Wilson’s Program and the New Freedom

In February 1913, one month before taking the oath of office, Wilson wrote a revealing letter (which he intended for public consumption) to Democratic Representative A. Mitchell Palmer of Pennsylvania. In what came to be known as the Palmer letter after its release, Wilson argued that the presidency was “passing through a transitional stage.” To have so many expectations for leadership increasingly centered on the president was “quite abnormal and must lead eventually to something very different.” The president was expected to be not only the chief executive but also the “leader of his party,” a “prime minister as much concerned with the guidance of legislation as with the just and orderly execution of the law.” And the president stood as “the spokesman of the nation in everything, even the most momentous and most delicate dealings of the government with foreign nations.”

Up to this point in his letter to Palmer, Wilson had essentially summarized the findings of Constitutional Government. For a tantalizing moment, though, he went further than he had in his book, suggesting that reform was needed to relieve the “quite abnormal” burdens and tensions of the presidency, reform that would provide for more responsible government. Eventually the president “must be made answerable to opinion in a somewhat more informal and intimate fashion—answerable, it may be, to the Houses whom he seeks to lead, either personally or through a cabinet, as well as to the people for whom they speak.” Yet Wilson still left open the question of how and when this change would occur: “That is a matter to be worked out—as it inevitably will be, in some natural American way which we cannot yet even predict.”

If Wilson could not predict the way and time in which responsible government might be established, he was nevertheless seeking to “interpret” such a change in the Palmer letter. His interpretation embodies both the ambiguity and the optimism of his revised program. The ambiguity
stemmed from a tension that he had long tried but ultimately failed to resolve between his conviction that the nation would "inevitably" resort to responsible government as the solution for its mounting problems of governance, on the one hand, and his awareness that the Constitution, party system, and political culture of the United States all worked against this solution, on the other. For all of his theoretical difficulties in this regard, Wilson remained remarkably confident about the prospects of his program for responsible government. Over the years he had developed considerable faith in the progress of history, in the functional adaptation that occurred when mature polities like the United States were confronted with new challenges. Wilson also believed that wise and compelling leaders, by interpreting the course of progress for their followers, could serve as the handmaidens for political development. Given that he himself would be exercising interpretive leadership in the White House, Wilson had even more reason to be confident of the eventual realization of his program.

I

Wilson's confidence in this regard was clearly reflected in his remarkable acts of interpretive leadership upon taking office. He called the 63d Congress into a special early session in order to revise the tariff downward, the perennial goal of Wilson and the Democratic Party. He decided to take the extraordinary step of convening the session by going to Capitol Hill and speaking to the legislators in person. No president had done this since John Adams; Thomas Jefferson had stopped what he regarded as the royalist practice of his Federalist predecessors. When writing The State in the late 1880s, Wilson had argued that Jefferson's decision had effectively dashed the first intimations of responsible government in the United States; with his decision to reverse Jefferson's reversal, Wilson intended to put American political development back on course.

Several members of Wilson's cabinet were unsettled by his intention and conveyed their lack of enthusiasm to him. When word of Wilson's visit reached Congress, there was a more pronounced protest as legislators with whiggish scruples, most notably John Sharp Williams, Democratic senator from Mississippi and Jefferson's biographer, inveighed against the very idea of such an address from the throne. Wilson, in his comments to the press before going to the Capitol, sought to alleviate congressional fears by explaining that he had nothing more radical in mind than open communication. Yet some discomfort was still apparent on the afternoon of April 8, 1913, when Wilson walked into the joint session, the representatives and senators before him on the floor, the galleries packed with diplomats, journalists, and
onlookers. To reassure the restive members of his audience, Wilson began by observing that he was glad for the opportunity to prove he was “not a mere department of the Government hailing Congress from some isolated island of jealous power” but rather “a human being trying to co-operate with other human beings in a common service.”

