The President as Statesman

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ONE

Toward "Power and Strict Accountability for Its Use"

“Our patriotism seems of late to have been exchanging its wonted tone of confident hope for one of desponding solicitude. Anxiety about the future of our institutions seems to be daily becoming stronger in the minds of thoughtful Americans.” Thus began Woodrow Wilson’s quest to bring responsible government to the United States. These sentences, leading up to a warning about “a marked and alarming decline in statesmanship,” introduced an essay that he wrote in 1879, at the age of twenty-two, during his senior year at Princeton.1 Entitled “Cabinet Government in the United States,” the essay appeared in the International Review (the editor of which, it is worth noting, was a young Harvard scholar named Henry Cabot Lodge). Over the next six years, as Wilson studied law at the University of Virginia, practiced it for a short time in Atlanta, then undertook graduate study in political science at Johns Hopkins University, he expanded and refined the argument of “Cabinet Government” in a series of essays and unpublished manuscripts. The series culminated in Wilson’s doctoral dissertation, better known as Congressional Government.

In his thesis, the young political scientist had the audacity to criticize the separation of powers—deemed “the sacred maxim of free government” in The Federalist2—as instead a “radical defect” in the Constitution, the root cause of the sorry statesmanship, political skullduggery, and governmental drift that was then bedeviling the nation. Wilson acknowledged that given the prevailing “blind worship” of the Constitution, this proposition made him something of a heretic.3 In spite of his heresy—or perhaps because of it—he quickly became a nationally prominent voice for political reform. Before analyzing Wilson’s argument and the way he managed to achieve such prominence, it will be helpful to consider what prompted him to become a heretic in the first place.
I

In large part the answer lies with the historical conditions in which Wilson came of political age during the 1870s. Though each generation of Americans hears charges of unmatched corruption in Washington, at this point the accusations might well have been true. The 1870s witnessed the apex of the fabled "great barbecue," in Vernon Parrington's apt phrase, in which the ruling bands of politicians liberally passed out favors to their benefactors in the form of favorable tariff rates, jobs, land grants, veterans' pensions, and so forth. The distinction between business deals and political agreements, often ambiguous in the United States, became a distinction without a difference. The corrupt reign of the Tweed Ring and the Credit Mobilier, Whiskey Ring, and congressional salary grab scandals marked the first part of the decade. So did the final, more dubious stages of what Wilson would subsequently term the "damnable cruelty and folly of Reconstruction." 4

All of this was no doubt made more intolerable to the young Woodrow Wilson because it was presided over by the hapless Ulysses S. Grant, the conqueror of his boyhood homeland. Though Wilson's father, the Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson, was an Ohioan, he had moved his family to the South and was a leader of the proslavery wing of the Presbyterian Church. During the war, the boy saw his father's church in Augusta, Georgia, serve as a hospital for Confederate wounded and as a makeshift prison for captured Union soldiers. Although Wilson was only nine when the war ended and would say as an adult that he had always considered himself a "Federalist," his rearing in the South gave his allegiance to the national government a well-honed critical edge. 5

Wilson's unique perspective shows up clearly in a draft of one of his earliest public speeches, entitled "The Union," which he gave to his fellow students at Princeton in November 1876. He proposed that "no American can think of the Union and the principles upon which it is founded without a flush of pride and thrill of patriotism," and proceeded to rely chiefly on the words of Yankee Daniel Webster to flesh out these principles. However, Wilson left no doubt about his views on Reconstruction. He condemned "the fanatical partisans who enrage the people by their frantic wavings of the bloody shirt" and the "traitors who have crept into favor in certain parts of the country by the miserable ambition of petty politicians." The greatest danger to the Union, though, was "the sad lack of great men ... of guiding genius." Were statesmen like Webster to reappear, there would be hope for
healing "the lesions of all parts of the country" laid open by the war, for promoting "that union of hearts for which the Southern people are so eager if their Northern brethren will only meet them half way."6

It was no coincidence that Wilson made his appeal for integrating statesmanship in the anxious weeks following the election of 1876, in which the ultimate victor in the presidential contest had yet to be decided. The campaign had excited and drawn out Wilson's formative political sentiments, which he recorded in his journal. He viewed the Democratic candidate, Samuel Tilden, as the sort of "good and prominent man" the riven nation had lacked for too long. Tilden's battles with Tammany Hall and his allegiance to the economic principles of sound money and free trade also convinced Wilson that he was just the right man for the Democratic Party. While Wilson's southern upbringing had placed him firmly in the Democratic fold, he believed that his party, too, had the tendency to stray from principle and indulge in the jobbery and corruption that were then prevalent. The tendency was especially disturbing because, to Wilson's mind, the Democratic Party was the only hope for initiating a new age of reform politics, one in which great issues, especially the march toward freer trade, would replace retrograde, bloody-shirt politics. If this was to happen, the leadership of a statesman like Tilden was essential. Indeed, the night before the election Wilson remarked in his journal that "the salvation of the country from frauds and the reviving of trade depends upon his election."7

Such convictions led Wilson to immerse himself in the political rallies, bonfires, and debates held at Princeton in the suspenseful time that followed the popular vote. His mother, writing from North Carolina, described the "intense anxiety" that gripped southerners as they waited for the outcome of the election. She admonished her son not to get in fights with Republican students on campus—he evidently had come close. In this context, the eventual elevation of Hayes, "that weak instrument of the corrupt Republicans," as Wilson saw him, notwithstanding Tilden's winning the popular vote, no doubt worsened the young man's disillusionment with his nation's politics.8

