Presidential Lightning Rods
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Any exploration of the lightning rod phenomenon must begin with the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. No modern president has maintained such high levels of popularity for so long, and no modern president has so successfully insulated himself from bad news and controversy. In a tremendously influential book, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader*, political scientist Fred Greenstein argues that Eisenhower's success in insulating himself from the day-to-day controversies of his administration was a direct result of his “hidden-hand” leadership style, which kept “the controversial political side of the presidential role largely covert” and accentuated his role as “an uncontroversial head of state.” A key component of Eisenhower's hidden-hand style, as described by Greenstein, was his use of advisers as lightning rods to take the heat on controversial policies.

That President Eisenhower thought in terms of lightning rods and the deflection of blame onto subordinates is suggested by the much-quoted recollection of Press Secretary James Hagerty. According to Hagerty: “President Eisenhower would say, ‘Do it this way.’ I would say, ‘If I go to that press conference and say what you want me to say, I would get hell.’ With that he would smile, get up and walk around the desk, pat me on the back and say, ‘My boy, better you than me.’” In a similar vein, Attorney General Herbert Brownell recalls Eisenhower telling him in their first official meeting: “It’s your responsibility, you know, as well as your authority. Now if anything goes wrong, you know who’s going to get it, don’t you.” And Emmet Hughes, a speech writer for President Eisenhower, recounts a conversation late in 1957 in which Eisenhower defended keeping John Foster Dulles as secretary of state: “People just don’t like the personality of Foster’s, while they do like me... I know what they say about Foster—dull, duller, Dulles—and all that. But the Democrats love to hit him rather than me.”

The crux of Eisenhower's leadership strategy was to allow trusted cabinet
members significant autonomy in formulating and administering policy. By delegating the authority to make decisions, Eisenhower hoped also to delegate responsibility for the results of those decisions, thereby allowing him to maintain a noncontroversial or nonpolitical public profile. That Eisenhower understood this connection is clear from his underlining of a passage in Arthur Krock’s memoirs critical of President Lyndon Johnson’s leadership style. Krock wrote (and Eisenhower underlined): “Johnson, as much as any president in our history, has closely identified himself and his office with the disasters, foreign and domestic, economic and social, into which the United States has become more and more deeply involved in his time. . . . [A] source of this close identification with all acts, policies and thorny situations is a passion to control every function of government, though subordinates are always available in profusion to take the gaff.”

Foremost among the Eisenhower administration lightning rods Greenstein identifies is Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson. “Farmers who rankled at the moves toward decreasing subsidization of agriculture,” Greenstein suggests, “blamed the zealous Mormon elder, Ezra Taft Benson . . . not Eisenhower.” The claim is suggestive, even plausible, but Greenstein provides no evidence to support it. That Benson was the target of heated criticism by farmers is beyond doubt to anyone familiar with the period, but that Benson deflected blame away Eisenhower is far from self-evident. Indeed the conventional wisdom among press and politicians during the 1950s was that Benson was a damaging liability for President Eisenhower. Farm-belt congressmen complained constantly that Benson undermined farmers’ confidence in Eisenhower. Many on the White House staff shared this view of Benson as a political liability, and it was frequently repeated by journalists and academics. Writing in the closing years of the Eisenhower administration, Richard Fenno, to take one prominent example, asserted that “more than any other member of the Eisenhower Cabinet, [Benson] has been a political liability.”

How might one mediate between these rival claims? How is one to determine whether Benson was a liability or a lightning rod? The question is important for how one judges the quality of Eisenhower’s leadership. If Benson was a liability, Eisenhower’s decision to retain Benson throughout his two terms seems to indicate incredible political naiveté if not obtuseness. If Benson was a lightning rod, that same decision seems to be evidence of devilish cleverness. In answering the question of whether Benson served as a lightning rod, this chapter (1) examines available survey evidence of farmers’ opinions in the 1950s, (2) compares these survey results with farm surveys taken in later administrations, (3) investigates elites’ reaction to Benson’s tenure, and (4) looks at Eisenhower and Benson’s behind-the-scenes relationship. The aim of this intensive examination of the Eisenhower-Benson
relationship is both to judge the validity and utility of the lightning rod construct and to gauge the effectiveness of Eisenhower's leadership.

EISENHOWER, BENSON, AND THE FARMERS

When Eisenhower entered the presidency, he inherited an agricultural system that established price supports at 90 percent of parity (a government-set "fair" price) for six basic crops: wheat, corn, cotton, tobacco, peanuts, and rice. Established during World War II to boost food production, price supports quickly became seen as the farmers' due. As the supply of crops increased (a result of technological innovations as well as government subsidies), the price of crops fell. The further prices fell, the more crops government had to buy at 90 percent of the parity price. For the government, declining prices meant storing immense surpluses that were difficult to unload without further depressing agricultural prices (by 1954 the government had enough wheat and cotton and other crops to supply the market for a full year); for taxpayers it meant increasing subsidies for farmers; and for farmers declining prices meant economic hardship.