Wilson was not yet done breaking with precedent. The next day he returned to the Capitol to confer with the Democratic senators of the Finance Committee on the tariff revision. He was the first chief executive to use the President’s Room in the Capitol since Lincoln had during the Civil War. Wilson’s opting to participate in his legislative party’s deliberations, like his address on tariff reform the night before, was a matter of some controversy. Nevertheless, he assured the reporters gathered outside the Capitol that his return visit was by no means a “national crisis” but only another effort to reach out to Congress in a cooperative spirit.

Wilson undertook his initiatives deliberately, as a symbolic unification of the executive and legislative branches whose separation had long troubled him. “That is perhaps the reason why I have done some very unconventional things in this very conventional town,” he told the Gridiron Club on April 12, as the hubbub over his initiatives was starting to recede. “This business of the division of powers, carried to the point of punctilio to which it has been carried, amounts to a permanent misunderstanding, to a permanent incapacity to get together.” With his deeds and his words, then, Wilson was exercising interpretive leadership. In an age when people were more and more inclined to look to the executive for constructive direction, Wilson’s departures from tradition, however unusual, could be seen as natural and potentially helpful developments, the success of which would ultimately hinge on the president’s discretion. “Never can there have been a case where the tone will so clearly make the song,” as the Nation put it. Wilson’s initial tone, combining as it did assertive and accommodating elements, held considerable promise.

In addition to the speech on tariff revision, Wilson appeared on Capitol Hill to call for currency and banking reform and for antitrust legislation. He kept his addresses relatively short and stuck to what he saw as the problems that needed to be solved and the key principles at stake with each reform. Wilson delivered these concise and resonating messages every few months, as the time grew ripe for each new piece of legislation. They were thus focused upon and widely disseminated in their entirety by the newspapers. It was not only Congress, then, but also the nation at large that Wilson was addressing.

That Wilson’s appearances on Capitol Hill drew the spotlight of public
opinion was in keeping with his intention of introducing many of the forms and, he hoped, the benefits of parliamentary government in the United States. His admiration of the Westminster regime originated in large part because the executive’s presence in the legislature sharpened debate and captured the public’s attention. With his appearances, Wilson was attempting to signify that responsibility for governing had indeed been invested in the executive and his legislative party. In his address on currency and banking reform, he aptly summarized the motivation behind each of his appearances: “I have come to you, as the head of the Government and the responsible leader of the party in power, to urge action now, while there is time to serve the country deliberately and as we should, in a clear air of common counsel.”

While on one level Wilson’s traveling to the Capitol bespoke a desire for open communication, “a clear air of common counsel,” there was also a coercive element in his addresses. He used his appearances to influence the timing of the legislative agenda and to outline the general form that the bills needed to take, putting the parties as well as the institution of Congress on the spot in the process. Wilson’s proclamations about party responsibility gave the Republicans notice that the Democrats were governing. At the same time, his unflinching descriptions of the duties of the governing party made it difficult for congressional Democrats to stand in the way of the reforms he was advocating.

Wilson combined his formal addresses to Congress with a more informal and interactive mode of presidential–congressional relations. His visit to the President’s Room the day after his tariff address was not merely symbolic. At the Capitol, the White House, and over the direct phone line that Wilson had installed between the two buildings, the president was continually conferring with legislators, working with the Democratic committee chairs and floor leaders as they drafted and shepherded the New Freedom bills, marshaling a consensus among the various factions of his party, and buttonholing undecided Democrats before key votes. And the communication along Pennsylvania Avenue went in both directions. Wilson was not imposing legislation upon but rather drawing it out of Congress. With each of the New Freedom measures, he was refining and advocating bills that originated in Congress, not the administration. To be sure, Wilson put his stamp on the legislation. It was at his insistence, for example, that the “Democratic” commodity of sugar was not exempted from the tariff reduction. But Wilson also accommodated the legislators, such as when he bowed to the demands of Bryanite Democrats that the federal government, not private bankers,
control the central board of the new banking system and underwrite the currency it issued.9