A set of more diffuse influences interacted with the particulars of Woodrow Wilson's time and place to sharpen further the young man's political views. Prominent among them, as John Mulder has documented, was the Covenant tradition of Calvinism espoused by Joseph Wilson. This tradition carried a profound sense of both the difficulty and the necessity of the struggle for moral progress, upon which all social progress rested. At the same time, Woodrow Wilson's personal faith included an optimism about the possibility of progress, an outlook that made him all the more impatient with politicians who did not foster it.9 He held political leaders to a moral stan-
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dard that the bosses of the Gilded Age could not begin to meet. Notwithstanding the corruption in Washington, in 1876 he proposed that a “Christian statesman,” one committed, like a minister, to a determined “search for the truth,” was not a contradiction in terms but rather an attainable ideal.10

The connection between Woodrow Wilson’s moral and political views was reinforced by two political journals that Joseph Wilson subscribed to, the *Nation* and the *Edinburgh Review*. In the former, edited by the moralistic Scots-Irish liberal E. L. Godkin, the young Woodrow Wilson read frequent castigations of Grant and the spoilsmen. Through the latter, Wilson followed the golden age of Victorian liberalism, particularly the speeches and exploits of his heroes, John Bright and—especially—William Gladstone, whose portrait hung over the schoolboy’s desk.11

As a young man, Woodrow Wilson proposed that there was not a statesman “whose character is worthier of the study and imitation of the young men of a free country than is Mr. Gladstone’s.” Wilson held Bright in high esteem for the constancy with which the great radical had adhered to his reform principles over the years. Paradoxically, Wilson’s even greater admiration for Gladstone stemmed in large part from his famous shifts on the grand issues of his time as he struggled, both in and outside of the cabinet, to come to terms with the best sentiments of public opinion, the logic of reform ideas, and the lessons from his experience in governing. Thus it was, Wilson argued, that Gladstone dropped the defense of the corn laws and the Church of England that had marked his days as an elitist young Tory to become a champion of free trade, religious toleration, and democratic reform. Implicitly comparing this embodiment of the “Christian Statesman” with the sorry types that he saw ruling in Washington, Wilson declared that “[Gladstone’s] life has been one continuous advance, not towards power only—fools may be powerful; knaves sometimes rule by the knack of their knavery—but towards truth also the while.”12

The capacity of Bright and Gladstone to move men with speech, which Wilson believed ultimately came from their “earnestness and sincere conviction,” was also responsible for his high estimation of their leadership.13 Rhetorical power clearly impressed the preacher’s son. Wilson would listen to his father’s sermons on the Sabbath, then return later in the week and hold forth before the empty pews to hone his own voice with the great speeches of Gladstone and Bright, Patrick Henry and Daniel Webster. After leaving home for college, he continued to solicit and receive guidance from his father on the art of speaking. At Princeton he was not only a frequent public speaker but an unceasing advocate for rigorous training of the student body in oratory and elocution so that its members might later be more effective
in public life. Wilson declared to his peers in a speech entitled “The Ideal Statesmen” that such a leader must “possess an orator’s soul, an orator’s words, an orator’s actions. To nobleness of thought he must add nobleness of word and conduct.”

In Wilson’s mind, the crucial setting for the development and demonstration of mastery in oratory came in formal debate. He was an avid participant in debating societies at every school he attended and paid great attention to the constitutional forms of these groups, seeing a relationship between a group’s formal structure and the quality of its debates. The constitution he drafted in early 1877 for the Liberal Debating Club at Princeton illustrated his belief in the supremacy of parliamentary forms that pitted two speakers against each other in a truth-winnnowing debate, the hearts and minds of the audience and ultimately the power and authority of the antagonists hanging in the balance. A few months later, Wilson presented a debate resolution to his fellow members that called for establishing in the federal government parliamentary forms akin to those he had instituted in their club.

Wilson’s activities in the Liberal Debating Club demonstrated his growing conviction that the stark contrast he detected between the likes of Gladstone and Bright and their American counterparts was not merely the result of personal virtue or the lack thereof. The different forms of government in Great Britain and the United States now appeared to him to be eliciting virtuous and vice-ridden leadership, respectively. The “severe and uninter­mitted training” that the English leaders had undergone while rising up through the ranks in Parliament was what had ultimately enabled them “to command with effect and success.” The American polity, with its diffusion of governing power and responsibility, had no such revealing proving ground for aspiring statesmen. Initially, this realization had driven Wilson to despair. Witness his diary entry on July 4, 1876: “One hundred years ago America conquered England in an unequal struggle and this year she glories over it. How much happier she would be now if she had England’s form of government instead of this miserable delusion of a republic.” But instead of wallowing in pessimism and Anglophilia, Wilson fixed upon the idea of saving the “miserable” government of his own country by establishing English forms in it.

