chosen to pay particularly close attention to his presi­
dency in evaluating the lightning rod hypothesis.

Faced with an incomplete fit between real world events and presidential
popularity (not to mention the statistical problems presented by time-series
analysis),\textsuperscript{20} a number of researchers have turned their attention to the indi­
vidual perceptions that mediate between real world events and evaluations of
presidential performance.\textsuperscript{21} The attribution of blame, these scholars have
shown, is not a reflexive response to objective events. Rather, blame is as­
signed by filtering events through a perceptual screen. This research marks
an important step away from “the assumption of automatic political blame”\textsuperscript{22} that has informed so much of the research on presidential popu­
larit.
Recognizing the contingency of blame compels one to look not only at how followers attribute responsibility but also at the "blame games" played by politicians that are geared to altering the perceptions of followers. The use of advisers as lightning rods is only one of a number of blame-avoidance strategies a president can pursue. Where the opposition party controls one or both houses of Congress, for example, presidents may try to deflect blame onto the legislative branch. Or, particularly at the outset of a term, a president might blame the previous incumbent for negative outcomes. My contention is that our understanding of the dynamics of presidential popularity can be enhanced by analyzing the process through which presidents attempt to shift blame onto others.

If the study of presidential popularity has been hampered by a neglect of how presidential behavior mediates between events and the perceptions of followers, the study of presidential subordinates has suffered from slighting advisers' interaction with the public. Members of the president's cabinet, when studied at all, are conventionally viewed as either advisers to the president or administrators of public policy. The first Hoover Commission report, for instance, observed that departmental heads have a "dual function . . . as advisers to the President, and administrators of the departments." Similarly, Leonard White writes of heads of departments as occupying the "dual position" of adviser and administrator.

For those interested in the cabinet member as adviser (or president as decision maker), the relevant topics include the extent to which a cabinet member has direct access to the president and whether the department head's advice is proffered in a formal or informal setting. Such scholars commonly contrast a "formalistic" or "bureaucratic" decision-making style, in which advice is funneled up through a formal hierarchy, with a "collegial" or "competitive" model of organization, in which advisers at every level have direct access to the president. These alternative advisory structures are compared for the range of options and quality of information with which the president is presented.

Students concerned with cabinet members as implementors (or saboteurs) of presidential policy are interested in the degree of congruence between the policies of the president and those pursued by a cabinet member. A standard question is whether members of the cabinet, because of the "many masters" they must serve—Congress, interest groups, the department itself—are "a President's natural enemies." Such scholars pay particular attention to the strategies a president may pursue to secure compliance from the department head.

Understanding a cabinet member's contribution to the formulation and execution of public policy is, of course, essential to a study of presidential-cabinet relations. But cabinet members, indeed all presidential advisers and assistants, can also be usefully studied from the perspective of how they con-
tribute to, or detract from, a president's public standing inside and outside of Washington. The adviser as lightning rod—defined as a relationship in which an unpopular adviser deflects criticism away from the president—is only one of at least four possible forms that the relationship between president, adviser, and the public may assume. The other three forms are a popular adviser bolstering a president's popularity (the adviser as asset); a popular adviser detracting from a president's popularity (the adviser as upstager); and an unpopular adviser diminishing a president's popularity (the adviser as liability).

FOUR HYPOTHESED RELATIONSHIPS

In his classic book *The President's Cabinet*, Richard Fenno hypothesizes that a prominent cabinet member adds prestige to an administration, thus boosting support for the president. Those few cabinet members who achieve prominence, Fenno argues, “add to the public confidence and public prestige which are the fundamental underpinnings of the President's success as Chief Representative of the Nation.” It is unlikely, Fenno continues, “that a Cabinet member could achieve national standing without its redounding to the net credit of the President.”

This positive-sum conception of the relationship between president and adviser treats the well-regarded adviser as an asset to the president.

An adviser's favorable reputation, however, may not necessarily bolster a president's popularity. An alternative possibility is that the favorable reputation of an adviser may be gained at the expense of the president. Many in the Johnson White House felt that Press Secretary Bill Moyers had this sort of negative-sum relationship with President Johnson. As one staffer put it: “Moyers became the White Hat and Johnson was the Black Hat. If anything good happened in the government, it was Moyers. If anything bad happened, it was Johnson.” Jim Baker's relationship with George Bush was sometimes seen in a similar negative-sum light: “If Baker is the great poohbah and savior,” comments Lynn Nofziger, “it makes George Bush look weak.” The relationship between Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger, examined in Chapter 5, provides an additional illustration of an admired adviser upstaging the president.