Thus Wilson was not being disingenuous (though he was downplaying the importance of his own unprecedented, systematic legislative leadership) when, in November 1913, he responded to a reporter's question about his trust program by declaring

You know, my trust program is largely fiction . . . Of course, I have certain ideas which I am earnestly [intent] on seeing carried out, and about which I have already conferred in an informal way with Senator Newlands and the chairman of the House committee. And I think from those conferences that we really are, at any rate, thinking along very much the same lines, that it is very feasible to do what I have usually done in these matters. I haven't had a tariff program. I haven't had a currency program. I have conferred with these men who handle these things, and asked the questions, and then have gotten back what they sent me—the best of our common counsel. That is just what I am trying to do in this case.10

Wilson's portrait of himself as merely the interlocutor and coordinator of Congress, not its dominating master, was certainly consistent with the discretion of his public rhetoric. Consider, for example, his most publicized statement in this period, his dramatic denunciation of the intense lobbying that was bogging down the revision of the tariff. He issued his warning on May 26, 1913, as the bill came before the Senate, where tariff reform had traditionally been sabotaged and where certain legislators, including some Democrats, were apparently prepared to collaborate with the interests once again. Though Wilson knew who they were, he did not single out the collaborators. Instead, he focused public attention on the lobbyists—"so numerous, so industrious . . . so insidious"—and positioned himself as the defender of Congress: "I know that . . . I am speaking for the members of the two houses, who would rejoice as much as I would, to be released from this unbearable situation." The attention generated by Wilson's statement made it impossible for senators to conduct tariff politics as usual—indeed, they eventually passed deeper cuts than the House did—yet his phrasing was such that they could not easily take public offense to it.11

Wilson had even more occasion to criticize members of Congress directly and publicly in October 1913, when he faced what would be the sharpest challenge to his leadership of domestic legislation during the New Freedom. Three Democratic renegades on the Senate Banking Committee, James O'Gorman from New York, Gilbert Hitchcock from Nebraska, and
James Reed from Missouri, were refusing to sign on to the Federal Reserve bill. Their refusal endangered the product of Wilson's painstaking labors during the summer to get the Bourbon and Bryanite factions of his party to agree on a compromise reform plan.  

Wilson urged the Democrats in the Senate to force the dissidents back into the party fold. Newspaper reports suggested that Wilson was even prepared to read O’Gorman, Hitchcock, and Reed out of the party and to speak out against them in their states if they did not acquiesce. Wilson was indeed furious with the three senators, but he was well aware of the need—and took care—to keep his temper and respect senatorial sensitivities in order to win approval of the bill. With the issue still hanging fire, Wilson told reporters that he had no intention of appealing to the constituencies of the dissidents. He also wrote to the Washington Post, which had reported his alleged threat of party ostracism, as follows: “I am quoted in your issue of this morning as saying that anyone who does not support me is no Democrat but a rebel. Of course, I never said any such thing. It is contrary to both my thought and character, and I must ask that you give a very prominent place in your issue of tomorrow to this denial.” Wilson then continued to hold his temper and abstain from public criticism of his opponents. After more negotiations with the dissidents, the Federal Reserve bill was dislodged from the committee and before the end of 1913 was passed by Congress.

These examples are not meant to suggest that Wilson’s leadership in the New Freedom period was not forceful or that it did not rest in large part on his leadership of public opinion. Wilson’s protests and denials notwithstanding, with his formal addresses before Congress and with public statements such as his denunciation of the tariff lobby, he sought to drive the legislative agenda and compel wavering legislators to support the New Freedom bills. Reports of his conversations with individual members of Congress indicate that he was apt, politely but resolutely, to speak of the duty to follow public opinion in private settings as well. Nevertheless, Wilson carefully avoided public criticism of congressional Democrats opposed to his policies, worded his statements so that public opinion, not he himself, stood as the “boss,” and pursued his policy goals by working with and through the Democrats on Capitol Hill. Indeed, it was as much their agenda as his.

