The President as Statesman

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Published by University Press of Kansas

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The President as Statesman: Woodrow Wilson and the Constitution.

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TWO

Political Development, Interpretive Leadership, and the Presidency

The impact of Congressional Government, published in 1885, Wilson's first year as a college instructor, propelled him on to an increasingly prominent academic career. In 1888, Wesleyan University in Connecticut hired the young scholar away from his initial teaching position at Bryn Mawr. That same year he accepted an invitation to give a short series of lectures in public administration at Johns Hopkins University, an engagement that became an annual affair over the next decade. Then, in 1890, he returned to Princeton as professor of jurisprudence and political economy.

During this rewarding period, Wilson opened a new line of inquiry in which he explored the origins and development of what he termed, in the first installment of this research project, "the modern democratic state."¹ The project was broader in scope than Wilson's previous work. Nevertheless, it was closely related to his writings on the virtues of responsible government and the need to institute it in the United States. Among other things, he wanted "to answer Sir Henry Maine's 'Popular Government' by treating modern democratic tendencies from a much more truly historical point of view." By presenting such a viewpoint, Wilson could better substantiate his claims about the political maturity of the English-speaking peoples and the English origins of U.S. political institutions, thereby buttressing his case against the separation of powers. Hence Wilson's observation that it was into his new line of research that "all my previous schemes have merged drawn by a centripetal force unmistakably natural."² This intellectual force field, in turn, substantially altered the dynamics of Wilson's program for responsible government. His new studies prompted him to reconsider the dynamics of constitutional change, to reaffirm the catalytic role of visionary leaders in
bringing it about, and, ultimately, to discover the need for and possibility of presidential leadership in the United States.

I

In 1889, Wilson published his comprehensive analysis of political development in The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics. Wilson’s analysis drew on the theories of social Darwinism that were then coming to the fore in the United States. His instructors at Johns Hopkins had familiarized him with the organic, evolutionary view of historical development that predominated in Germany, where many of them had been trained, as well as the theories of Herbert Spencer. But the primary influence on Wilson’s thinking in this regard was Walter Bagehot’s Physics and Politics, or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of “Natural Selection” and “Inheritance” to Political Society.

Bagehot’s account of national political development emphasized the importance of social cohesion and commanding authority in the initial stages, when military threats and war were the primary challenge. Over time, however, the “cake of custom” needed to be broken to provide a suitable range of material for the “natural selection” of the best leaders and behaviors along with technological advancement. Likewise, traditional authority had to give way to government by discussion. “Progress is only possible in those happy cases where the force of legality has gone far enough to bind the nation together, but not far enough to kill out all varieties and destroy nature’s perpetual tendency to change.” The “happy cases” that Bagehot referred to were limited to a few Anglo-Saxon nations, including the United States. For all of Bagehot’s criticism of the American form of government in his prior work, he did not see the Americans as less evolved than the British. Indeed the “difficulty of struggling with the wilderness” was in some ways an advantage in that it imparted “the eager restlessness, the high-strung nervous organization” to the American character, which, in turn, speeded along the nation’s development.

Arguing along similar lines in The State, Wilson likened societies to organisms that adapted to their environment and the changes brought on by war, migration, economic development, technological change, and so on. Government was “merely the executive organ of society, the organ through which its habit acts, through which its will becomes operative, through which it adapts itself to its environment and works out for itself a more effective life.” The medium through which this change occurred was the melange of habits, meanings, prejudices, beliefs, sentiments, fears, and
aspirations that Wilson sometimes subsumed under the concept of national character but more often than not referred to as public opinion (597–99).

Against those who argued that constitutions were the fundamental political facts that determined nations’ fates, Wilson maintained that opinion was “a controlling fact; in political development it is the fact of facts.” As public opinion changed with historical circumstances, new institutions and policies became conceivable. So long as political innovation emerged from and was legitimate in terms of the prevailing public opinion, it would contribute to progressive development. If, however, leaders and reformers pursued drastic or anomalous changes, then the outcome would be regressive. “Every nation must constantly keep in touch with its past: it cannot run towards its ends around sharp corners.”

The secret to the well-advanced political evolution of the English-speaking peoples, Wilson argued, was the gradualism and pragmatism that over time had marked the adaptation of their institutions, practices, and policies. This slow but steady evolution had taken place on both sides of the Atlantic. In a revealing new tone, Wilson was now less inclined to compare the U.S. polity unfavorably with that of Great Britain. Americans, too, he suggested, had manifested in their institutions the English genius for politics. Indeed, Wilson argued in *The State* that American political institutions were “in all their main features simply the political institutions of England, as transplanted by English colonists . . . [and] worked out through a fresh development to new and characteristic forms” (449–69).