Eisenhower's long-term objective was to restore a free market in farm products; his short-term goal was more modest—to reduce price supports by instituting a flexible system of payments ranging from 75 percent to 90 percent of the parity price. But even such modest reforms brought howls of protest from farm-state congressmen and important agricultural groups. Agricultural interests' unhappiness over the specific reforms proposed by the Eisenhower administration was exacerbated by the prolonged downturn in farm prices. In contrast to the national economy as a whole, which was relatively favorable for Eisenhower most of the time, the farm economy remained a trouble spot throughout the 1950s.

Given the state of the agricultural economy and the administration's chosen course it is not surprising that Secretary Benson would be, as Chief of Staff Sherman Adams described him, "the most unpopular and the most harshly criticized figure in the Cabinet." What is surprising is that by and large President Eisenhower remained remarkably popular among farmers. Surveys of farmers conducted during the 1950s strongly support Greenstein's contention that Benson's unpopularity among farmers did not translate into disapproval of Eisenhower. A substantial proportion of farmers, these polls show, simultaneously liked Ike and disapproved of the performance of Secretary Benson.

A Gallup poll taken at the outset of 1958, for instance, found that two-thirds of farmers approved of Eisenhower, while slightly less than 30 percent approved of Benson. Among those farmers who held an opinion about both Benson and Eisenhower (three-fourths of the sample), moreover, more than
two in five combined disapproval of Benson with approval of Eisenhower. A similar discrepancy between attitudes toward Eisenhower and attitudes toward Benson shows up in surveys of farmers at the state level.

A particularly rich source of farmers' opinions during the Eisenhower years are the surveys of Iowa farmers conducted by Wallace's Farmer, which periodically asked farmers to evaluate the performance of President Eisenhower and Secretary Benson on a scale of "good," "fair," or "poor." In none of these polls did more than 14 percent of Iowa farmers judge Eisenhower's performance as poor, while, in contrast, no more than 15 percent ever rated Benson's performance as good.

In the fall of 1953, 88 percent of Iowa farmers judged the president's performance as either good or fair, while only 8 percent gave the president a poor rating. In contrast, 33 percent believed the secretary was doing a poor job. By the end of 1954, only 3 percent of Iowa farmers judged Eisenhower to be doing a poor job, compared with 28 percent who believed Benson's performance was poor. Close to 60 percent rated Eisenhower's performance good, while only 15 percent were willing to give the same grade to the secretary of agriculture.

Although discontent among Iowa farmers increased as farm prices fell, the disparity between attitudes toward Eisenhower and Benson remained large. In the summer of 1957, for instance, 55 percent believed the secretary was doing a poor job, while only 14 percent rendered the same judgment about the president. More than 80 percent believed the president was doing either a good or fair job, while only one-third of the sample would say the same about Benson. A poll conducted the following summer revealed almost precisely the same pattern of support.

Another survey, conducted less than a month before the 1958 midterm elections, found that only 8 percent of Iowa farmers believed Eisenhower was doing a poor job, compared with 44 percent who disapproved of Benson's performance. Fifty-five percent believed the president was doing a good job, and only 13 percent gave the secretary of agriculture the same high mark. Moreover, of the 88 percent who had an opinion about both Eisenhower and Benson, two-thirds gave Eisenhower a higher rating than they gave Benson, one-third judged the performances of Eisenhower and Benson the same, and less than 1 percent viewed Benson more positively than Eisenhower.

These surveys suggest that Benson's popularity among farmers was highly susceptible to changes in the farm situation. This connection did not go unnoticed by Benson, who lamented "the discouraging correlation between the level of farm prices and my level of popularity." When prices fell, elite demands for Benson's resignation increased and his popularity among farmers fell. What is remarkable is that Eisenhower's popularity among farmers re-
mained relatively impervious to changes in Benson's popularity or drops in prices.

Eisenhower's relative insulation from farmers' distress is particularly evident in a special survey of midwestern farm households conducted by Gallup in the spring of 1956, which found that although 76 percent believed farmers were worse off than they had been a few years ago, 62 percent still expressed approval of Eisenhower's performance. The widespread perception that the farmers' situation had deteriorated during Eisenhower's first term was evidently blamed on Benson, who received only a 32 percent approval rating.22

These surveys tend to belie one farmer's confident report that "those that had a good year are still all for Ike, and those who didn't ain't."23 Instead what they show is that although attitudes toward Benson were closely tied to the state of the farm economy, attitudes toward Eisenhower were relatively independent of conditions on the farm.