But this was, of course, not all that Wilson was trying to do. By the end of September 1914, as Congress prepared to pass the Clayton Antitrust Act, the last of the major New Freedom reforms, Wilson had good reason for confidence in the success of his program for responsible government. Indeed, it was at this juncture in his presidency that he had the conversation with
Colonel House, noted at the outset of this book, in which the president suggested that constitutional amendments were unnecessary because he could transform the political system through the power of his personal leadership.

Several editorial observers were reaching similar conclusions. They had been struck by how Wilson's systematic leadership of Congress was unlike anything they had witnessed and pointed to new possibilities in American politics. Even the *New Republic*, the fledgling progressive journal of opinion at which Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann served as editors, acknowledged that Wilson's legislative leadership transcended that of its own patron saint, Theodore Roosevelt. The editors observed that Roosevelt had "made no consistent attempt to work through and by means of Congress," relying primarily instead on "arousing public opinion." Wilson also had led public opinion, but more adeptly, in ways that did not keep him from reaching out to and working with legislators. As a result, he had been more productive. While the editors worried that Wilson's approach might lead him to make too many compromises with the Democratic majorities, they concluded that "in establishing regular forms of co-operation and a better general understanding between the President and Congress, Mr. Wilson is accomplishing an immediately beneficent constitutional reform."  

The judgments of Wilson's contemporaries have since been confirmed by students of the historical development of the presidency. In this regard, Wilfred Binkley's claim that during the 63d Congress "Woodrow Wilson's formula for responsible government was working as planned" seems hard to refute. However, when it came to remaking party politics—a task that, as Wilson knew, was an inextricable part of his program for integrating the separation of powers—his formula was proving to be more problematic.

II

Wilson's program rested on the assumption that the president could rely on the support of disciplined party majorities in Congress. Insofar as this discipline needed bolstering, the president could accomplish it by publicly committing the party to the legislation that corresponded with its principles, on the one hand, and by working actively behind the scenes to build a consensus in support of the measures, on the other. This was what Wilson was trying to do in the New Freedom years. Yet his adroit reconciliation of such divergent roles was not enough. He also had to rely on the imposition of a party line in closed legislative caucuses and the enticements of the spoils system.

At the end of the 63d Congress, a congress in which the legislative caucus
flourished as it never had before, or since, in American history, a Democratic legislator wrote to President Wilson to complain about the frequency and force with which the party whip had been applied. Unmoved by the objections, Wilson told the dissident that while freewheeling debates were appropriate in the caucus, the party had to present a united front on the legislative floor. “I do not see how party government is possible,” he argued, “if individuals are to exercise the privilege of defeating a decisive majority of their own party associates in framing and carrying out the policy of the party.” To buttress this judgment, Wilson added that it had been borne out in both his “years of study” and his “recent years of experience.”

Wilson’s letter was misleading. His political experience may have convinced him of the imperative of caucus discipline, but as noted earlier, he had not been so convinced in his “years of study.” The young Woodrow Wilson had looked forward to the day when instead of a cigar-smoking político the force of public opinion would serve as the real “boss” of the legislative delegations and impose a purified form of party discipline.

Wilson began his presidency with these hopes intact, but they were not shared by the Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill, particularly in the House. In 1910, following the revolt against Speaker Cannon, the House Democrats had won a majority of seats, and they had invested controlling power in the caucus. In 1913, with a Democrat entering the White House, the leaders who would shepherd the reform legislation through the 63d Congress, most notably House Majority Leader Oscar Underwood, were determined to retain the caucus to secure the safe passage of the Democratic agenda, beginning with the tariff revision that would quite fittingly bear Underwood’s name.

Wilson understood that the Democratic leaders were so inclined, yet as he noted to reporters, he had always been a critic of the caucus mechanism. The president suggested to the congressional leaders that the party could at least hold its caucuses in public, which would eliminate the specter of “hide and seek” politics that he was wont to denigrate. However, Underwood and the Democratic leadership, knowing that an open caucus was really no caucus at all, ignored his advice.