Wilson was now prepared to argue that the government of the United States had developed progressively over the years. It had overcome the systemic weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation; survived the War of 1812 and then was victorious in Mexico; adjusted to the rapid expansion of the railroads and the tremendous internal migration westward; and, finally, through the painful national catharsis of the Civil War, resolved the sectional crisis and eradicated the increasingly obsolete institution of slavery. Social change, economic development, and international challenges had produced in American public opinion the growth of what Wilson termed “the national idea.” In turn, Wilson argued, this ascendent ethos had transformed the Constitution, creating an effectively national government where one had not previously existed (469–80).

To be sure, Wilson noted in *The State* that there were some persistent aberrations in American political development, namely, the estrangement of the executive from the legislature and the intrusion of politics into administration that resulted. These problems were not in keeping with U.S. status
as an otherwise well-evolved polity of English lineage (565–66, 591–92). Wilson continued to reject A. Lawrence Lowell’s argument that the separation of powers reflected a fundamental difference in the principles underlying the American and British polities. Instead, Wilson believed that the arrangement was a historical artifact that had managed thus far to resist progressive development because of its “peculiar legal status.”

If the separation of powers thus remained an anomaly in Wilson’s theory of political development in the United States, it was one that he predicted would disappear soon enough. In 1889, in a review of James Bryce’s *American Commonwealth*, Wilson observed: “America is now sauntering through her resources and through the mazes of her politics with easy nonchalance; but presently there will come a time when she will be surprised to find herself grown old,—a country crowded, strained, perplexed,—when she will be obliged to fall back upon her conservatism, obliged to pull herself together, adopt a new regimen of life, husband her resources, concentrate her strength, steady her methods, sober her views, restrict her vagaries, trust her best, not her average members. That will be the time of change.” That America would soon “concentrate her strength” and “trust her best, not her average members” in order to respond to the changing environment was an overriding implication of Wilson’s Darwinian theory of political development, in which, “tested by history’s long measurements, the lines of advance are seen to be singularly straight.” This historical optimism marked a considerable shift from Wilson’s earlier writings, in which he foresaw with some pessimism the continued degradation of the U.S. polity unless reformers actively intervened to overhaul the Constitution.

Traces of the pessimism remained, however. Wilson continued to be discomforted by what he believed were the anachronistic limits on responsible government in the United States. Although his theory of political development predicted progress over time, the dearth of leadership in the United States at this critical juncture in its history needed to be resolved soon. By 1889, the same year in which *The State* was published, Wilson indicated that he was ready to pull back from his more assertive theses about the primacy of broad socioeconomic and international forces, and corresponding adjustments in public opinion, as the fundamental variables in political development. Wilson wrote in a set of personal notes that “the formula of evolution is easy, we know; but it is not wholly safe, we suspect.” He did not want to lose sight of the role “that human choice and originating thought” played in political development. Therefore, Wilson concluded that “we need a fresh formulation of the principles [of] political change, and a somewhat shifted point of view.”
II

Wilson offered such a “fresh formulation” in “Leaders of Men,” which he wrote in December 1889 and gave as a popular lecture several times in the 1890s. In this lecture, Wilson celebrated the transformative power of leaders such as William Gladstone, his boyhood hero. This power began to figure more prominently in Wilson’s theory of political development; visionary leaders, he concluded, had to play a catalytic role in bringing it about.\(^{13}\)

To his audiences, Wilson proposed that “leadership, for the statesman, is *interpretation*. He must read the common thought: he must test and calculate very circumspectly the *preparation* of the nation for the next move in the progress of politics” (*PWW*, 6:659; Wilson’s emphasis). Given the subtleties of this task, the statesman clearly needed to possess a special insight into the vectors of history. At the same time, though, he also had to be a man of the people, capable of establishing a rhetorical rapport with them. In this regard, the nuanced reasoning of an Edmund Burke could not bring about the same political movement as the straightforward, resounding oratory of a John Bright (*PWW*, 6:650–56).

For James Ceaser, Jeffrey Tulis, and other adherents of the Hamiltonian vision of political leadership, in which the executive’s power is best grounded in the formal Constitution, leaving him independent of and in a position to refine or even act contrary to public opinion, the Wilsonian leader threatens to become either too weak or too strong. If the leader merely caters to public opinion, the former occurs; if the leader manipulates public opinion and through his demagoguery acquires an irresistible power, the latter.\(^ {14}\)

Wilson recognized that suggesting that the power of leaders depended in large part on their popular support was a controversial step, but in “Leaders of Men,” he defined it as a realistic and necessary one. He noted that the world had changed considerably since the era of the Founding; relations between elites and the common man had taken on a new cast. Extolling the insight of his hero, William Gladstone, into the dynamics of democratic leadership, Wilson proposed that the nineteenth century had “established the principle that public opinion *must* be truckled to (if you *will* use a disagreeable word) in the conduct of government. A man, surely, would not fish for votes . . . among the minority.”\(^ {15}\) What some saw as a vice, Wilson understood to be a precondition for governing in a democratic polity, which the United States increasingly had been since the Jacksonian revolution.\(^ {16}\)

While the leader’s purposes might now have to be those he “interpreted” instead of proposing himself, the power wielded through successfully inter-
preting public opinion would be nonetheless compelling. Indeed, if anything, the power of the Wilsonian leader threatened to become overbearing, and Wilson himself seemed to suggest as much in rhetorical flights like the following: “It is the power which dictates, dominates: the materials yield. Men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader.”

