Introduction

Toward the end of the evening on September 29, 1914, Woodrow Wilson settled down in his study at the White House for a talk with his closest friend and adviser, Colonel Edward House. It was their custom in such meetings to review the various conundrums of politics and policy facing the administration, and on this night, the two men spent most of their time hashing out plans for a diplomatic overture to the British Foreign Office concerning the war that had just engulfed Europe. Before retiring, though, Wilson and House turned to a less troublesome, more familiar topic, one they could discuss in broader strokes. “We talked much of leadership and its importance in government,” House recorded in his diary. “He has demonstrated this to an unusual degree. He thinks our form of government can be changed by personal leadership.” For his part, though, the normally obsequious Colonel House had reservations. He told Wilson that “no matter how great a leader a man was, I could see situations that would block him unless the Constitution was modified. He does not feel as strongly about this as I do.”

At that point in his presidency, Wilson had every reason for confidence in the power of his personal leadership. His program for establishing what he termed responsible government, developed during his three decades as a political scientist, appeared to be working. The crux of the program was to have a wise and visionary leader, supported by a principled political party, draw together the executive and legislative branches that Wilson believed the Founders had impractically separated in the Constitution. The resulting integration of the separated powers would provide for responsible government by giving the leader and his party the power they needed to govern and by enabling voters to reward or punish them for what they did or failed to do. Upon becoming president, Wilson put his plan into practice. He reached out to lead the disciplined Democratic majorities in Congress in several innovative, even audacious ways. The result was the New Freedom, a sweeping set of reform bills that lowered tariff rates, stiffened the anti-trust laws, and established the Federal Reserve Board and Federal Trade Commission.

In his diary entry for September 29, 1914, Colonel House also made note
of Wilson’s intention, after leaving the presidency, to write a book entitled *Statesmanship*, in which he would explore the “essence of government.” Had Wilson ever managed to write this study, he might well have accepted House’s point about the need for constitutional reform, not least because of Wilson’s eventual failure to secure Senate ratification of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations Covenant contained within it. But Wilson was in no shape to undertake his magnum opus at the end of his presidency. During his disastrous confrontation with Henry Cabot Lodge and the Senate, Wilson exhausted himself and suffered a crippling stroke. The separation of powers, which Wilson had bridged with such drama and effect during the New Freedom, ultimately gave rise to a struggle that left his dearest policy, his presidency, and the man himself in ruins.

The irony—or rather the tragedy—of Wilson’s overwhelming defeat is that he could have predicted it himself. At the outset of his career as a political scientist, Wilson had been convinced that constitutional amendments that would fuse the separated executive and legislative powers were necessary preconditions for the establishment of responsible government. But the political prospects for Wilson’s amendments were dim at best. “How to bring the country to adopt the new system?” he asked in one of his early essays. “There’s the rub.” Wilson concluded that the situation called out for “a contest of reason, a mission of statesmanship.”

Wilson’s “mission of statesmanship” is the subject of this book. It can be noted here, to preview the argument elaborated below, that Wilson’s mission took a fateful turn with a decision he made shortly after embarking on it. In order to widen the audience for his reform tracts, he decided to drop his calls for constitutional amendments and instead began advocating, to use his phrase and emphasis, “responsible government under the Constitution.” The change in tack cleared the way for his remarkable achievements as a political scientist and leader. But—as the ambivalent Wilson realized—the change also left his plan for responsible government vulnerable to the countervailing and constitutionally entrenched logic of the Founders’ separation of powers. This logic ultimately confounded his efforts to lead as the prime minister of a responsible party. And it meant that Wilson had both the means and the inclination to lead as an independent and energetic president, which further jeopardized his parliamentary ideal.

In approaching Wilson, this book sets out to understand him as he understood himself throughout his public life, as a statesman, i.e., a leader endeavoring to coordinate political theory and practice in order to improve the health of the polity. This approach might seem presumptuous. The inclination of realistic if not cynical political scientists and citizens—and these
days there are not many other kinds—is to see the ideas of political leaders as fancy cover for underlying ambitions or compulsions. Several studies of Woodrow Wilson do just this; indeed, he has become something of a poster boy for the field of psychobiography. It will be shown here, however, that Wilson’s ideas about responsible government need to be taken seriously, both in their own right and as a key to understanding his leadership. His program had a coherence and consistency of its own, as he developed and applied it, that cannot easily be explained by his personality.

Although Wilson’s program cannot be reduced to a mere rationalization of the drives of his complex personality, neither can it be elevated to the realm of political philosophy. Some thoughtful interpreters of the broad sweep of Wilson’s political, social, and religious thought have cordoned off the cigar smoke and compromises that clouded his political career and concentrated instead on his thinking as it matured, in a presumably more pristine setting, during his academic years. When studying Wilson’s program for responsible government, though, it is neither possible nor desirable to sustain this intellectual quarantine. In 1883, when Wilson decided to opt out of his fledgling legal practice and commence graduate study in history and political science at Johns Hopkins University, he was not giving up on his long-standing desire to be a statesman. Indeed, he decided on an academic career because he believed it was the best outlet for his ambitions, that he could maximize his impact by serving as an “outside force” in politics. Right from the start of his academic career, Wilson began pulling theoretical punches in order to make his program more practical and appealing to politicians and reformers. He did not view his accommodation of political reality as a compromise of his intellectual integrity; rather, he saw it as a form of statesmanship. In 1886, in his first year as a professor, Wilson proposed that the ideal professor of politics “should bridge over the gulf between closet doctrine and rough, everyday practice” and “be no less a scholar for being studiously a man of the world.”