It was not long before Wilson saw for himself that a vote tainted by the smoke of the caucus counted just as much as one that floated on the pure air of public opinion—and that the former were more readily marshaled. Given that he needed votes more than he did theoretical consistency, at least in the short term, he dropped his objections to the closed caucus soon enough. Indeed, even before the struggle for tariff revision was over, Wilson had become an ardent defender of the caucus and supported his legislative lieuten-
Wilson’s reliance paid dividends. The caucus played a critical role in the Democratic Party’s achievements of 1913–1914. In the House, Underwood drove a veritable steamroller that repeatedly ran over the intraparty opposition to the tariff, banking and currency, and trust legislation. In the Senate, the tradition of legislative individualism, the body’s more informal organization, and the consensual approach of the Democratic leader, John Worth Kern, meant that the imposition of caucus discipline was less frequent and compelling. Even so, the “conferences” (as Kern preferred to call them) among Democratic senators figured prominently in the passage of the Underwood Tariff and especially the Federal Reserve Act.\(^2^1\)

Ironically, while expediency led Wilson to drop his opposition to the legislative caucus, thereby facilitating the party triumphs in the New Freedom years, the course of events demonstrated that there was nevertheless considerable wisdom in his original views. As Wilson could have predicted, the controlling influence of the Democratic caucuses set off vehement protests: from progressives and Republican insurgents who had been hoping to collaborate with the administration but were effectively shut out from deliberations over the reform agenda; from Republican regulars whose opposition was pointless before the Democratic steamroller; and, most tellingly, from renegade Democrats who braced against the new expectations of regularity. Criticisms leveled earlier against the tyranny of Speakers Reed and Cannon were now directed, from both sides of the aisle, at the hidden machinations of “King Caucus.”\(^2^2\)

The criticism resonated with the age-old suspicions of legislative cabals and party wire-pullers that figure prominently in the American political tradition and that were furiously circulating in the Progressive Era. The enforcement of party discipline on the floor of the legislature by a body that met secretly outside of it, while evidently necessary for responsible government in the United States, promised to be a difficult practice to legitimate. The more efficient the enforcement, the harder the interpretive task became, and Wilson’s previous opposition to the practice only made his problems in this regard more formidable.\(^2^3\)

If the need for caucus rule pointed to unrealistic assumptions in Wilson’s program concerning the willingness of legislators to vote with their party on their own accord, then the persistent criticism of the practice suggests that in another important respect he was right (in expecting it). Whether Wilson could successfully “interpret” the caucus system, though, would soon

ants in their efforts to set a party line. Thereafter, his doubts about caucus rule resurfaced on occasion, but there was no mistaking his political reliance on the institution.\(^2^0\)
be turned into a moot question, as profound divisions among the congress­
ional Democrats concerning national security policy, brought to the surface 
and inflamed by World War I, ruled out even the modicum of agreement 
needed to put the caucus system into effect.24

The coercive legislative caucus was, for a time, an effective but insuffi­
cient means of lining up votes for the Democratic agenda on Capitol Hill. 
Wilson also had to bend his program in another, more collusive fashion: 
dispensing federal patronage to congressional Democrats in exchange for 
their support. Much like the caucus, the administration's use of the spoils 
system, while evidently necessary for legislative success in the short term, 
was exceedingly difficult for Wilson to legitimate in the political atmos­
phere of the Progressive Era.