BLOCK, BERGLAND, AND BUTZ

The extraordinary nature of the Eisenhower-Benson pattern can be more fully appreciated by contrasting it with farmers' attitudes toward the recent administrations of Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford. Surveys of farm opinion taken during these three presidencies suggest that, by and large, farmers tend not to distinguish much between the secretary of agriculture and the president.24

Among Iowa farmers, for instance, the popularity of President Reagan and Secretary of Agriculture John Block closely coincided. Throughout the first term, both Reagan and Block were approved of by a modest majority of Iowa farmers. At no point was the percentage of farmers who disapproved of the two men more than three percentage points apart.25 In the opening year of the second term, as discontent rose sharply, Iowa farmers soured on both Block and Reagan. By January 1986, 61 percent of farmers disapproved of Block's performance and 56 percent disapproved of Reagan's.26

In Illinois, Block's home state, both Block and Reagan were well liked during the first term, but to the extent that there was a discrepancy in attitudes toward the two, Block tended to be less unpopular than Reagan. On average, about 5 or 6 percent more Illinois farmers disapproved of Reagan than disapproved of Block.27 Indiana farmers showed a similar tendency during the first term to evaluate both Block and Reagan positively, with Reagan's unpopularity running, on average, a few points lower than Block's.

Neither Carter nor his secretary of agriculture, Bob Bergland, were very popular among farmers, but to the extent that a divergence of opinion existed, Bergland tended to be less unpopular than his beleaguered chief.
Among Iowa farmers, for instance, Carter's disapproval rating averaged about 47 percent, almost 7 percent higher than disapproval of Bergland. Similarly, averaging the results from Illinois polls shows that slightly more than half of Illinois farmers expressed disapproval of Carter, while Bergland's unpopularity was roughly 5 percentage points lower. Among Indiana farmers, the average disapproval rating of Carter was 47 percent, and for Bergland 40 percent.

In the case of Gerald Ford and his secretary of agriculture, Earl Butz, surveys again suggest a tight coupling of farmer attitudes toward the president and secretary of agriculture, with a slight tendency toward greater disapproval of the president than the secretary. Averaging the four Illinois polls taken in 1975 and 1976 reveals that virtually the same number of Illinois farmers disapproved of Butz (27 percent) as disapproved of Ford (28 percent). Indiana farmers tended to express slightly higher levels of dissatisfaction with Ford's performance (32 percent), while only 26 percent said they disapproved of Butz.

In comparing the attitudes of farmers toward the Reagan, Carter, and Ford administrations with those toward the Eisenhower presidency, the most striking feature is the extent to which farmers' evaluations of the president and the agriculture secretary are joined in the case of these other three presidents and divorced in the case of Eisenhower. There was sometimes as much as a 40 (and never less than 20) percent difference between disapproval of Benson and disapproval of Eisenhower. In contrast, Reagan, Carter, and Ford rarely had disapproval ratings that were more than five or six percentage points lower than the secretary's and, more often than not, the president's disapproval rating was actually higher than that of the secretary's.

BLAMING BENSON FIRST

Farmers did not connect Eisenhower with Benson in large part because elites either did not perceive or were reluctant, for strategic reasons of their own, to make such a connection. The message farmers consistently received from opinion leaders was that it was Benson, and not Eisenhower, who was responsible for declining farm prices and the reduction of price supports.

In the halls of Congress, Benson was routinely blamed for any number of maladies that afflicted the farmer, while Eisenhower usually went unmentioned or was absolved from blame. Typical in this respect was a Senate resolution submitted by Texas Democrat Ralph Yarborough, which stated that it was the sense of the Senate that the secretary of agriculture should be fired because his "oppressive policies . . . have failed." The sixteen-point resolution asserted, among other things, that "Mr. Ezra Taft Benson has depressed the prices received by farmers, . . . stirred up economic civil war between
producer groups of different farm commodities, . . . [and] tried to eliminate the small family-type farm in America." This indictment was characteristic of anti-Benson sentiment in that it (1) blamed Benson for falling farm prices, (2) portrayed Benson as a heartless enemy of the family farmer, (3) identified the administration's farm policies as Benson's policies, and (4) made no mention of President Eisenhower.

Although few believed, as one congressman did, that Benson was "evil personified," many were convinced that the secretary was unsympathetic to the small farmer's plight. Benson's public image as a heartless ideologue, who lacked sympathy for small farmers, can be seen in Missouri Senator Thomas Hennings's complaint that "no relief, or even sincere sympathy, can be expected from the Department of Agriculture by farmers who face drought disaster," as well as in Montana Democrat James Murray's plaint that "Secretary Benson's administration of farm programs has been uniformly callous and heartless." In the words of South Dakota Republican Francis Case, "The great difficulty which Mr. Benson has had all along has been to persuade the farmers that he has been on their side." Many critics found it only a short step from the view that Benson didn't care about declining prices to the view that the secretary's policies were actually designed to bring about lower prices. Senator Hubert Humphrey, for instance, argued that it was "Benson's deliberate objective . . . to force farm prices down." Benson, Humphrey concluded, had "not merely mismanaged our Nation's farm programs; he has deliberately wrecked them." Others accused Benson of pursuing policies that were aimed at "driving the farmer off the land," while still others attacked him for being "dedicated to the creation of a scarcity of food."