Wilson was certainly aware of the potential abuses of popular leadership. In “Leaders of Men,” he defined the statesman in part by contrasting him with the demagogue: “You will find the one trimming to the inclinations of the moment, the other obedient only to the permanent purposes of the public mind” (PWW, 6:661). Wilson’s implication, of course, was that a demagogue would be unable to sustain his leadership by pandering to temporary whims or passions, whereas the statesman, building on higher political ground, i.e., the “permanent purposes of the public mind,” would be able to prosper. One might reasonably join the Founders and the modern defenders of their regime in questioning this assumption. Might not a clever demagogue be able to fool enough of the people to win office and thereafter degrade the constitutional order?

Wilson’s research in the processes of political development in general, and American political development in particular, led him to think otherwise. He summarized the judgments he had gleaned from this research in other sections of “Leaders” and in doing so qualified his bold pronouncements about the power of leaders to mold public opinion as if it were clay. Even leadership of the most compelling kind had to operate within the significant constraints imposed by the natural inertia of public opinion: “That general sense of the community may wait to be aroused, and the statesman must arouse it; may be inchoate and vague, and the statesman must formulate and make it explicit. But he cannot and should not do more” (PWW, 6:660–61).

Were the statesman to try to do more, to enact policies or reforms for which public opinion was not prepared, he would surely fail. As an organism, society could only develop in limited steps of adaptation. “What a lesson it is in the organic wholeness of Society, this study of leadership,” Wilson remarked. “How subtle and delicate is the growth of the organism, and how difficult initiative in it! Where is rashness? It is excluded. And raw invention? It is discredited” (PWW, 6:670).

In an essay entitled “The Nature of Democracy in the United States,” which Wilson also wrote in 1889, he noted that there were additional constraints on popular leadership in the U.S. polity. He cited the case of Andrew Jackson, whom he regarded as a demagogue. For all of Jackson’s “childish arrogance,” the constitutional tradition in the United States had kept him in check. “He was suffered only to strain the Constitution, not to break it,”
Wilson observed. After being duly elected, Jackson had to operate within "the letter of the law" and cope with "hostile criticism; and . . . he passed into private life as harmlessly as did James Monroe." Wilson also noted that amid the expansiveness and diversity of Madison's republic, it would be very hard for a demagogue to enthral a sufficient portion of the nation to do much damage: "Thoughts which in one quarter kindle enthusiasm may in another meet coolness or arouse antagonism. Events which are fuel to the passions of one section may be but as a passing wind to the minds of another section." 18

Of course these safeguards are not infallible, as demonstrated by the demagoguery that has emanated from state capitols in the South and the U.S. Senate in this century. The likes of Huey Long and Joe McCarthy, however, would not have surprised Wilson. As Stephen Skowronek and Terri Bimes have shown, Wilson regarded appeals of the sort made by Jackson, Andrew Johnson, and the politicians just then beginning to exploit the sectional issue as a real threat to the stability of the political system.\(^{19}\) Indeed, in 1889, Wilson believed the danger of demagoguery in the United States was on the rise, in part because of the increasing speed with which political news could circulate among the masses, and in part because of the new waves of non-English immigrants, whom Wilson believed were more receptive to if not already advocates of radical political doctrines.\(^{20}\)

It was in light of this danger that Wilson renewed his call for more responsible government: "This vast and miscellaneous democracy of ours must be led; its giant faculties must be schooled and directed" (\textit{PWW}, 6:235). He saw his program as one that would reduce if not eliminate the danger of demagoguery. If such leaders "come temporarily to power among us," Wilson argued, "it is because we cut our leadership up into so many little parts and do not subject any one man to the purifying [\textit{sic}] influences of centered responsibility."\(^{21}\) When power was centralized, those holding it had the ability and thus the obligation to back up their promises and accusations, circumstances that tended to temper and discipline their leadership.

Responsible government would constrain popular leaders not only by putting leaders on the spot but also, and more importantly, by tending over time to produce statesmen in the highest echelons of government who would not stoop to demagoguery. Some observers, even those sympathetic to Wilson, have suggested that he harbored an idealistic or romantic view of leadership, one that did not provide institutional solutions to the problems of what statesmen should do and how statesmen could be selected.\(^{22}\) This criticism overlooks Wilson's enduring conviction that his program solved both problems. Establishing "power and strict accountability for its use,"
Wilson believed, would attract better men into politics, provide a rigorous and extended testing ground in which only the ablest statesmen could win power, and compel those responsible for ruling to adopt policies they could defend in the face of focused opposition. That Wilson's solutions were adequate is debatable; that he diagnosed the problem and offered an institutional prescription is not.