A third type of interaction between adviser and president is, at first glance, somewhat difficult to distinguish from the lightning rod relationship. Here the adviser attracts criticism but, rather than deflecting blame away from the president, generates dissatisfaction with the president. Reagan's interior secretary James Watt, I argue in Chapter 3, is an archetypal example of this type of adviser who so angers critics that he becomes a liability to the president.
The distinction between a liability and a lightning rod is sometimes muddied in everyday discourse by using the term "lightning rod" to indicate the attraction of controversy, shorn of its connotation of deflecting criticism. For examples, a journalist reports, "It is understandable that the White House had no desire to send an Administration bill to Congress to become the lightning rod for environmentalists' ire." At times, the term "lightning rod" seems to become virtually a synonym for liability, as, for instance, in the remark that "everyone realized that the Democrats would be unable to attack the beloved President directly, yet the combative Nixon remained a lightning rod for controversy; would it not be better to choose someone else to serve as Ike's running mate?" Reagan's first press secretary, Larry Speakes, appears to use the term in a similar fashion when he writes, "We certainly had our share of lightning rods, like Watt, who drew constant fire from the environmentalists; Ray Donovan who could never establish rapport with the labor unions; and Ted Bell over at Education. All three were decent gentlemen who were unsuited for their posts." Equally confusing is the usage of the term adopted by a conservative activist who, before the 1992 New Hampshire primary, explained that "if [Pat] Buchanan runs, then [John] Sununu is a lightning rod." Because "people [Sununu] antagonized . . . might be drawn to Buchanan," Bush needed to jettison his lightning rod and "be standing there by himself" come February.

In this book, I use the term "lightning rod" to designate not merely the attraction of criticism but the deflection of criticism away from someone or something. The term "liability" is reserved for those individuals whose actions not only engender criticism of themselves but of others. Whether an adviser is a lightning rod thus depends not only on the volume or intensity of criticism aimed at an adviser, but also on the effect that criticism has on support for the president.

PITFALLS OF A METAPHOR

To identify an adviser as a "lightning rod" is to engage in the use of metaphor. A metaphor, as defined in Webster's dictionary, is "a figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used of one thing is applied to another." Metaphor enables us to move from the familiar to the unknown. Yet there is always the danger that a metaphor may conceal as much or more than it illuminates. More precisely, the peril of taking a metaphor literally is that one confuses attributes of the analogy with attributes of reality.

To begin with, presidential advisers are not inanimate objects. They have agendas, ambitions, and aspirations that may or may not coincide with the president's. The metaphor leads one to assume that an adviser is providing
political cover for a president, but it may well be that the adviser is pursuing a policy about which the president cares little or perhaps even disagrees with. One needs therefore always to ask whether the adviser is taking the heat while pursuing the president's or his own agenda.

Just as likening advisers to lightning rods may lead one to overlook the strategic calculations of the adviser, so it may result in neglecting the strategic interests of presidential adversaries, particularly members of Congress. The metaphor presumes that the president has positioned his adviser in such a way that the adviser rather than the president absorbs the criticism. Neglected is the possibility that it is the strategic calculations of the president's political opponents that explain why the adviser rather than the president is criticized.

The costs to a congressman of attacking an unpopular president are lower than those of criticizing a popular president. As one pundit, writing about President Eisenhower, put it, "In politics, you can't kick a man when he's up." The obverse is also true. As Lyndon Johnson explained, "If some folks think a fellow is winged or crippled, they pile into him. . . . If you've got an enemy, it gives him a lot of hope." The thesis that it is the opposition's strategic interests, rather than a president's behavior, that accounts for the lighting rod phenomenon is advanced by a former member of the Eisenhower administration, who suggests: "I think whether he [Eisenhower] had delegated or not . . . it was simpler not to attack him. This made the next line fair game, and the next line was Cabinet members.