Listening to some congressmen, one could come away with the impression that it was Benson's administration. The maverick senator from Oregon, Wayne Morse, declared that "more than a million farmers have left the farms since Benson came into power in 1953, and under his policies American agriculture will continue to be depressed." The time has come, Morse concluded, to "repudiate the Benson program." When Eisenhower's name was drawn into the debate, usually because of some presidential action such as a veto, his decisions were often attributed to the "bad advice" of Secretary Benson. For instance, after Eisenhower vetoed the "freeze bill" (so called because it would have frozen all price supports for the coming year at 1957 levels), William Proxmire told his colleagues that he was sure that "the motives of the President are excellent. I have always assumed this to be true. . . . He is, of course, interested in the welfare of farmers. But the President of the United States . . . is ill-advised." Yarborough concurred with this view, recalling that he had "served under the President in the European theatre during the war. I admire him as a great leader, and also
personally. . . . If he knew what was going on at the economic front, we
would have had his signature of approval instead of his veto." 42

Even Hubert Humphrey, one of the most vocal and partisan critics of ad­
ministration farm policy, for the first few years blamed Benson and not
Eisenhower for administration decisions. 43 After the reduction of price sup­
ports for dairy products from 90 percent to 75 percent of parity, for instance,
Humphrey called upon the president, "who is a good man, a considerate
man, to reconsider the action which has been taken by his Secretary." Pref­
acing his remarks with the observation that "the people of my state. . .
have high regard and true affection for the President," Humphrey pleaded
that "if my voice could reach the White House this afternoon. . . . I would
ask him [Eisenhower] not to permit one of his agents, one of his department
heads, to disavow a pledge which the President made to the people of my
state and to the people of the Nation." 44

The heavily Democratic National Farmers Union, although not above
taking swipes at Eisenhower, reserved the great preponderance of its consid­
erable venom for Benson, whom they vilified as "the chief advocate of the
farmer’s oppressors, . . . the major instrument in the efforts to destroy the
farmers’ programs, [and] . . . the chief prophet of the ideology which has
been constructed to rationalize the oppression and doom of independent
family-scale agriculture." In contrast, "President Eisenhower’s role in the
farm situation is primarily innocent," suggested the editor of the Farmers
Union’s Washington Newsletter. "Ike neither knows nor cares much about
what is going on in agriculture." 45

The belief that Eisenhower was not paying much attention to what Ben­
son was doing is evident in a cable the newly elected Senator Proxmire sent
to President Eisenhower. Proxmire called on Eisenhower “to take immediate
action to replace Ezra Taft Benson as secretary of agriculture. Secretary
Benson’s unwise and unsound policies have brought many American farm
families close to ruin.” 46 How was this belief that Benson rather than Eisen­
hower was responsible for the administration's farm policies sustained? The
answer lies in Eisenhower’s capacity to be different things to different people
as well as in his willingness to delegate authority.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING AMBIGUOUS

To sustain a successful lightning rod a president must keep his intentions
ambiguous, thereby allowing opponents to believe that if the president paid
closer attention he might behave differently than the overly zealous aide.
Eisenhower succeeded in keeping his intentions ambiguous enough for
farmers to feel that, despite Benson’s policies, the president was on their
side.
Eisenhower projected an image to farmers that was sharply at variance with the image projected by Benson. While Benson went around the country preaching the virtues of self-reliance and free markets and his unalterable opposition to programs that foster dependence on government, Eisenhower's public statements on agriculture tended to "muddle through." Consider, for instance, the contrast between the president's first annual message to Congress, which promised that "the Secretary of Agriculture and his associates will . . . execute the present act faithfully and thereby seek to mitigate the consequences of the downturn in farm income," and Benson's "General Statement on Agricultural Policy," issued only a few days later at his first press conference. In a sweeping statement of first principles, Benson declared:

Too many Americans are calling on Washington to do for them what they should be willing to do for themselves. . . . It is doubtful if any man can be politically free who depends upon the state for sustenance. A completely planned and subsidized economy weakens initiative, discourages industry, destroys character and demoralizes the people. . . . The principles of economic freedom are applicable to farm problems. . . . Farmers should not be placed in a position of working for government bounty rather than producing for a free market.