With regard to the adequacy of Wilson's program, the following issue does need to be addressed. Could an interpretive statesman serve as a historical switchman, sending American political development in the direction of responsible government? Wilson's discussion of the catalytic role of interpretive leadership, when viewed in the context of his frustration with the peculiar persistence of the separation of executive and legislative powers, indicates that he believed leaders could play a critical role in subjecting the arrangement to an informal but nonetheless fundamental evolution. The potential effects of interpretive leadership in his view went beyond fostering policy innovation and included constitutional adaptation.

But was public opinion in the late nineteenth century really amenable to responsible government? Wilson insisted that it was. The nation's mounting problems demanded responsible government for their resolution, and its political tradition, at least as interpreted by Wilson, portended this innovation. Yet if Lawrence Lowell and Sir Henry Maine were right, and the separation of powers was neither an obsolete nor an anomalous arrangement but rather vital and integral to the American political tradition, then even the most compelling statesman would have great difficulty reshaping the public opinion supporting it.

Wilson had another problem: in a sense, the Constitution had a self-defense mechanism against the Wilsonian leader. The constitutional division between the president and Congress, the bicameral legislature, the plethora of congressional committees, the pragmatic and secretive party organizations, all these features of American government and politics meant not only that there was no suitable platform for interpretive leadership in the U.S. polity, but also that any interpretive efforts to create one would be exposed to political scorn from some of the other disparate power centers.

Over the course of the 1890s, however, Wilson came to believe that despite these obstacles a platform suitable for interpretive leadership was emerging in the United States, in keeping with the progressive laws of political development, and that visionary men might use this platform to bring about more responsible government. He was increasingly convinced that such leaders might thrive not in Congress, as he had once thought, but in the presidency.
In late 1889, just after he drafted “Leaders of Men” and just before he embarked on more than a decade’s worth of research and writing in American history, Wilson confided to his journal that:

The phrase that Bagehot uses to describe the successful constitutional statesman I might appropriate to describe myself: “a man with common opinions but uncommon ability.” I receive the opinions of my day, I do not conceive them. But I receive them into a vivid mind, with a quick imaginative realization, and a power to see as a whole the long genesis of the opinions received. I have little impatience with existing conditions; I comprehend too perfectly how they came to exist, how natural they are. I have great confidence in progress; I feel the movement that is in affairs and am conscious of a persistent push behind the present order.23

No longer an impatient physician prescribing drastic remedies, Wilson was now confident enough in his “uncommon” political insight and “the persistent push behind the present order” that he was willing to serve as a Hegelian handmaiden to reform. He would clear the way for more responsible government by describing how it was already intimated in American history. As Wilson posed the question to his journal, “Why may not the present age write, through me, its political autobiography?”24 It was this grand aspiration that lay behind Wilson’s discovery of the need for and possibility of presidential leadership in the United States.

It was not obvious that the presidency deserved such a rethinking in the early 1890s. Indeed, many observers were more impressed by the forceful presence of Thomas Brackett Reed, Speaker of the House, and the “Reed rules” he imposed on that body, which significantly boosted his power to control it. One was Albert Bushnell Hart, a professor of history at Harvard. In 1891, Hart expounded on the implications of the recent developments on Capitol Hill in an *Atlantic* article entitled “The Speaker as Premier.” Hart implicitly chided Wilson and the rest of the “small and very earnest band of men” who had advocated parliamentary reforms of the American government. The reformers, Hart argued, had failed to see that with the augmented power of the Speaker, “there has actually grown up within our system of government an officer who possesses and exercises the most important powers entrusted to the head of the administration of England.”25

Wilson did not find Hart’s argument persuasive. “The essential feature of the [English] Premier’s Leadership,” he wrote to Hart, “is that he is, while he leads the House, himself constantly in the midst of administrative busi-
ness.” This latter business gave the leader the perspective that was crucial for crafting sound legislation, and it made the leader responsible in the sense of being accountable for the execution and effects of the laws. Because Reed was an “officer who belongs wholly to the legislature,” he lacked both the perspective and the responsibility that Wilson deemed essential. Wilson put the criticism more sharply in a letter to James Bryce, who was then working on a revised edition of *The American Commonwealth* and had asked if any of the changes in Congress had significantly altered the analysis presented in *Congressional Government* (the Englishman had relied on Wilson’s book when writing his first edition). The mistake of Hart and those who saw the Speaker as an emergent prime minister, Wilson argued, was that “they think what we need is concentration of power, and consequent concentration of responsibility, in the Houses merely; when what we need is the marriage of legislation and practical statesmanship—a responsible direction of those who make the laws by those who must carry them out and approve or damn themselves in the process.”26 A visit that Wilson would have with Speaker Reed later in the decade vindicated this judgment. Reed had read *Congressional Government* and told Wilson that he was quite impressed with its analysis of “government by helter skelter.” When Wilson asked the Speaker where Congress was heading, Reed said he did not know; he simply did what seemed to be “most convenient at the moment.”27