Later, in Wilson’s 1910 presidential address to the American Political Science Association, he spoke of “the statesmanship of thought” and “the statesmanship of action,” and had this to say about the connection between them: “The man who has the time, the discrimination, and the sagacity to collect and comprehend the principal facts and the man who must act upon them must draw near to one another and feel that they are engaged in a common enterprise. . . . Know your people and you can lead them; study your people and you may know them.”

By this point in his career, Wilson believed that the American people could be best known and led, and his program for responsible government
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best implemented, from the presidency. If Wilson is to be judged as he would have judged himself, the analysis of his theoretical program needs to be measured by the practical test he put it to during his presidency.

Wilson himself struggled to come to terms with the preliminary results of this test, and as he did so he continued to modify his program. In the crucible of the White House, he came back to and reaffirmed the teachings of his early, “immature” writings on relations between Congress and the president. As president, Wilson also changed his mind and concluded that, in some instances, the constitutional separation of the executive and legislative powers was preferable to a parliamentary fusion of them. Examining these significant but heretofore unappreciated modifications in Wilson’s program dissolves the common notion that it had assumed a final, mature formulation by the end of his academic career.

My aim, then, is to study Wilson’s statesmanship of thought and his statesmanship of action as a piece, to look over Professor and then President Wilson’s shoulder as he grappled with the separation of powers. But Wilson’s statesmanship also needs to be situated in the appropriate historical context. He was profoundly influenced and animated by the unsettling political developments and controversies in which he was engaged, remaining convinced throughout his life that he lived amid a critical conjuncture in American history. Historians and political scientists have since borne him out. Dramatic industrial growth, the closing of the frontier, the swelling of American cities with newcomers from the farmlands and abroad, the emergence of the United States as a world and colonial power—these and other developments were overwhelming the patterns of leadership and party politics that had prevailed for most of the nineteenth century. As a result, American reformers began what Robert Wiebe has termed a “search for order.” Woodrow Wilson was in the thick of the search, and his program for responsible government was his unique contribution to it.

The nature of Wilson’s program left him no choice but to fight on two fronts in the debate over what direction the search should take. Wilson took on defenders of the constitutional status quo and the traditional parties that thirsted for its offices. At the same time, he opposed radicals wanting to empower heroic executives and expert administrators by eradicating party politics altogether. Wilson generally gave as good as he got in these debates, but they also shaped and constrained the evolution of his program.

Approaching Wilson in this manner yields a perspective that challenges both the traditional and revisionist schools of thought on his statesmanship. The traditional interpretation appears in the work of biographers and political scientists who are sympathetic to (if not outright supporters of) Wil-
son, his progressive policies, and the office of the presidency. These scholars hold their subject up as an inspiring exemplar for contemporary presidents. Arthur Link summarizes the conclusions of this school of thought when he argues that during the New Freedom, Wilson was able to “demonstrate conclusively” that the president could serve as “the chief spokesman of the American people” and “destroy the wall between the executive and legislative branches.” As a result, “historians a century hence will probably rate his expansion and perfection of the powers of the presidency as his most lasting contribution.”

The revisionist view of Wilson appears in the work of conservative political theorists sympathetic to the constitutional design of the Founders. These scholars criticize Wilson for tearing down the obstacles that the creators of both the Constitution and the nineteenth-century party system placed athwart the presidential leadership of public opinion. Even though the popular appeals that Wilson made over the heads of his Senate opponents in the Treaty fight backfired, his “rhetorical presidency” left a permanent mark on the polity. As a result of Wilson’s dangerously naive theory and practice, James Ceaser and his coauthors contend, we are led more and more “to neglect our principles for our hopes and to ignore the benefits and needs of our institutions for a fleeting sense of oneness with our leaders.”

As divergent as these interpretations are, scholars in both camps depict a theorist and leader who boldly confronted and profoundly changed the separation of powers. The following account, in contrast, pays due homage to the moderation of Wilson’s statesmanship, his persistent ambivalence regarding his program for “responsible government under the Constitution,” and the resilience of the separation of powers. It also finds Wilson’s program implicated in both his successes and his failures, in the New Freedom and the treaty debacle. This reconsideration will not support the sharply divergent and unabashed conclusions regarding Wilson and the separation of powers in the traditional and revisionist interpretations, but it may be useful in discerning what, if anything, might be done to meet better the challenges of leadership and governance that Wilson confronted and that continue to face the United States.