Eisenhower's public statements on agriculture avoided the doctrinaire attacks on the dangers of government intervention in the marketplace that characterized many of Benson's speeches. Typical in this respect was Eisenhower's first agricultural address, which came in October 1953 at the annual convention of the Future Farmers of America. In the speech, Eisenhower stressed his affinity with, and sympathy for, the small family farmer. He reminded his audience of young farmers that he "worked on the farm during my boyhood in Abilene, some 160 miles west of here," "grew up among farmers," and currently owned a farm in Pennsylvania. The president stressed that he understood and was "deeply concerned" with the problems facing farm people who had been hurt by the "economic grinding machine" of declining prices and rising costs. Eisenhower talked up the invaluable role the federal government was playing in helping cattle farmers of the Southwest survive the drought and assured his audience that "the federal government is continuing, and will continue as long as necessary, to assist in meeting the misfortunes of our people, in the drought areas." The president artfully fuzzed over the "extremely complex" question of price supports by vowing that his administration would propose no program "that fails to provide solidly for the national interest by continuing prosperity in American agriculture." "All of us know," he concluded reassuringly, "that the price support principle must be a part of any future farm program."
This speech might lead one to conclude that Eisenhower disagreed with the free-market message his secretary of agriculture was spreading to farm groups across the country. But that conclusion would be erroneous. Indeed, in the early stages of the formulation of this very speech, Eisenhower had rebuked Republican National Chairman Leonard Hall, telling him, "I don't believe for a minute the farmer wants the government to be his boss." In his memoirs, Eisenhower unambiguously endorsed "the fight to free the farmers and make the agricultural industry more responsive to the competitive market."

Although Eisenhower and Benson were in agreement about the need to get government out of agriculture, Eisenhower was attuned to the need to devise policies that would allow the president to appear as a defender of the small farmer. Meeting with Benson, during the president's convalescence at Fitzsimmons Hospital in the fall of 1955, Eisenhower insisted on the need to show that "we are sympathetically concerned with the [farm] situation." This desire to project his sympathy for the plight of the small family farm led Eisenhower to champion the Soil Bank program.

In meetings with farm leaders and farm-belt congressmen, Eisenhower succeeded in conveying an impression of compassion and sympathy that contrasted with the heartless, close-minded image projected by Benson. Minnesota Republican Senator Edward Thye, for instance, tells of meeting with Benson to protest the secretary's decision to lower dairy price supports and finding that Benson "paid no attention" to his pleas. In contrast to Benson, who "you could sense . . . wasn't sympathetic to your views," Thye recalls that "once you reached the President, and he became aware that you may be right and his administrators wrong, he was as positive as, you might say, a rocket on the target."

A similar tale is related by the master of the National Grange, Herschel D. Newsom. "I knew darn well," Newsom reports, "that basically, philosophically, he [Eisenhower] wanted to do what the Grange wanted to do." Eisenhower fed this impression, telling Newsom after one meeting: "Well, frankly Herschel, I think I find no disagreement with your philosophy and it sounds to me as though the Grange has worked out some mechanics pretty well. Now you go talk to Ezra." The obstacle, in Newsom's view, was that Benson was stubbornly committed to a rigid, free-market ideology, and Eisenhower, because of his "military philosophy," was unwilling to go over the head of his political lieutenants.

Another Benson critic and Eisenhower admirer, North Dakota Senator Milton Young, recalled a debate over wheat price supports, in which he and other farm-state congressmen were pushing for full parity while Secretary Benson urged low price supports. Eisenhower, Young reported, "finally settled it himself by setting it at $2 a bushel." To Young, this scene showed that on farm policy Eisenhower was not "nearly as conservative as secretary Ben-
son” and that in contrast to Benson, whom Young described as “stubborn,” “immovable as a rock,” and “irritating,” Eisenhower was “tolerant” and “considerate.” By casting himself as the compassionate conciliator and Benson as the heartless ideologue, Eisenhower was able to shift criticism onto Benson while still pursuing his goal of reducing price-support payments for farmers.

In meetings with congressional leaders, Eisenhower let Benson defend the administration’s position. On one such occasion, House Minority Leader Joe Martin and ranking Republican of the House Agricultural Committee William Hill came to the White House to press for a softening of the administration’s position on reducing price supports for dairy products. According to Benson, after Martin and Hill made their appeal, “the President looked at me and again, for the umpteenth time, I had to say no.” By deferring to Benson’s “expert” judgment, Eisenhower shifted congressional resentment onto the secretary.

Periodically, however, Eisenhower found it necessary to defend his secretary of agriculture publicly in order to maintain Benson’s effectiveness. Defending a subordinate in the face of demands for that individual’s resignation threatens to undermine the lightning rod relationship by making it more difficult for others to believe that significant policy differences exist between the leader and adviser. If a president is to sustain the adviser as lightning rod, he must defend the adviser in a way that leads critics to believe that the decision to retain the adviser is based on grounds other than agreement on policy.