In 1893, Wilson’s doubts about leadership that did not span and integrate the legislative and executive powers also led him to criticize what he regarded as Grover Cleveland’s efforts to govern unilaterally from the executive branch. The worrisome sign to Wilson was Cleveland’s decision at the outset of his second term to break with tradition and select personal associates instead of recognized party leaders for most of his cabinet posts. Cleveland’s actions, Wilson argued, raised a fundamental question: “Are we to have a purely administrative cabinet, and individual choice of policy by the President, or are we to have responsible party government?”28

Although Wilson admired Cleveland’s character and supported his policies, he nonetheless warned that the general precedent set by the second term cabinet “commits the country . . . in a hazardous degree, to the understanding and capacity of a single man.” That the president was often elevated “hastily, by the unpremeditated compromises or the sudden impulses of huge popular conventions,” made the country’s reliance on his judgment even more problematic. Wilson also noted that given the limitations on the president’s time, the cabinet secretaries “must decide many questions which bear directly on the general policy of the Administration.” The risks of relying on an untested leader were thus compounded by the inevitable need
to rely on the judgment of his personal—and unelected—associates. And men who were relatively new to governing in Washington would lack the experience to generate the “highest efficiency” in administration, efficiency that could only result from a “close cooperation and intimate mutual understanding” between the executive and the legislative branches.”

Instead, Wilson argued, the burdens of the executive should be shouldered by a group of men whose judgment and abilities had been proven in previous party battles—“by the conservative processes of the survival of the fittest in Congress”—and who thereby enjoyed established ties with fellow partisans in the legislature. Such men could symbolically bridge the separation of powers and bear witness that a whole party, not simply one man, was accountable for the administration’s policies. In a new twist to his program, Wilson suggested that the cabinet would be more explicitly turned into such a “responsible party council” if public opinion, operating through the Senate’s powers of confirmation, forced the president “to call to the chief places in the departments representative party men who have accredited themselves for such functions by a long and honorable public service.” Wilson thus continued his call for the cabinet to serve as “a natural connecting link” between the executive and the legislature, though his descriptions of the mechanisms through which the link might be established were becoming more informal and ambiguous.

Such were Wilson’s conclusions at the outset of Cleveland’s second term. By its end, however, Wilson gave a decidedly different interpretation of both the man and the office. Writing in the Atlantic, Wilson was speaking most of all for himself when he observed that Cleveland’s “singular independence and force of purpose have made the real character of the government of the United States more evident than it ever was before.... He has refreshed our notion of an American chief magistrate.”

What was most impressive to Wilson was the way in which Cleveland had called into question the claim of Congressional Government that the president was simply a creature of—and could not begin to re-create—the pragmatic, parochial features of the American party system. To understand the revelation that Cleveland’s example brought home to Wilson, we need to review the young political scientist’s evolving impressions of contemporary politics in the 1880s and 1890s.

For all of Wilson’s scholarly interest in the reform of American politics and government, after the Hayes-Tilden campaign of 1876 he grew increasingly aloof from practical politics. Wilson had a problem in that he was committed to the agenda of liberal reformers such as E. L. Godkin and Carl Schurz: civil service reform, free trade, and sound currency. However, Wilson
also was a Democrat; his party was heavily populated with spoilsmen, and
as he observed the month before the 1880 election, it appeared to be “allying
itself, in its pursuit of power, with every damnable heresy—with Green­
backers as with protectionists.” 32 In 1881 he reported to a friend that he was
not growing tired of politics per se, only “of the unsavory particulars of
party intrigues and personal politics.” In contrast, Wilson observed that he
was increasingly interested in “political principles, in genuine political opin­
ions honestly held, in political tendencies, and in the broader phases of party
movements.” 33

Wilson was looking for a party to rally around a principled agenda that
addressed the policy challenges of the 1880s, not the war of the 1860s. For
a brief while in 1884, he thought that Grover Cleveland might be the man
to bring this change about; here at last was a strong character and a Demo­
crat with whom Wilson agreed on the issues. But Cleveland’s early refusal
to take an active legislative initiative, and his apparent inability to impose
his principles on his party, suggested to Wilson that something more was
needed. In an 1886 article in the Boston Times entitled “Wanted—A Party,”
he bemoaned the muddled lines of division between the parties and their
predilection for slogging “played out” issues. He also looked forward to a
day when “a new party will be formed—and another party opposed to
it. All that is wanting is a new, genuine, and really meant purpose held by a
few strong men of principle and boldness. That is a big ‘all’ and it is still
conspicuously wanting.” It would want a while longer. In 1889, shortly after
the start of what he termed the “reactionary administration” of Republican
Party regular Benjamin Harrison, Wilson reported feeling angry and de­
spendent; his interest in affairs in Washington had “suffered a decided col­
lapse.” 34