During his senior year at Princeton, Wilson began to frame his argument for such a change. He did so primarily with the aid of Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*. In this essay, first published in 1867, Bagehot had sought to probe beneath the “dignified parts” of the English Constitution, i.e., the triune balance of the Crown, Lords, and Commons, in order to reveal its
“efficient secret,” namely, the fusion of executive, legislative, and party leadership in the cabinet. In a comparison of the British and American systems, Bagehot praised cabinet government for producing—and criticized the separation of powers for thwarting—responsible legislation, sound administration, and an edifying public debate over the means and ends of policy. 18

Bagehot’s highly stylized treatment of parliamentary and presidential government resonated with and organized Wilson’s impressions of the two regimes. In the process, Bagehot whetted the young man’s desire for political reform in the United States. Bagehot also provided Wilson with a method for proceeding. As Wilson began working on Congressional Government a few years later, he reread Bagehot’s book and confided to Ellen Axson, his fiancée, that it “has inspired my whole study of our government.” Wilson wanted to rest his analysis, as had Bagehot, on interpretive insight and literary flourish, forsaking the systematic empirical research and objective presentation advocated by his graduate advisers at Johns Hopkins University. Wilson believed that his alternative approach, “if it could be successfully applied to the exposition of our federal constitution, would result in something like a revelation to those who are still reading The Federalist as an authoritative constitutional manual.” 19

Yet on one point, Wilson’s purposes diverged from those of Bagehot and paralleled those of the authors of The Federalist. Bagehot had laid bare the workings of the English Constitution so that his countrymen could better understand it and hold back from reforms that might jeopardize the political benefits that they were accruing under it. 20 In contrast, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay sought to expose the shortcomings of the government of the United States under the Articles of Confederation in order to support their efforts to transform it. Wilson likewise wanted to reveal what he saw as the real nature of the American regime and the pathologies of power within it in order to bring about fundamental change. As Wilson confided to a friend soon after Congressional Government was published, the book’s “mission was to stir thought and to carry irresistible practical suggestions . . . and set reform a-going in a very definite direction.” 21

II

As Wilson explored the troublesome ramifications of the separation of powers in his book, he argued that they were ironic in two key respects. One irony was the curious staying power of this “radical defect.” When the Founders framed the Constitution, Wilson argued, they had sought above all else to prevent the dangerous concentration of power that had occurred when King George III, Lord Bute, and the “King’s Friends” had corrupted
and dominated Parliament. Toward this end, the Founders decided that seated members of the legislative branch could not hold executive offices, lest they trade their votes for a place in the administration. The resulting "absolute separation" of powers, Wilson argued, was an improvement over the British system under George III, but it was unnecessary. For at that very moment, Britain's unwritten constitution was already evolving toward the more responsible system of government that emerged there in the mid-nineteenth century, a system in which the executive power was lodged in a cabinet elected by and accountable to the legislature. This form of government not only checked executive machinations but also allowed for more efficient policy-making through its fusion of executive and legislative power. The American separation of powers, however, had not undergone a similar progressive evolution because its growth had been "hindered or destroyed by the too tight ligaments of a written fundamental law." By overreacting to a temporary perversion of the British Constitution, the American Founders had prevented their nation from subsequently experiencing its eventual perfection.

What is more, for all of their precautions, the Founders had still failed to prevent a dangerous concentration of power with their Constitution. Indeed, their design had brought one about, which was the second irony. Publius may have warned against the "impetuous vortex" of the legislature, yet in Wilson's view the Founders' constitutional design, by formally insulating Congress from executive control, effectively transferred all power to that vortex. Bereft of sustained direction, Congress had, with time, met the invariable need for such guidance from within, setting up a complex internal structure of committees to organize its activities. As Congress's institutional capacity to act increased, it involved itself in more and more spheres of governmental activity. With this increased involvement came a distortion of the legislative function and a confounding of the separation of powers. Congress maladroitly sought to perform functions that Wilson held to be properly executive in nature, namely, framing legislation and supervising administration. Thus preoccupied, Congress became, at the same time, much less suited for what he saw as the appropriate legislative functions of debating the policies prepared and administered by the executive. Yet there was no stopping the congressional monolith once it had organized itself to govern. Hence the unpleasant but nonetheless efficient secret of the American regime, according to Woodrow Wilson: "The balances of the Constitution are for the most part only ideal. For all practical purposes the national government is supreme over the state governments, and Congress predominant over its so-called coordinate branches."
For all of its ostensible power, the American presidency had proven to be an ineffectual counterbalance to congressional government. Wilson observed that there had once been signs of hope in this regard, in the early days of the republic, before Congress had blindly organized itself to take the initiative. The priority of foreign affairs in this period and the special responsibilities of the presidency for them had elevated the position of the office, not least by attracting great statesmen who felt called to wield its power. However, over the course of the nineteenth century, with Congress attempting more and more to govern on its own and with the growing importance of domestic affairs, the power and prestige of the presidency had gone into a downward spiral. The diminished office, Wilson argued, had become a creature of the parties. The brokering that party officials engaged in during the nominating conventions was geared to select not the best statesmen but the least controversial candidates—the latter would give the party the best chance of controlling the spoils that came with winning the presidential contest. “The shoals of candidacy,” Wilson lamented, “can be passed only by a light boat which carries little freight and can be turned readily about to suit the intricacies of the passage” (Congressional Government, pp. 41–45; subsequent parenthetical citations in this section are to this book).

Wilson’s critical analysis of the Gilded Age presidency anticipated the more famous observations offered three years later by James Bryce in The American Commonwealth on “why great men are not chosen presidents.” But while Bryce criticized the debasement of the presidency by the party organizations, he nonetheless appreciated the safety and stability that all the politicking brought to the presidency. He also detected a rough-hewn administrative effectiveness in the workings of the office. More recently, James Ceaser has likewise concluded that although the party brokering undermined the independence of the office, it mitigated against factionalism and demagoguery, fostered the development of broad national coalitions, and preserved at least some energy in the executive.25 Unlike these observers of the nineteenth-century presidency, Wilson could not temper his criticism of it. He believed the nation needed more in the way of commanding statesmanship, and it was not going to come from an executive office that had been bowled over by the legislature and the parties.