This is precisely what Eisenhower tried to do. He defended Benson without identifying himself with Benson’s policy positions. Typical were Eisenhower’s comments at a 1958 news conference, in which the president defended Benson on the grounds that “when we find a man of this dedication, this kind of courage, this kind of intellectual and personal honesty, we should say to ourselves, ‘We just don’t believe that America has come to the point where it wants to dispense with the services of that kind of a person.’” An even more masterful combination of firmly defending Benson’s character while still distancing himself from Benson’s policies can be seen in Eisenhower’s response to Minnesota Senator Edward Thye’s call for Benson’s dismissal. Eisenhower wrote:

Naturally I am not unaware of your strong feelings in this matter; yet it seems to me that upon reflection you will concede to Mr. Benson not merely the right but more importantly the obligation vigorously to set forth the programs and concepts which, in his best judgment, are essential to the well being of our farm people. It is my opinion that if he failed to do so, he would be derelict in his responsibility, and though so
doing may understandably create some difficulties, I hardly see how he could effectively carry out his responsibilities in any other manner.\(^{59}\)

Judging by the explanations that key figures, including Thye, later gave for the president’s decision to retain Benson, it would appear that Eisenhower was successful in defending Benson in a way that allowed him to maintain a sense of distance between himself and Benson’s farm policies. Some years after the end of the Eisenhower administration, Thye was asked during an interview why he thought the president resisted calls from congressmen and farm leaders to fire Benson. Thye responded by telling the interviewer that he believed that Eisenhower thought: “I’ve delegated you as Secretary of Agriculture. It’s your responsibility to administer that office, and I’m not going to interfere with you.” This attitude, Thye reasoned, was probably leftover from Ike’s military training.\(^{60}\)

Even more revealing is the explanation that North Dakota Senator Milton Young, one of Benson’s most vocal congressional critics, gave in answer to the same question. Young attributed the decision to retain Benson to Eisenhower’s “lack of experience in political life.” As a result, Young explained, Eisenhower was not “as familiar as most Presidents are with . . . the problems that arise from having Cabinet officials who have a different political philosophy than you have.” Furthermore, Young suggested that Eisenhower was “a very tolerant, kindly, considerate person, [not] . . . the kind that would . . . fire someone . . . if he disagreed with him.”\(^{61}\) Thus despite publicly supporting Benson, Eisenhower persuaded key elites that Benson and Eisenhower disagreed on farm policy.

THE STRUGGLE OVER PRESIDENTIAL INVOLVEMENT

Although Benson was relatively successful at deflecting blame away from the president, uncritical acceptance of the lightning rod metaphor can obscure important questions about Eisenhower’s strategy and Benson’s role. Cabinet members are not inert objects, as the lightning rod metaphor implies, but strategic actors with objectives of their own. They may welcome the autonomy that delegation brings and willingly absorb the blame for unpopular policies, but they may also periodically require a president’s public backing if they are to achieve their policy objectives. The president’s need to distance himself from day-to-day controversies can thus conflict with the cabinet member’s need to draw the president into the political fray.

Eisenhower was quite content for Benson to be “on the front lines, taking the blows,”\(^{62}\) but Benson was not always so content to have Eisenhower maintain his distance from policy disputes. In his memoirs, Benson notes
that from the outset "it was evident that the President expected to choose his men, give them sufficient authority, and let them work out proposed solutions to their problems which he could either approve or reject." While conceding this to be "good executive procedure," Benson believed that "in the case of agriculture the strength of the opposition and its readiness to do battle indicated that we needed the support of a President who himself had strong policy convictions. . . . Even the President's sympathetic understanding would not be enough; we had to have fighting support" (emphasis in original). If opponents succeeded in portraying the president and himself as divided, Benson realized that "our farm proposals would die of political malnutrition."63

Benson was consequently engaged in a continuous tug-of-war with members of the White House staff, who wanted to keep a safe distance between the president and Benson, over the public visibility of the president.64 Typical of such wrangling was the struggle over the form in which the 1954 agricultural message should be delivered to Congress. The administration's proposal to abandon the fixed price supports established during World War II in favor of flexible supports was bound to create intense opposition. Desiring to maximize the distance between the president and controversy, some members of the White House staff wanted to have the department send up an agricultural message, accompanied only by a covering letter from the president. Benson insisted that the president should send the agricultural message, believing it was essential that we "get it across to Congress and the country that this wasn't a Benson recommendation, but an Eisenhower program." Benson explained to the president that "this message must be yours with no attachments. There should be one program—the administration's program, with no Benson plan." Eisenhower eventually relented and decided to do it Benson's way.65

Although the agricultural message was sent to Capitol Hill over the president's signature, Eisenhower managed to maintain some public distance from the program by having Benson hold a press conference immediately afterward to explain the proposals. The following day, the New York Times carried the text of the message accompanied by a picture not of the president but of Secretary Benson defending the message at the news conference.66 Benson's public profile was further heightened by an extensive speaking tour he undertook to sell the administration's farm program.67 With Benson having "carried the ball on farm policy,"68 it is hardly surprising that friends and foes alike commonly referred to the administration's program as "Secretary Benson's farm program."

Although wary about drawing too close to Benson's agricultural policies,69 Eisenhower also recognized that if he wanted to achieve his objective of reducing federal government involvement in agriculture he would periodically have to weigh in on the side of his farm program. Although Eisenhower
carefully meted out his public involvement, he occasionally did assent to Benson's requests for public presidential backing. When things looked bleak for the administration's 1954 farm program, for example, Eisenhower consented to go on television to make a public appeal for the administration's bill.\(^70\)

Without the president's public support for the 1954 program, it would undoubtedly, as Benson foresaw, have gone down to defeat. At the same time, more overt activity on the part of Eisenhower also opened him up to criticism from the opposition. The trade-off between policy objectives and personal popularity can be seen in congressional reaction to the president's vetoes of agricultural legislation.