As with the caucus, Wilson entered the White House with the best of 
intentions. He vowed that he would appoint “progressives, and only progres­
sives” to administrative positions, and that he would not consult with the 
old guard Democrats on Capitol Hill when filling offices. In keeping with 
his program, he intended to wean his party off of the spoils of office simply 
by refusing to traffic in them.25

Subsequent events, however, showed that Wilson went back on his vows. 
His political deputies, most notably Joseph Tumulty, who he brought down 
from Trenton to serve as his personal secretary, and Albert Burleson, his post­
master general, funneled the administration's patronage through the politi­
cians belonging to the dominant Democratic machine or faction in any 
given area, i.e., the men best able to deliver votes. This practice led the ad­
ministration into some decidedly unprogressive relations with bosses from 
the South and the northeastern cities—even with Tammany Hall and the 
hated Essex County Machine in New Jersey—where insurgents had made 
some inroads but had not yet toppled the regulars.26

There were more jobs to pass out, too. Wilson acceded further to the 
congressional Democrats' thirst for patronage by agreeing to Burleson's 
opening up for political appointments some 36,000 postmasterships (they 
had been classified into the civil service list by Taft before he left office). 
Wilson also signed off on bills that excluded from civil service classification 
many of the administrative positions in the agencies created by the New 
Freedom bills, such as the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Reserve 
Board, and the Federal Trade Commission.27

What led Wilson to stray so far from his professed intention of separat­
ing politics from administration? The standard account is that Burleson per­
suaded Wilson to change course at the start of the administration. Burleson, 
a Texas politico with long experience in the House, was alarmed by Wilson's
declarations regarding patronage. He warned the president that if the administration were to abstain from the conventional distribution of jobs to party loyalists, its legislative agenda would falter. “It doesn’t amount to a damn who is postmaster at Paducah, Kentucky,” Burleson argued, “but these little offices mean a great deal to the Senators and Representatives in Congress.” Though Wilson was obviously discomforted by the dilemma, it was not long, Burleson later recalled, before the president turned him loose to conduct politics as usual.28

Wilson probably did have conversations with Burleson in the early days of his administration that followed the pattern recounted by the latter. Nevertheless, the hard truth that Burleson purportedly explained to Wilson—how the “petty choices” of the spoils system engendered receptive majorities in the legislature—was a truth that Wilson had already acknowledged in his program. The problem was, of course, that Wilson had never reconciled his acceptance of this reality with his vision of a responsible party whose unity came from principles instead of patronage, a party whose leader could therefore preside over a nonpartisan administration all the while enjoying the disciplined support of his compatriots in the legislature.

This programmatic contradiction between the imperatives of party politics and sound administration, moreover, was manifested in Wilson’s leadership well before his talks with Burleson. Governor Wilson had effectively consented to the construction of a Wilson machine in New Jersey by delegating his appointing power to Joseph Tumulty. Complain as he did that Tumulty could not “see beyond Hudson County, his vision is so narrow;” Wilson nonetheless brought him to Washington to serve as his personal secretary.29 Wilson knew that the former ward heeler had the political instincts and sensibility that were crucial for party management but that he himself lacked. Likewise aware of Burleson’s background and political orientation, Wilson chose him to be his postmaster general and the administration’s chief liaison to Congress for the same reasons that he kept on Tumulty.30 Despite Wilson’s subsequent ambivalence and dissembling over the dilemma of patronage, he himself laid the foundation for the patronage policy of his administration with the unresolved ambiguities of his program, his selection of political deputies, and his delegation of the appointment power to them.

The gap between Wilson’s program and practical necessity caused problems in another regard. Wilson left up to his cabinet secretaries the staffing, basic policies, and daily administration of the departments. In turn, he devoted the majority of his time and energy to legislation,31 thereby fulfilling the prophecy in Constitutional Government that presidents would resort to such a division of labor in view of their increasing political responsibilities. The
freedom this division gave Wilson to concentrate on legislative affairs was a significant factor in the passage of the New Freedom bills. But he had premised this part of his program on the assumption that the cabinet would consist not of party politicians with their own agendas but rather of experienced men of affairs who would be dedicated to the president's agenda and serve as efficient administrators. Wilson could not and did not fill his cabinet exclusively with such men—political expediency dictated otherwise—and the standards of administration during his presidency suffered accordingly.