We need therefore to distinguish the "strong" lightning rod hypothesis—people attack an adviser because they believe that person is corrupting a president's good intentions—from a "weak" version of the lightning rod hypothesis—opponents, for tactical reasons of their own, criticize the adviser rather than the president. Examples of the weak lightning rod hypothesis include the assertion by a GOP pollster that Vice President George Bush "is a lightning rod for all those constituencies angry at Ronald Reagan," or journalist Robert Donovan's suggestion that Sherman Adams "has been a whipping-boy for extreme right-wing Republicans who dislike the direction in which Eisenhower is taking the party but who have found it safer to hit Adams with blows intended for the President." The weaker version submits that the lightning rod phenomenon is not only, as the metaphor implies, something constructed and manipulated by the president, but is also manipulated by an opposition trying to influence the policies of a popular president, the unintended consequence of which is to help sustain a president's popularity.

When we refer to an individual as a "lightning rod," there is a further presumption that the individual was placed there by the president with malice aforethought. The danger again is that the metaphor leads us to assume what needs to be demonstrated. A president's intentions (like those of his
opponents) must remain an empirical question. It cannot be presumed that the president is cognizant of the lightning rod phenomenon in making appointments or organizing his government. It may be, for instance, that a president chooses cabinet members with the aim of increasing the administration’s prestige (the adviser as asset), with the unintended consequence of providing highly visible members who can function as lightning rods.

Finally, literal adherence to the metaphor may obscure the costs attached to using advisers as lightning rods. Even when an adviser is pursuing policies the president approves of, one must still ask whether a president’s public detachment from a policy entails a sacrifice in the president’s effectiveness. To what extent does the president have to put himself in the line of fire to persuade others to go along with the administration’s plans? Chapter 7 addresses questions about the limits of a lightning rod strategy through an examination of the relationship between President Eisenhower and Attorney General Herbert Brownell during the battle over civil rights legislation.

PUBLIC VISIBILITY OF PRESIDENTIAL ADVISERS

Unknowns cannot function as lightning rods. If people don’t know who a president’s advisers are they can hardly blame those advisers for policies gone awry. How publicly visible, then, are a president’s cabinet and staff? The only systematic treatment of this subject, Fenno’s *The President’s Cabinet*, comes to the conclusion that “the activities of Cabinet members simply do not get reported in the public press.” If Fenno is right, then there might seem to be little point in pursuing the lightning rod hypothesis any further.

Fenno’s evidence for this contention comes from the *New York Times Index* from 1912 to 1932. During Woodrow Wilson’s administration, for instance, Fenno finds that the secretaries of agriculture, interior, commerce, and labor got their names in the *Times* an average of no more than once a week. With the exception of a single year, the same was true for the postmaster general. Their appearances on the front page were even rarer, ranging from a low of about once a year for the secretary of agriculture to a high of almost ten times a year for the attorney general. The same held true for the Republican administrations of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. Two-thirds of Hoover’s cabinet, for example, averaged less than one appearance a week in the *Times* and less than one appearance a month on the front page.

The pattern of news coverage that characterized the cabinets of Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, however, seems to be substantially lower than the coverage of “modern”—i.e., post–Franklin Roosevelt—presidents. Whereas Fenno reports that for the “outer cabinet” posts of agriculture, interior, commerce, labor, and postmaster general the norm was less than one
TABLE 1.1. Average yearly number of front-page mentions of department heads in the New York Times.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmaster General</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: The Wilson through Hoover averages are computed from data presented in Richard F. Fenno, Jr., The President’s Cabinet (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 165–66, with the exception of the number for the secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge, data for which are not presented in Fenno. The latter figure and the FDR averages have been computed by the author from the New York Times Index.

mention a week in the Times, the evidence for Franklin Roosevelt’s first two terms is startlingly different. No secretary of any of these departments averaged less than one mention a week during the first eight years of the Roosevelt administration. Indeed, only in one year (1938) did a department head (Labor Secretary Frances Perkins) average less than one mention a week. The least prominent of the six posts (commerce and agriculture) averaged close to two mentions a week, and the most prominent post (postmaster general) averaged five mentions a week. The other two (interior and labor) averaged between two and two-and-a-half mentions a year. As Table 1.1 shows, front-page stories reveal a similar contrast in coverage. The cabinet heads during the Roosevelt presidency received something in the order of a threefold increase over the coverage of cabinet heads during the preceding presidencies. Most telling of all, of the “outer cabinet” heads who served between 1912 and 1932 only Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover (1921–1928) received more coverage than the least visible of FDR’s cabinet heads.