In his extended critique of congressional government, Wilson laid out its dire implications for public policy. Bills whose support came from logrolling between and among the multifarious committees in the House and Senate, and which leaders pushed through in the normal course of congressional business with little or no debate, were destined to lack coherence and often to work against the public interest.26 And once the legislation was passed,
congressional capacity to intervene in the details and staffing of administra-
tion, while sufficient to generate inefficiency and corruption, was insuffi-
cient to produce the wisdom and information needed to frame laws success-
fully or to hold administrators fully accountable (270–82). "Nobody stands 
sponsor for the policy of the government," Wilson complained. "A dozen 
men originate it; a dozen compromises twist and alter it; a dozen offices 
whose names are scarcely known outside of Washington put it into execu-
tion" (318). Although this situation was generally intolerable, Wilson be-
lieved it to be urgently so at a time when, in the face of accelerating social 
and economic change, "the sphere and influence of national administration 
and national legislation are widening rapidly" (316).

Congressional government also perverted party politics. In the absence 
of a conspicuous and sustained debate between the party controlling the 
government and the party opposing it, the electorate was neither in a posi-
tion nor prompted to pass judgment on either party (101–2). As a result, 
Wilson argued, the parties did not feel compelled to work toward the pas-
sage of a systematic legislative program or even collectively subscribe to a 
coherent set of principles. "They are like armies without officers," he ob-
erved, "engaged upon a campaign which has no great cause at its back. 
Their names and traditions, not their hopes and policy, keep them together" 
(324). Getting into power and keeping hold of it, rather than using it, was 
the imperative. The unhealthy power of the patronage-fed organizations was 
geared largely toward these more mundane ends (98–99). Although a neces-
sary antidote to the committee system, the sole mechanism providing for 
concerted party action—the legislative caucus—was an unsatisfactory in-
strument, for it operated secretly, providing a haven in which compromises 
of principles and the squelching of dissenting views could occur in secret 
(326–31).

The policy and political perversions of congressional government pro-
duced a dearth of statesmanship in the United States. So long as the game 
was played in such an unseemly manner and for relatively insignificant 
prizes in terms of the power one might ultimately exercise, good men and 
prospective leaders held back from public life, leaving the field to less admi-
rable types. To make things worse, without the revealing and repeated tests 
of oratory and public leadership that characterized the parliamentary arena, 
these types had little difficulty in ascending to the highest echelons in the 
congressional government (205–6).

What did Wilson propose to do about the problem of congressional gov-
ernment? His solution was to galvanize the political power that had been 
first divided by the separation of powers and then dispersed by the rise of
the committee system in Congress: "Power and strict accountability for its use are the essential constituents of good government. A sense of highest responsibility, a dignifying and elevating sense of being trusted, together with a consciousness of being in an official station so conspicuous that no faithful discharge of duty can go unacknowledged and unrewarded, and no breach of trust undiscovered and unpunished,—these are the influences, the only influences, which foster practical, energetic, and trustworthy statesmanship” (284; Wilson’s emphasis).

Wilson demurred from explicitly stating how the “power and strict accountability for its use” that he was calling for might be established in the United States, claiming, “I am pointing out facts,—diagnosing, not prescribing remedies” (315). But he left little doubt that the remedy was cabinet government, the British version of which he openly admired in the book. To tease out his prescription, it is necessary to leave behind the comprehensive diagnosis of Congressional Government, which Wilson proposed was the culminating work in his series, and delve into his previous studies.

In both of the essays that Wilson published prior to his book, he had called for a constitutional amendment to Article 1, Section 6’s proscription on members of Congress holding offices in the executive branch. Wilson’s amendment instead would have enabled and effectively required the president to select his cabinet secretaries from among seated members of the legislature. This change was the linchpin of his program for responsible government at this point in time. It meant that “power and strict accountability for its use” would be concentrated in the cabinet—a single committee of congressional leaders who would retain their legislative positions and, at the same time, administer the executive departments. Wilson believed that the president would have to select the leaders of the majority party on Capitol Hill, for a combination of pride and necessity would quickly force the resignation of cabinets that were unable to maintain the support of Congress. Wilson’s plan thereby envisioned a de facto system of Westminster-style ministerial responsibility operating on Capitol Hill, one that would produce a multitude of benefits.27

Prominent among those benefits was more effective government. Holding the leadership positions in both branches—and in a party clearly accountable to the electorate—the cabinet would have both the drive and the capacity to frame, pass, and administer, with coherence and efficiency, the policy proposals upon which their party had stood before the electorate. Wilson argued that the ensuing debate between the counterpoised government and opposition parties in Congress over the merits and execution of these policies would winnow and improve, not thwart or pervert, legislation
and administration. "The educational influence of such discussion . . . operates in two directions,—upon the members of the legislature themselves, and upon the people whom they represent." 28

With the immense political fortunes riding on the outcome of this debate, principles and oratory would replace the dispensation of patronage and pork-barrel legislation as the unifying forces of party action. Given the pressing need for them, men of principle and rhetorical power would be attracted into politics and rise to the forefront of the party organizations, taking over the leadership positions held by the backroom politicos. At election time, with so much power destined to fall into the hands of the majority party, party leaders would have to propose concrete and compelling proposals to the voters—and hold to them after the election. In this sense, public opinion, brought into focus by an ongoing debate over principles and programmatic mandates, would replace the caucus leader as the true "boss" of the party in power. 29