Burleson, for example, was an inveterate spoilsman who Wilson included in his cabinet in order to have an experienced broker with congressional Democrats. Yet Burleson's selection as postmaster general and his subsequent manipulation of his department's offices were perhaps to be expected, as his position was the one most likely to call for such politicized administration. A more striking departure from Wilson's program was the naming of William Jennings Bryan as secretary of state. Bryan's selection was obviously intended to reward (and pacify) a party baron and the sizable wing of the party under his direct influence. A long-standing opponent of administrative reform, Bryan quickly set to work finding places for "deserving Democrats." To help make room for them, he turned out many of the professional foreign service officers who had been promoted to unclassified positions by Wilson's Republican predecessors, believing that they harbored GOP loyalties. Then, in the best Democratic tradition and in consultation with Wilson, Bryan took care to divide the spoils at his disposal among various state and ethnic constituencies. That Wilson himself made several political appointments in the upper reaches of his administration, not least in staffing the State Department, no doubt left Bryan with a sense of license in these matters.32

Although Bryan and Burleson were the clearest examples of political secretaries in the cabinet, Wilson appointed others, such as Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo. It was not that these men were not capable administrators; it was just that they had more on their minds. Wilson's complete deference to them in departmental affairs hastened the conflation of politics and administration during the early years of his presidency. In perhaps the most notorious example, he gave the go-ahead for several southerners in his cabinet to undertake a concerted effort to remove, segregate, and otherwise discriminate against the blacks working in their respective departments, thereby opening up more favorable opportunities for Democratic office-seekers.33

To be sure, this kind of management was not an across-the-board prob-
lem in the cabinet. Wilson’s delegation of administrative power to his secretaries meant that in those instances where he appointed able men who were not interested in playing politics, such as Secretary of Agriculture David Houston, Secretary of War Lindley Garrison, and Secretary of Labor William Wilson, the standards of professionalism lauded by progressive reformers were advanced. The problem was that these administrators were more the exception than the rule.

What were the effects of Wilson’s politicized administration? The most immediate was the support it purchased for the administration on Capitol Hill: sated with spoils, the regulars stood by their unexpectedly benevolent president. For his part, Wilson acknowledged and appreciated the old guard’s support, stating later that “no wheelhorse in harness ever pulled harder than they did in the direction of the party’s program of progress. I did not have to lie awake at night knowing what they were going to do.”

However, Wilson’s patronage policy also drew widespread criticism. Democratic insurgents in various state and local organizations dispatched protests to the White House when sustaining aid was given to the party conservatives whom they had battled in Wilson’s name in 1912. At the national level, reformers and progressives complained that Wilson appeared to be doing nothing less than simply turning his administration over to the spoils men. Herbert Croly spoke for this group when he complained that “Mr. Wilson is the only President, Democrat or Republican, since the original civil service law was passed, who has not only done nothing to raise the standards of administration but who has actually lowered them.”

As with the caucus, Wilson once more fell victim to one of his own predictions: in this case, that presidents who resorted to the blatant use of spoils would, in light of the mounting calls for professional administration, be condemned for their sins.

The protests clearly got to Wilson, and he urged his deputies to avoid excesses. Though accepting the need for patronage politics, at least in the short term, Wilson also knew all too well that it tended to keep the sights of legislators fixed on the mundane activities suited to gaining and keeping office and away from what he considered to be more appropriate aims—using power for systematic and collective purposes. As long as the patronage system was in place, broad-minded and principled politicians, the type of party men needed for Wilson’s program to work as intended, would be less apt to flourish. And, of course, in such circumstances what Wilson regarded as one of the leading by-products of responsible government, the disentanglement of politics and administration, could not be established. But Wilson
knew that to shut off the flow of jobs would impinge on the legislative successes that were necessary for him and his party to be sustained in office by the electorate, hence his dilemma. "It is a thorny and difficult matter altogether," he admitted to a progressive critic of his patronage policy, "in which I have not satisfied myself and am grieved to learn that I have not satisfied my friends."