Then Grover Cleveland’s second term in the White House piqued that
interest. As Wilson viewed things from the end of that term, he identified
the key turning point back in 1887: midway through Cleveland’s first term,
when “sick of seeing a great party drift and dally,” the president threw down
the gauntlet for tariff reform in his annual message to Congress. Cleveland’s
continued pressing of this issue during the next election year and then again
in his second term, along with his spearheading the repeal of the Silver
Purchase Act and his significant expansion of civil service reform—all of
which he did notwithstanding the grousing of the pragmatic politicians
in his party—thoroughly impressed Wilson. Here, at last, was a leader who
“called himself a party man” but was nevertheless committed ultimately to
what he saw as the party’s long-standing principles—not the short-term suc­
cess of the organization. Wilson insisted that Cleveland was no less a partisan
for his priorities; rather, the president had “deemed his party better served by manliness and integrity than by chicanery.” That Cleveland’s leadership ultimately divided and led to political disaster for the Democratic Party was beside the point. The Bryanite Democrats, running on the wrong side of the silver issue as Cleveland had defined it, had been thoroughly repudiated in 1896, or so it seemed to Wilson. Cleveland had “forced the fight” on silver and thus engaged in an act of creative destruction. He cleared the way for the rise of a new, more principled party.

The “singular independence and force of purpose” that Wilson detected in Cleveland’s enduring refusal to play politics as usual on the tariff and his resolute stand on silver suggested to Wilson that a president could in fact set the legislative agenda, if not control it outright, in Washington. “Power had somehow gone the length of the avenue,” Wilson quipped, “and settled in one man.” Maine and Lowell, for all of their championing of the nineteenth-century presidency, did not detect this capacity in the office, perhaps because in Cleveland’s case the power had not come simply from the Constitution. Wilson commented of Cleveland that on the initial tariff question “the country watched him, waiting for him to speak, the only representative of the nation as a whole in the government.” The circumstances compelled Cleveland to move beyond the limited, negative conception of the executive’s legislative role with which he had come to the office. As he did so, he held the nation’s attention. He knew this and warmed to the task: “The habit of independent initiative in respect of questions of legislative policy was growing upon him, as he felt his personal power grow.”

Wilson was not the only one praising Cleveland at the close of his second term. Liberal reformers Godkin and Schurz also wrote testimonials, admiring Cleveland as a moralistic repudiator, for the enemies he made. Cleveland had done what they had always wanted a president to do: say no to the party politicians in Congress, frequently and forcefully. As Godkin’s Nation put it the day he left office, “Where other statesmen have left behind them a monument of wise laws passed, he has left a monument of foolish and base laws prevented.” For his part, Schurz reserved his highest accolades for the “civic heroism” demonstrated by Cleveland in vetoing a handful of appropriation and pension bills he regarded as faulty just before leaving office.

Wilson was looking for a more constructive form of leadership then were Godkin and Schurz. Cleveland’s steadfastness and his willingness to use his veto pen appealed to Wilson, to be sure. But it was what was intimated in Cleveland’s presidency—the possibility of a proactive, principled executive, one who could remake his party and take the legislative initiative—that Wilson most appreciated. The “direct, fearless, and somewhat unsophisti-
icated” Cleveland had moved haltingly toward this possibility, Wilson noted, “as if in spite of himself,” and he had never sought to lead Democrats in Congress with persuasion as well as mastery. His example gave Wilson a sense of what a sophisticated, willing, and persuasive president could do.  

The departures of Cleveland’s presidency, and their ramifications for government and party politics, were especially striking to Wilson because of the broader historical context in which they occurred. Developments in the 1890s persuaded Wilson more and more that there was a pressing need for authoritative national leadership in the U.S. polity that only the president could provide. Prominent among these developments was the symbolic closing of the frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner influenced Wilson’s thinking about the import of this event. Wilson had befriended Turner when they had lived in the same boardinghouse near Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. The two provincials, Wilson from the South and Turner from the West, spent many evenings discussing American history and the role of the sections in its development. The influence went in both directions; Wilson encouraged and guided Turner as the latter was working out his frontier thesis. Turner would recall later that Wilson’s “emphasis upon Bagehot’s idea of ‘breaking the cake of custom’ left a deep impression on me when I came to consider what part the West had played.”