### AVOIDING THE VETO

In general, Eisenhower used the veto relatively sparingly (at least before 1958), particularly considering that for six years of his eight-year tenure both houses of Congress were controlled by the opposition party.\(^71\) His reluctance to exercise the veto power was consistent with a leadership strategy aimed at keeping the president off the firing line. A veto threatens to undermine a lightning rod strategy by placing the president prominently and unambiguously on the front lines.\(^72\)

Eisenhower's first veto of agricultural legislation did not occur until the spring of 1956. The Democrats, with at least one eye on the upcoming presidential election, had attached more than one hundred amendments to the administration's farm bill, many of which demanded a rigid 90 percent parity.\(^73\) Eisenhower followed the advice of Secretary Benson and vetoed a bill that the president considered "less a piece of farm legislation than a private relief bill for politicians."\(^74\)

Congressional Democrats immediately jumped on the president's veto as evidence that it was Eisenhower, and not just Benson, who was responsible for the administration's farm policy. Oklahoma Senator Robert Kerr, in typically extravagant language, declared:

No longer can any outraged American say that Eisenhower is not to blame for the farm policy of this administration. . . . Mr. Benson has a great many skirts, . . . but Ike can no longer hide behind them. The mask of hypocrisy has been stripped, and now he must stand forth in the full glitter of the shining truth that he is the implementor and architect of this farm policy. The nails that have been driven into the farmer's hands, the cross upon which he is being crucified, may have been furnished by Benson, but the hammer that drove those nails into the farmer's hands was wielded by the hand of Eisenhower. The hand
that placed the crown of thorns upon the farmer's head was the hand of Eisenhower.\textsuperscript{75}

Senator Allen Ellender, a Democrat from Louisiana, hammered away, although in a more restrained manner, at the same theme: "Heredofore Secretary of Agriculture Benson has been blamed for the present depressed plight of our agriculture, but now the farmers of the country will blame the President. They have no other alternative."\textsuperscript{76} Hubert Humphrey, too, believed the veto exposed the reality that "it is Mr. Eisenhower's farm program, not poor Benson's. It is Mr. Eisenhower who is responsible."\textsuperscript{77} South Carolina Senator Olin Johnston also felt himself "dutybound to take the President of the United States to task for his veto." He denounced Eisenhower for having "completely broken his word and faith with the farmers of the Nation." Eisenhower, Johnston concluded, had become "totally infected with the disease of the Republican Party that has plagued the little people of this country since the first Republican drew breath."\textsuperscript{78}

Democratic efforts to pin the blame on Eisenhower failed, however, because Eisenhower, in a nationally televised address, took advantage of his above-politics image to persuade farmers that the blame lay with Congress for passing a "bad bill" that he had "no choice" but to veto.\textsuperscript{79} His success in defining the bill as a political "hodge-podge" that was bad for the country was revealed by a subsequent Gallup poll of midwestern farmers, which showed that fewer than three in ten respondents disapproved of the president's veto.\textsuperscript{80} Although Eisenhower had come through the incident relatively unscathed, the veto had left him more exposed to personal criticism than he preferred.\textsuperscript{81}

Two years later, when Benson again recommended a presidential veto, this time of the "freeze bill," Eisenhower expressed exasperation with his secretary. Although Eisenhower decided to back Benson's decision, he was clearly upset that Benson was forcing him back onto an exposed stage. To White House aides, Eisenhower complained that he was "unhappy and irritated" about the position Benson had placed him in, and he told them that he "hated to veto the bill" because "his action would be taken as 'kicking the farmer in the teeth.'"\textsuperscript{82} When Benson sent a letter to the president setting out the reasons why the legislation should be rejected,\textsuperscript{83} Eisenhower sent back a testy reply reminding Benson that "there is little need for you to enumerate again all of the advantages both of us believe should result from our present farm program. I am not only familiar with these but have time and time again supported them publicly." Eisenhower went on to give Benson a lengthy lecture on politics, recalling the aphorisms: "Never lose the good in seeking too long for the best," or as some say it "The best is always the enemy of the good." "In future," Eisenhower advised, "we should avoid ad-
advanced positions of inflexibility. We must have some room for maneuver, or we shall suffer for it." 84

LIGHTNING RODS HAVE PREFERENCES TOO

The preceding exchange, and others like it, 85 suggest that although Eisenhower and Benson were in agreement on the general direction of farm policy, Benson was not simply doing Eisenhower's bidding. If it was true, as Eisenhower told Benson, that "you and I rarely, if ever, had any difference of conviction as to the basic principles we should follow in our attempt to establish the proper relationship between the government and agriculture," 86 it was also true that the two often had significantly different views about the pace of change.