III

Such was the basic logic of Wilson's program to establish responsible government in the form of cabinet government. To appreciate it fully and to understand the ways in which Wilson elaborated it, his writings need to be juxtaposed with the proposals of other reformers then at work. Wilson formed and honed his program so that it might win out over them. By far the most widely advocated of the alternatives was civil service reform. Liberal and mugwump reformers such as E. L. Godkin and Carl Schurz insisted that if government jobs were not handed out as rewards for political service but rather filled on the basis of merit with "the best men," in the phrase of the time, the political, economic, social, and moral health of the nation would be set aright. 30 Woodrow Wilson likewise believed that the spoils system had to go. As he put it in 1887 in "The Study of Administration"—a seminal essay in the founding of the discipline of public administration—"although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices." 31

But Wilson also held that putting a stop to inappropriate political involvement in administration had to await the establishment of responsible government. In Congressional Government, Wilson proposed that this priority was inadvertently borne out by Dorman Eaton's Civil Service in Great Britain: A History of Abuses and Their Bearing upon American Politics, the bible of American advocates of civil service reform. Only after responsible government was established in Britain, Wilson argued, did the ministry feel compelled to make the service of the government professional and neutral, lest
it be called to account for incompetent or political administration of the
laws. In the United States, civil service reform had come later and was in-
complete because the separation of powers did not allow for such a compel-
ling responsibility—no institution or leader had both the power and the
incentive to clean up the spoils. Hence the priority of establishing respon-
sible government.

Although Wilson offered counsel to advocates of civil service reform, he
took sharp issue with the reform plan of Albert Stickney, who wanted to do
away with politics altogether. A New York lawyer and the most prominent
of the beleaguered antipartisan reformers of the Gilded Age, Stickney be-
came convinced during his battles with Tammany Hall that parties were in-
herently corrupt. “In order to get anything which really deserves the name
of republican government,” Stickney argued, “one must destroy party alto-
gether.” In 1879, Stickney presented a scheme for doing this in *A True Re-
public*, calling for the end of regular elections—legislative and executive
officers alike would hold their positions during good behavior—and for the
establishment of a hierarchical, professional administration of “the best
men” under the control of the chief executive. It would be hard to over-
estimate the alarm in Wilson’s reaction to Stickney’s plan, which he read in
late 1879 during his first semester in law school. Wilson spent much of that
autumn, and more time thereafter, rebutting Stickney. Four years later, when
a publisher thought that his extensive criticism of Stickney’s plan weighed
down a manuscript that Wilson had submitted for review, the author re-
plied by arguing that “mine is necessarily a rival scheme. To fortify my
positions I must destroy his.”

Wilson felt compelled to disagree primarily because Stickney proposed
doing away with the very institution—the political party—that played the
central role in his own plan for cabinet government. Wilson was convinced
that antipartisanship was inherently impractical. Given human nature and
the issues at stake in politics, parties arose as a matter of course: individuals
would invariably band together to pursue the political ends that they held
in common. Citing the reasoning of Edmund Burke, Wilson also contended
that political parties were necessary and beneficial institutions; indeed, they
made representative government possible. Only through concerted party ac-
tion could good men work effectively to achieve their ends. What is more,
partisanship refined the views and behavior of individual politicians by
bringing political connections out into the open and by generating a public,
shared commitment to principles. The trick, then, Wilson insisted, was not
to attempt the impossible and misguided task of eradicating partisanship but
rather to create the conditions in which it had these positive effects.
Wilson's advocacy of party government differed from Burke's in some key respects. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., has shown that Burke offered his argument for party government in large part to constrain the discretion of individual statesmen, discretion that, as the reign of George III led Burke to believe, too often resulted in corruption if not tyranny. Party government was a safer, less arbitrary form of rule than reliance on individual statesmen. Wilson, in contrast, advocated sharpening party responsibility not to restrain but to foster statesmanship in the United States. The concentration in the cabinet of "power and strict accountability for its use" would attract the ambitions of men of talent and principle. And while the path toward power in the new system still would be arduous, it would be a path that such men could endure, even thrive upon. To Wilson, party government, properly understood, would result in much needed innovation and discernment in policy; it was more constructive than preventive in aim.

Wilson believed better statesmanship and more responsible partisanship were compatible because of an additional departure from Burke's argument. When Burke had worked to legitimize party "connexions" in the age of George III, he had done so over and against the traditional, ostensible norm of political independence among members of Parliament, a norm that members should stand for "not men, but measures," in Chatham's phrase. In Burke's estimation, this rationale simply allowed members "to get loose from every honourable engagement" in order to serve their own ambitions. Burke emphasized the possibility of and need for men of principle, once they had joined together, to maintain their political connections. Party was the bulwark against the temptations of individual ambition; straying from the fold, in Burke's mind, was inherently suspect.

Wilson's time and challenge were different. Intense party solidarity was the norm—and a ripe target for critics such as Stickney who wanted to do away with parties altogether in order to enable "the best men" to govern. To Wilson's mind, though, the question of whether the party or the individual within it was to predominate was poorly framed. "Is it the party . . . which men of thought owe and pay allegiance?" Wilson asked in an essay on John Bright. "No. It is to the principles, of which party is the embodiment." If the statesman was not free from obligation, in Wilson's thinking, at least he was free from the need to uphold the axiom of "party, right or wrong" that then prevailed. The obligation took a much different form: to discern and elucidate the principles of the party and to set it aright when it strayed.