Like Bagehot and Turner, Wilson understood the West not so much as a section but as a “stage of development,” one that had quickened American life, given it a more democratic spirit, and widened the practical meaning of freedom in the nation. The close of the frontier raised new challenges for the polity. The American character would have to be preserved and developed further without the unique perspective borne of the frontier, and socioeconomic pressures would increase as the migrating nation turned back on itself. “The free lands are gone,” Wilson warned. Americans would have to “make their life sufficient without this easy escape.”

At the same time that the nation was losing the safety valve of the frontier, it was being buffeted by the escalating pressures of industrialization and urbanization, a growing number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, mounting labor strife, and a surge in sectional and populist unrest. Wilson was keenly aware of the historical flux resulting from these trends. In 1897 he observed that the modernizing nation stood “unfinished, unharmonized.” The situation called for “leadership of a much higher order to teach us the triumphs of cooperation, the self-possession and calm choices of maturity.”

Wilson recognized that the policies needed to integrate and manage the transformed society and economy were of a different sort than the distribu-
tive patterns that had predominated for most of the nineteenth century. Regulating the railroads, giant industries, and trusts; revising the tariff in the wake of industrial growth; and reforming the currency, among other tasks, all raised hard questions, pitting section against section, interest against interest. These new issues could not be settled through “a mere compounding of differences, a mere unguided interplay of rival individual forces,” and they could not be avoided for much longer. In these circumstances, authoritative national leadership was essential. Yet, Wilson asked in an 1897 address entitled “Leaderless Government,” who was in a position to provide such direction and judgment? “Who is to reconcile our interests and extract what is national and liberal out of what is sectional and selfish?”

The answer that Wilson was reaching for was the president. In preparing the way for this conclusion—no small revision of his program—he noted the legacy of strong presidential leadership offered by the likes of Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln. More important, Wilson went beyond the historical precedents for presidential leadership (recently brought up to date by Cleveland) to note the potential authority and power that inhered in the presidential office as a representative institution. Only the president held a national office and represented the people as a whole. In contrast, the political vision of members of Congress, representing as they did particular constituencies, states, and sections, tended to be more limited and parochial. Wilson implied that as a result the president was in a better position to discern the public interest at home and the national interest abroad.

Wilson understood that the president’s ability to serve as an authoritative national leader was limited by the taint from his selection through the internecine processes of the nominating conventions as well as by the lack of any formal connections between the president and his cabinet, on the one hand, and their party’s legislators in Congress, on the other. Wilson remained purposefully ambiguous about how these problems might be rectified and responsible government instituted. Nevertheless, in “Leaderless Government,” Wilson took a significant step: he had suggested that the platform for national leadership that he had long been calling for should be situated not in the Capitol but in the White House.

Wilson’s belief that the nation had to rely on the encompassing leadership of the president to resolve the new problems it confronted in the 1890s grew even more pronounced at the end of the decade, when the Spanish American War established the United States as a world and colonial power. Many reformers worried that the American conquest marked a dangerous imperial departure in the nation’s foreign policy and would distract attention from
domestic reform. Yet as Wilson told himself in a personal memorandum written as the war came to a close, "The thing is done; cannot be undone, and our future must spring out of it." Moreover, after he reconsidered his program in light of the sudden change in "the scenes, the stage itself upon which we act," the future he projected was actually one of more responsible government. 46

In his early writings, Wilson had hardly touched upon foreign affairs. Civil service reform, the soundness of the currency, and tariff revision were the issues that had animated him in the 1880s and 1890s. Insofar as he did address foreign affairs in this period, it was largely to note how congressional power, in particular the "treaty-marring" power of the Senate, tended to trammel on the president's ostensible powers in this domain. Wilson was quick to contrast this pattern with the deference that he believed Parliament accorded the Ministry as it exercised the Crown's prerogative in the making of British foreign policy. 47

All this changed after the war with Spain. In the preface to the fifteenth edition of Congressional Government, which Wilson drafted in 1900, he proposed that "when foreign affairs play a prominent part in the politics and policy of a nation, its Executive must of necessity be its guide: must utter every initial judgement, take every first step of action, supply the information upon which it is to act, suggest and in large measure control its conduct" (xi-xii).

Wilson did not explicate his convictions concerning the "necessity" of executive dominance in foreign affairs, but as this passage indicates, he shared the judgments of Alexander Hamilton. The institutional efficiency of the "energetic executive," arising from the office's capacity for "decision, activity, secrecy, and despatch," made it both right and necessary that the president take the lead in matters of war and diplomacy. This initiative, in turn, effectively enabled the president to control the nation's policy. 48

The functional logic of executive dominance in international affairs, Wilson argued, was evident in American history. When foreign affairs and war dominated the agenda, strong presidents emerged and dominated the polity. Conversely, he held that apart from the accelerating organizational capacity of Congress, the leading cause of the subordinate presidency for much of the nineteenth century was the preeminence of domestic affairs, in which Congress had more of a role to play because of its superior capacity to represent local interests and concerns. 49