In any event, the validity of the lightning rod hypothesis depends not on the average visibility of administration officials but rather on the visibility of a few extraordinary officials. During Roosevelt’s first term, for instance, Postmaster General James Farley got his name in the New York Times an average of 355 times a year, or almost once a day, and received a front-page mention almost once a week. During the first year of the Eisenhower administration, to take another example, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson appeared in the New York Times 274 times, an average of more than five times a week. In marked contrast to President Wilson’s secretary of agriculture, who appeared on the front page eleven times in eight years, or the secre-
TABLE 1.2. Top ten administration officials and members of Congress in television coverage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1989</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>Two-Year Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J. Baker</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheney</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quayle</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzwater</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sununu</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornburgh</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Bush</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scowcroft</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darman</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administration Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,369</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Dole</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunn</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foley</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Wright</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gingrich</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gephardt</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rostenkowski</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congressional Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,363</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated as the total number of entries in the Vanderbilt Television News Index and Abstracts.

Relative to members of Congress, moreover, top cabinet members and other high administration officials do very well in terms of media coverage. During President George Bush's first two years in office, as Table 1.2 indicates, no senator or representative received nearly as much television coverage as Secretary of State Jim Baker or Defense Secretary Dick Cheney. And the top ten administration officials easily outdistanced the top ten senators or representatives in terms of television news coverage. Indeed the ten most visible administration officials received close to twice as much coverage as the ten most visible senators and representatives.

Just because newspapers or even television news report the activities of administration officials does not, of course, mean that the public knows who these people are. Indeed, one might object to the lightning rod hypothesis, in so far as it pertains to the mass public, on the grounds that it re-
TABLE 1.3. Public awareness of administration officials (in percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dulles</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durkin</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownell</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodge</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benson</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>83</td>
<td></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphrey</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summerfield</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKay</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobby</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stassen</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seaton</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folsom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Opinion Research Corporation; data provided by Roper Center. The question was, Which of these members of the present administration have you heard or read about?

requires an unrealistic degree of political knowledge on the part of the general public and thus ignores decades of public opinion research demonstrating minimal public awareness of the political realm. As Richard Neustadt warns, "One never should underestimate the public's power to ignore, to acquiesce, and to forget, especially when the proceedings seem incalculable or remote from private life." Any thesis that requires most people, most of the time, to be informed and concerned about politics is unlikely to be valid.

Equally vital, though, is the need to differentiate "the" public. As Neustadt himself recognizes, "the presidential public is actually an aggregate of publics as diverse and overlapping as the claims Americans and allied peoples press on Washington." In thinking about lightning rods, it is essential to be clear about which of these diverse publics one has in mind. To function as a lightning rod, an administration official must be known to the subpopulation that is antagonized by an administration policy. The relevant population for evaluating whether a secretary of agriculture has served as a presidential lightning rod, for instance, is probably the subpopulation of farmers rather than the population as a whole.

Just as one cannot reduce the public to an undifferentiated, and largely apathetic, ill-informed mass, one cannot regard all administration officials other than the president as equally unknown to the public. As suggested earlier, press coverage of administration officials varies dramatically, and as a
result so too does public awareness of administration officials. In Eisen­
hower's administration, for instance, anywhere from 80 to 95 percent of the
public ordinarily claimed to have heard or read about Secretary of State
John Foster Dulles, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, and Secre­
tary of Defense Charles Wilson. In a totally different category, as Table 1.3
shows, were the likes of Interior Secretary Douglas McKay or Commerce
Secretary Sinclair Weeks. Only about a third of the population even claimed
to have heard of either of these two cabinet secretaries. In evaluating the va­
-lidity of the lightning rod thesis, at least at the mass public level, we need not
concern ourselves with how little is known of the least prominent officials
but instead should focus on those extraordinary few who are highly visible
and well known.

In the next two chapters, I examine two of the most prominent and con­
troversial cabinet members in recent history—Reagan's first secretary of the
interior, James Watt, and Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture, Ezra Taft
Benson. In comparing the tenures of these two men, I show how one might
distinguish a presidential lightning rod from a liability, and I identify some
of the conditions necessary for an adviser to deflect blame away from the
president.