Wilson's efforts to create more room and responsibility for principled statesmanship in the American polity did not mean that he was willing to hand everything over to a great statesman. Indeed, in addition to Stickney's
antipartisanship, Wilson sought to combat the total concentration of power and responsibility in the executive leader called for in *A True Republic*. Stickney's executive could hire and fire his department heads as he saw fit; he alone was responsible for the entire branch (and it was only by means of a two-thirds majority that the legislature could turn him out of office). The chief executive also held the legislative initiative: the legislature would simply ratify (or not) his proposals. A collectively responsible executive of the sort that Wilson called for, Stickney argued, confounded the chain of individual responsibility that was necessary to secure an administration of "the best men" doing "their best work for the people." 39

In 1882, in an outline for an unpublished, book-length manuscript entitled "Government by Debate," Wilson took issue with Stickney on this point: "Why subordinate the President to his Cabinet? Why not make the President responsible—somewhat as Stickney suggests? Because no one man can be equal to all the responsibilities of all the offices of executive government. His supervision can at best be but very superficial." 40 To avoid the problem of overreliance on one man, Wilson maintained that the department heads should stand together as a collectively responsible political link between the legislature and the executive branches. The president, nominally the chief executive, would take on an essentially symbolic role, much like the British monarch, presiding over the administration and formally recognizing the executive ministers.

The other major reform that Wilson grappled with as he formulated his program for responsible government involved sending members of the president's cabinet into Congress, where they might introduce legislation, field questions, and take part in debates. Gamaliel Bradford and E. L. Godkin's *Nation* were persistent advocates of this idea. So was Senator George Pendleton, who in 1879 introduced a bill to institutionalize such cabinet appearances in both houses of Congress. Their idea was very similar to Wilson's cabinet government design, and Arthur Link has even suggested that Wilson cribbed his plan from Bradford and Pendleton without attribution. 41

No doubt Wilson was influenced by these proposals, but he did acknowledge if not directly cite them when formulating his own. More important, Wilson's plan differed in a fundamental respect. Bradford and Pendleton explicitly rejected formal amendment of the separation of powers, in essence calling for the informal imposition of the president's authority upon an incorrigible Congress. Wilson's plan, in contrast, hinged on a formal amendment that would have left the president no choice but to select the cabinet from among seated leaders of the majority party in Congress. This change would effectively transfer the executive power to the legislature. 42 After
Wilson made his initial pitch for this constitutional amendment, he realized that at least three more amendments were required before the potential benefits of a parliamentary system could be fully realized in the United States. In 1882, he spelled them out in “Government by Debate.” In doing so, Wilson further differentiated his reform plan from that of Bradford and Pendleton.

The first additional change involved the political status of the president. In Wilson’s plan, the president would serve as the symbolic chief of state and the first administrator in “the line of non-partisan permanent officials.” Except for selecting the leaders of the majority party to serve in the cabinet, the president had no political role to play, and this remaining role was essentially a formality. Even his use of the veto would have to subside. Were the president to indulge in politics, e.g., by refusing to name to the cabinet the leaders of a congressional majority with which he disagreed or by vetoing bills passed by such a majority, Wilson’s plan for cabinet government was at risk. And certainly a political president could not symbolize the state or lead a nonpartisan administration with compelling authority. Yet as long as the president was elected and nominated by partisans, he would be tempted by politics. Wilson knew that Albert Stickney had a point here. So, borrowing and modifying a page from Stickney’s book, Wilson proposed that the president hold office permanently during good behavior. The presidency was to become a nonhereditary throne. Removing the office from politics in this way would leave those filling it in a better position to discharge their remaining duties (The Papers of Woodrow Wilson [PWW], 2:227–28, 244–46).

Wilson also faced the difficult task of reconciling responsible government with a bicameral legislature. A cabinet could not be readily accountable to two houses, especially if they were controlled by opposite parties. Which legislative body would the cabinet be drawn from and responsible to? Wilson proposed that this was “the most awkward question” he faced; the weakness of his answer certainly indicated as much. In formulating it, Wilson compared the Senate to the British upper house. When it came to controlling the cabinet, the Senate’s “claims, like those of the Lords, would necessarily be postponed to the claims of the popular chamber.” The lower house’s democratic legitimacy and control of the federal purse made it the natural repository of a responsible cabinet. As a result, the Senate, indirectly elected by the states, would find its political power, though not its prestige and authority, diminished. How exactly this transition in legislative power might occur, however, Wilson did not say (PWW, 2:246–47).

Assuming that the Senate’s power could be diminished and the House of Representatives would come to host the cabinet, there remained the prob-
lems arising from the biennial, fixed terms of House members. The short time span would regularly generate campaigns of excitement and detract from serious political debate. The fixed intervals between elections also raised the prospect of a serious impasse if a cabinet were to be voted out in midterm by the majority that elected it and the majority then refused to support a new cabinet drawn from the opposition party. To get around these difficulties, Wilson proposed that House members' terms be lengthened to six or eight years. He also argued that the cabinet ministers should be able to have the American monarch, i.e., the president, dissolve the legislature and call for new elections in case of a deadlock, a power without which "there would be no having Cabinet government" (PW, 2:223–24, 247–49).