The war with Spain and the seizure of the Philippines, Wilson argued, had broken this pattern once and for all. The nation was now "in the very presence of forces which must make the politics of the twentieth century
radically unlike the politics of the nineteenth.\textsuperscript{50} The demands of imperial administration would strengthen the position of the executive branch vis-à-vis more parochial interests in the parties and the legislature. Furthermore, as the focus of party politics shifted from patronage and reconciling sectional disputes to encompass the broader scope of international affairs, the statesman bearing responsibility for these affairs would be better positioned to lead his party. The greater institutional resources and political prominence of the chief executive in turn would make it easier for him to frame the debates over domestic as well as foreign policies. Hence Wilson's pregnant suggestion as he closed out his preface to the new edition of \textit{Congressional Government} that the recent war might "put this whole volume hopelessly out of date."\textsuperscript{51}

The prophecy marked a significant shift in Wilson's program. In 1885, in the first edition of his book, he had been a heretical critic of the Founders' Constitution, in particular of its "radical defect," the separation of powers, which he had argued precluded responsible leadership. Now he was suggesting that such leadership could flourish in the Founders' regime. To be sure, he did not see this possibility as resulting from the Founders' constitutional provision for an independent and energetic executive power with special responsibilities for diplomacy and command. To Wilson's mind it was the necessities of foreign affairs that gave rise to the new promise of presidential leadership. But inasmuch as he was implicitly agreeing that the Constitution allowed for an ample response to the necessities, he accepted the Founders' creation. This acceptance would have no small effect on his program for responsible government.

A less dramatic event in 1898—the publication of Henry Jones Ford's \textit{The Rise and Growth of American Politics}—bolstered Wilson's willingness to let go of long-held views on the basic dynamics of American politics. Ford, a newspaper reporter, argued that the president's national constituency and his unequaled influence on public opinion established the inhabitant of the White House as the dominant force in the polity and an unrivaled catalyst for progressive change. Wilson, of course, was beginning to believe the same thing. What distinguished Ford's account was that he believed the presidency had emerged long before to play such a role. Indeed, Ford contended that since the Jacksonian revolution and the advent of mass parties had transformed the office into a democratic, representative institution, "the agency of the presidential office has been such a master force in shaping public policy that to give a detailed account of it would be equivalent to writing the political history of the United States."\textsuperscript{52}

Ford's book clearly had an impact on Wilson. He praised it as "lucid and
convincing," recommended it on reading lists to his students as a useful counterpoise to *Congressional Government*, and successfully worked to bring Ford to teach at Princeton. The most suggestive evidence of Ford's influence on Wilson, however, comes from reading the sections of *Rise and Growth* that exult the power of the presidency to shape public opinion, party politics, and policy and the sections of Wilson's *Constitutional Government*, published ten years later, that discuss the office in remarkably similar terms. Wilson had been in the process of discovering the potential of the presidency before Ford wrote his book, and Ford's analysis served to clarify and confirm Wilson's developing thoughts on presidential power.  

If Henry Jones Ford's *Rise and Growth* served as the intellectual confirmation for Wilson's new understanding of the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt's vocal stewardship of the public interest served as the political confirmation. The growing tensions between the two ambitious men left Wilson hesitant to praise Roosevelt by name in his scholarly writings during the 1900s, but Wilson was not so reticent in his lectures to students and speeches to reform clubs.  

Several facets of Roosevelt's leadership made a profound impression on Wilson. He was struck by Roosevelt's willingness to roll up his sleeves and enter the fray of party politics. Wilson held him up as an example to reformers, who were increasingly prone to antipartisan sentiments: "The danger of our age is not partisanship, but that our thoughtful men will belong to no party. Don't form yourself into a third party. Don't isolate yourself. Go into the arena and take your active part." Wilson also appreciated the active policy initiative that Roosevelt assumed in the White House. "Whatever else we may think or say of Theodore Roosevelt," Wilson told his students in 1909, "we must admit that he is an aggressive leader. He led Congress—he was not driven by Congress." Finally, Wilson was impressed, albeit with some unease, by the audacity of Roosevelt's willingness, in the latter's words, "to appeal over the heads of the Senate and the House Leaders to the people, who were the master of both of us" when the president and Congress were at loggerheads over a policy. Although he thought that the president's appeals were often too brash and strident, Wilson observed that at no time was Roosevelt a stronger and more popular leader than when "he spoke of any inside matter he pleased, as if it were the people's privilege to know what was going on within their government."  

All these developments at the turn of the twentieth century seemed consistent with Wilson's expectations regarding the progressive path of political development and the role of dynamic leaders in fostering progress.
precedented set of challenges at home and abroad and the bold responses to them by presidents such as Cleveland and Roosevelt were bracing the nation and opening up new possibilities of leadership. Whether and how these developments would put Wilson's analysis in *Congressional Government* "hopelessly out of date" by engendering responsible government remained to be seen.