The difference between the president and secretary manifested itself immediately after Eisenhower's election in a debate over whether price supports should be maintained at their current level until the current law expired in 1954, or whether flexible supports should instead be instituted immediately. Believing that his campaign pledge obligated him to maintain price supports for at least a year, Eisenhower refused to follow Benson's recommendation that fixed price supports be abandoned right away. 87 The same conflict over the pace of change was evident in a dispute in the summer of 1954 concerning the appropriate level for wheat price supports. At a meeting with legislative leaders, Benson suggested that

the impact [of a drop to 75 percent] would be softened by virtue of the fact that the price for wheat is now at 82 percent of parity rather than the theoretical 90 percent and that the drop to 75 percent would thus be limited to merely 7 percent. The President refused to accept that reasoning and called attention to the important psychological factor involved in dropping the formula's upper level from 90 percent to 75 percent. 88

In both of these cases Eisenhower overruled Benson. But at other times, Benson's preference for more rapid change won out, as, for instance, when he decided at the outset of 1954 to reduce dairy price supports from 90 percent to 75 percent. This action, although consistent with Eisenhower's general position of reducing price supports, moved more precipitously than Eisenhower thought wise. In a private letter to his long-time friend Swede Hazlett, Eisenhower confessed that "I personally think that the Secretary of Agriculture made a mistake in failing to take smaller bites." 89

Other elites sensed this difference between Eisenhower's emphasis on gradual reductions in price supports and Benson's preference for more sweeping changes. August Andresen, a Republican congressman from Min-
nesota, wrote to Eisenhower that he believed "the recent action of Secretary Benson to lower the support price on dairy products from 90 percent to 75 percent . . . was a terrible mistake. It was anticipated," Andresen continued, "that the Secretary of Agriculture would follow your suggestion by making a gradual reduction in the support price rather than to go the full limit allowed by law." In a similar vein, Herschel Newsom, master of the National Grange, praised Eisenhower's call for gradual reduction of price supports, adding that "I have not seen recognition by the Department of Agriculture of the President's own emphasis on gradualism."

Benson served as a target of criticism, then, because there were genuine differences of opinion between the president and the secretary of agriculture. The elite perception that Eisenhower was more disposed to "go slow" than Benson was grounded in reality. This important kernel of truth sustained the lightning rod by making it plausible for elites to blame Benson while appealing to Eisenhower to rein in his secretary.

EISENHOWER AND BLAME AVOIDANCE

Eisenhower's political sagacity did not lie solely, or even mainly, in his recognition that advisers could serve as lightning rods. Few are the presidents who have been unaware of the utility of deflecting blame onto subordinates. Rather, what distinguishes Eisenhower from other presidents is that his behavior made it possible for his subordinates to become plausible lightning rods.

Critically important to Eisenhower's ability to insulate himself from Benson's actions was the president's willingness to delegate significant decision-making authority to department heads. Although Eisenhower played the pivotal role in shaping the administration's commitment to reducing price supports, the all-important details of this general policy (how fast, how far, which crops, and so on) were largely left to Benson. Like most department secretaries, Benson ran into conflict with White House staff members who felt his decisions did not conform with the president's policy. In his memoirs, Sherman Adams reported that Benson, "enveloped in a kind of celestial optimism, . . . convinced that his big decisions were right," would often carry out his plans without getting White House clearance. Others (voicing the usual staff complaint about departmental sabotage) accused Benson of actively undermining presidential decisions.

What differentiated Eisenhower from President Nixon or President Johnson was that he did not react to such reports of departmental subversion by drawing decision making into the White House. There are, of course, costs attached to this strategy: granting cabinet members autonomy means that public policy may not always develop in precisely the direction the president
prefers. But Eisenhower reaped advantages also. Allowing subordinates to exercise significant discretion made it plausible (rather than seeming disingenuous) to blame a cabinet member for a controversial policy, a claim I attempt to bolster in Chapter 4, which compares Eisenhower's use of Vice President Richard Nixon with Lyndon Johnson's use of Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

No less important in making Benson a successful lightning rod was Eisenhower's capacity to cloak his underlying intentions and principles in ambiguity, thus allowing those on different sides of an issue to read into Eisenhower's political views their own political preferences. Eisenhower's studied ambiguity allowed Secretary Benson and his allies to come away convinced that Eisenhower was a fervent believer in applying free-market principles to agriculture. At the same time, supporters of continued high price supports, like Senators Edward Thye and Milton Young, continued to believe that Eisenhower was sympathetic to their viewpoint that government had an important role to play in helping farmers. Both sides thus believed that were the president to become more involved he would side with them.

The importance of this ambiguity in sustaining a lightning rod can be better appreciated by contrasting Benson's eight-year tenure as secretary of agriculture with James Watt's two-and-a-half years as secretary of interior under President Ronald Reagan. Watt's viability as a lightning rod, the subsequent chapter argues, was severely handicapped by the ideological clarity of Reagan's environmental vision.