IV

With the sweeping constitutional changes that Wilson proposed in "Government by Debate," he demonstrated an astute grasp of what it would take for American politics and government to work like British politics and government. But his theoretical insight was effectively denying him a voice in the ongoing debates over political reform. Harper refused to publish the manuscript because an editor deemed Wilson's proposed constitutional changes too radical. The editor saw the Bradford-Pendleton plan for a cabinet presence in Congress as a much more realistic option. Wilson, though, saw this option as a flight from the truth. Complaining to a friend who worked at the publishing house, Wilson acknowledged that the changes he proposed were radical, "perhaps they are too radical; but if one goes one step with me, he cannot, as it seems to me, escape going all the way. To stop short of the length to which I carry the argument would be simply to be afraid of the legitimate and logical conclusions towards which it inclines with an inevitable tendency." Wilson vowed he would hold to what he emphasized were his "deliberate convictions" regarding the necessity of constitutional amendments—and his manuscript remained unpublished.44

However, the longer Wilson faced the hard choice between theoretical rigor and political relevance, the more he was convinced that as a man embarked on "a mission of statesmanship," he had to opt for the latter. A few months later, when Wilson began writing Congressional Government, he decided to "leave out all advocacy of Cabinet Government—all advocacy, indeed, of any specific reform—and devote myself to a careful analysis of Congressional government." Wilson decided that such an analysis, especially one that relied on the British system for comparative leverage, would lead his readers indirectly but just as inevitably to the imperative of establishing cabinet government in the United States. And, of course, by abandoning
“the evangelical for the exegetical,” Wilson could avoid the rejections and criticism that an author proposing impossible constitutional changes was destined to receive. Wilson now understood that if he was to become “one of the guides of public thought” that he aspired to be, he would have “to stand apart from advocacy of radical measures for which the public mind may not be ripe.”

But Wilson could not stand back from his own logic so easily. Much to his chagrin, Gamaliel Bradford reminded him of it in a positive review of Congressional Government that appeared in the Nation. Bradford opened by stating that “we have no hesitation in saying that this is one of the most important books, dealing with political subjects, which has ever issued from the American press” and went on to compare the book favorably with Bagehot’s The English Constitution. Subsequently, though, Bradford referred to one of Wilson’s previously published articles in which the young reformer had called for constitutional amendments. The reviewer noted that even though amendments were not discussed in the book, the nature of Wilson’s argument indicated that the author still believed they were necessary. Of course, Wilson still did. Nevertheless, the reference to his earlier call for amendments upset Wilson—he regarded it as “a slap in the face”—for it undermined the image of a tough-minded realist, diagnosing problems, not prescribing remedies, that he had worked so hard to project in his book.

Wilson overreacted. It was the praise of Bradford’s review, and not the tweak about Wilson’s unlikely amendments, that resonated with the reception of Congressional Government in most circles. Wilson soon came around. At the first indications that his book was drawing favorable notices in Washington and in reform circles generally, he reaffirmed his choice to serve as an “outside force” in politics. “I have—almost unwittingly—taken the lead in a very great work,” he wrote to his fiancée, Ellen Axson. “My book succeeds because I have taken the lead: and now, the opening having been made, I must come up to my opportunities and be worthy of them.”

Wilson met with his first opportunity to defend the arguments of Congressional Government shortly thereafter. The challenge did not come from the reformers Wilson had argued with as he formulated his program for responsible government. Instead, two defenders of the constitutional status quo, Sir Henry Maine, the English jurist, and A. Lawrence Lowell, then a young instructor in government at Harvard, cast doubt on Wilson’s criticism of the constitutional separation of powers and the independent executive office it established. The indirect criticism of Congressional Government in Maine’s
Popular Government, published in 1885, and the direct and sustained criticism of it in Lowell’s “Ministerial Responsibility and the Constitution,” which appeared in the Atlantic the following year, clearly got to Wilson. He responded with an essay in the same magazine two months later. In his response, Wilson incorporated new arguments on behalf of responsible government that he would increasingly rely on in the years ahead. He also took the fateful step, signaled by his title, of advocating “Responsible Government Under the Constitution.”

Maine and Lowell rejected Wilson’s view that the presidency had been subordinated by Congress and the political parties. While Maine saluted the lawmaking power and independence of Congress, he also praised the persistent autonomy of the president. Unlike the monarchs after George III, he argued, the constitutional position of American presidents meant that they did not have to hand their power over to legislative leaders. Lowell, for his part, after acknowledging that the balance of power along Pennsylvania Avenue often shifted, emphasized the resilience of the American chief executive. Among other things, the ongoing use of the veto by presidents both demonstrated and protected their constitutional independence. Moreover, Lowell argued, the administrative tools and prerogatives at the president’s disposal enabled him to exercise leadership in his own right, as Lincoln had done during the Civil War. Like neo-Federalist critics of the rhetorical presidency in the late twentieth century, then, Lowell and Maine understood the presidency to be grounded in the Constitution. It could and should, therefore, refine and even resist, rather than excite or submit to, public opinion.

Wilson could not yet see the considerable constitutional power that inhered in the presidency. His difficulties here may well have originated in his misreading of the Founders’ purposes regarding the separation of powers: in his belief that they had established it solely to prevent the abuse of executive power. Wilson acknowledged that during the high stakes diplomacy conducted by the first few presidents, during Andrew Jackson’s administration, and then again during the Civil War, the American chief executive had had “Congress at his beck.” But Wilson did not see these temporary interruptions in the general pattern of congressional dominance as having much to do with constitutional provisions for an independent, energetic executive.

Nor did Wilson accept the argument that the president’s veto was a suitable means of leadership, and here he had a point. Unlike Lowell and Maine, he was looking for constructive legislative leadership. “Government lives in the origination, not in the defeat, of measures of government,” he argued. “The President obstructs by means of his ‘No’; the houses govern by means of their ‘Yes’” (PWW, 5:116–19; Wilson’s emphasis).
Wilson was also on sturdier ground with his essential point about the
dispersion of political power and governmental authority in the United
States. Congress may not have been as dominant, nor the president as sub­
ordinate, as he insisted. Still, nowhere within the two branches were the
power and authority necessary to govern in the hands of a group capable of
doing so in a consistent, concerted fashion.

Wilson had his sharpest disagreement with Maine and Lowell on the
question of whether a responsible focal point for governing should be estab­
lished. If it were, a disciplined legislative party would be in a sense unstop­
pable—at least until the next election—once it was given a majority of
seats by the voters. Giving unchecked sway to democratic forces was a recipe
for disaster in Maine’s estimation; democracy was only feasible when con­
strained by the checks and balances that distinguished the American Con­
stitution. Arguing from similar premises, Lowell proposed that a responsible
ministry in the United States would endanger individual and minority
rights as it made policy on the basis of a “popular feeling” caused by “tem­
porary excitement” rather than “a mature and lasting opinion.”

Lowell’s argument was particularly challenging to Wilson because it was
based on the assumption that there was a fundamental difference between
the British and American political systems. Lowell held that this difference
originated in the divergent governing values of the two nations, and that it
was manifested in the provisions in the U.S. system for checking power and
preserving minority rights for which there were no counterparts in Britain.
Hence Lowell argued that “a responsible ministry cannot be grafted into
our institutions without entirely changing their nature, and destroying those
features of our government which we have been in the habit of contem­
plating with the most pride.”

Wilson’s first response to criticism of the democratic aspects of respon­
sible government was to extol the stability invested in both the British and
American regimes by public opinion. Wilson argued that the British and
their more rough-hewn but nonetheless politically mature brethren in
America were the inheritors of a unique political tradition that had instilled
in them a tremendous respect for law—indeed, a “constitutional morality.”
This tradition also carried a healthy pragmatism and a corresponding dis­
dain for the abstract theories and revolutionary action that had plagued
France’s political development. It was the stability of Anglo-American pub­
lic opinion that ultimately made the government of both nations constitu­
tional. “Parliament dare not go faster than the public thought,” Wilson ar­
gued. “There are vast barriers of conservative public opinion to be overrun
before a ruinous speed in revolutionary change can be attained. In the last analysis, our own Constitution has no better safeguard."

Wilson also moved to rebut Maine and Lowell by insisting that counter to their arguments, responsible government reconciled majority rule with authoritative leadership and the capacity to govern. Wilson's program would temper the popular will by making its focal point a cabinet of "men of first rate powers" whose administrative responsibilities enabled them to "see the problems of government at first hand" and to recognize the trade-offs, imperatives, and limitations accompanying various policies. The executive officers could then use their congressional and party leadership status to school the legislators and the nation at large in the necessities of government (PWW, 5:122).

Bringing the point about governability home, Wilson drew attention to the "grave social and economic problems" that were beginning to arise with urbanization and industrialization. Since Wilson had written Congressional Government, the nation had experienced mounting labor strife. In the face of the serious economic turbulence, "any clumsiness, looseness, or irresponsibility in governmental action must prove a source of grave and increasing peril." The spreading "commercial heats and political distempers" called for "a carefully prescribed physic" (PWW, 5:123).

However, Wilson hesitated at the moment when he might have prescribed a specific change in the Constitution. He "fully admitted" that he had called for constitutional change elsewhere and that he was "strongly of the opinion that such changes would not be too great a price to pay for the advantages secured." But Wilson then bowed to the difficulty of bringing them about and suggested that a more realistic aim would be the erection of a leadership committee in each house. The committees would be charged with preparing and initiating legislation, thereby providing a modicum of integration and system on the congressional side of policy-making. This centralization on Capitol Hill could then perhaps be supplemented, Wilson observed, by more public consultation on the floors of the houses between the new steering committees and the executive department heads. These developments might find the secretaries answering questions, taking part in debate, and generally, serving as representatives of the executive branch. "Such arrangements," he argued, "would constitute responsible government under the Constitution" (PWW, 5:121-22; Wilson's emphasis).

At the same time, though, such arrangements, while more feasible, amounted to far less than the fusion of the executive and legislative branches that Wilson had explicitly called for earlier and that, according to his own
logic, was still the solution to the nation’s problem of governance. His demurral was his way of resolving the conflict between the callings of the academic student of politics and the statesman. Wilson saw himself as a statesman first; he was quite frank in professing that he was studying politics ultimately to bring about political changes. Therefore, it is not surprising that he muted the implications of his analysis to offer a more palatable prescription. Given the dire situation, he believed “some measure of legislative reform is clearly indispensable.” It would not do to hold out for the as yet unrealizable ideal of “ministerial responsibility in its fullness” (*PWW*, 5:123).

Wilson thus took another step in keeping with a political value that he would come to admire more and more over the years—political expediency. Reform, to be plausible and effective, had to build on structures already in existence, on values that were already intimated in a nation’s political development. As he came to embrace the need for expediency in his statesmanship, his program became, on the face of it, more plausible. However, Wilson had to pay for his greater hearing and relevance by subduing the more penetrating insights of his own political analysis concerning the constitutional preconditions of responsible government, to the point where he himself risked losing sight of them.