Diplomacy, War, and Executive Power

During the New Freedom period of 1913–1914, there was one unmistakably sour note in Woodrow Wilson's relations with the Democratic majorities in Congress. It came in early 1914 with his decision to push for a repeal of the lower rates and exemptions that would be enjoyed by U.S. ships traveling through the Panama Canal, which was due to open later that year. Great Britain argued that the special treatment would amount to a violation of the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty. However, the Democratic platform of 1912 (and candidate Wilson, before he was swayed by the British arguments) endorsed the privileges for American shipping. Many congressional Democrats, including House Majority Leader Oscar Underwood and Speaker Champ Clark, still did. In light of Wilson's continual demands of fellow Democrats that they uphold the party line, his reversal provoked considerable outrage. Indeed, the *New York Times* called the tolls dispute "the most sharply drawn issue between the Executive and Congress that this Administration has seen." ¹

Wilson sought to explain himself to his followers by arguing that the tolls issue raised doubts abroad about the willingness of the United States to live up to its international agreements and was, as a result, undermining his diplomacy. The nature and international stakes of the dispute ruled out compromise; in this instance, congressional Democrats needed to defer to their president's leadership. "As for the platform," Wilson argued, "I feel that no promise made in a platform with regard to foreign affairs is more than half a promise." ²

Wilson eventually succeeded in getting majorities for his repeal in the House and Senate, as he had with the major domestic reforms of the New Freedom. In this instance, however, he was neither treating Congress as the legislative partner of the president nor working with the Democratic leaders to advance traditional party policies. Rather, as Wilson acknowledged, he
was dictating his views to his followers and demanding that Congress accept the president's foreign policy.³

However inconsistent Wilson's leadership in the tolls dispute might have been with the rest of his legislative leadership during the New Freedom, it was quite consistent with his theoretical conclusions about "the two presidencies." The domestic president needed to work in tandem with his party followers in the legislature, i.e., as a prime ministerial figure. However, necessity dictated that the president could and should exercise "very absolute" control of the nation's foreign affairs. During the struggles over American preparedness and neutrality prompted by the escalating war in Europe, Wilson had to act upon his theoretical convictions in increasingly assertive and controversial ways. Congressional Democrats (not to mention Republicans) did not accept his assumptions about the president's exclusive control of American national security policy. In the face of this opposition, Wilson came to rely on an argument that he first made in a speech to Congress on the tolls repeal, in which he maintained that he was "charged in a peculiar degree, by the Constitution itself, with personal responsibility" on questions of foreign affairs.⁴

There was nothing unusual in Wilson's claim; presidents had long asserted and exercised special prerogatives in this domain. Indeed, the historical ability of presidents to do so was the major reason why he had come to believe that in an age of new and persistent international challenges the president could dominate the American polity. But the stance on issues of war and peace that Wilson assumed as an independent and energetic president made it harder for him to stand as a cooperative prime minister, working through and with his partisans in Congress, on the domestic agenda. As he assumed personal responsibility for the nation's diplomacy and later its war effort, and as he sought to defend his control in constitutional terms, he blurred the parliamentary divide between the "government" and "opposition" parties that he had established during the New Freedom. In its place appeared the more familiar constitutional struggle between the president and Congress over the control of American diplomacy and national security. By the end of World War I, the exertions of this interbranch struggle put Wilson in the unlikely position of defending, both in practice and in theory, the Founders' separation of powers and the independent executive office it secured.

I

The outbreak of war in Europe prompted a new departure in Wilson's approach to legislative leadership. Concerned about preparing the nation for war, were it to become involved in the conflict, he began submitting bills to
Congress that had been developed by his administrators. No longer was he content to speak on the general principles, then draw out the details of legislation from his party in Congress. Rather, Wilson presented these bills to Congress as vital for the nation's security—matters that he, as chief diplomat and commander in chief, could best understand and act upon and for which he was responsible. Wilson discovered, however, that members of Congress believed that they, too, were responsible for these matters and would not pass the administration bills as a matter of rote.

The first measure stemming from the war proposed the establishment of a federal shipping board. The outbreak of World War I had quickly diverted or waylaid many of the foreign ships that had been carrying fully 90 percent of the American goods bound for overseas markets. To alleviate the sudden dearth of shipping, Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo drafted a bill empowering a commission to build and purchase merchant ships, then operate them in international commerce. In his annual message in December 1914, Wilson urged Congress that “such legislation is imperatively needed and cannot wisely be postponed.”

However, Republican senators led by Henry Cabot Lodge and Elihu Root feared that the administration's shipping board might purchase some of the German ships left stranded in American harbors, thereby involving the United States in a diplomatic imbroglio with the British and the French. Wilson grasped this danger and repeatedly stated that the administration would not undertake ship purchases that would generate international controversy. Nevertheless, despite the importuning of his friends and associates, he refused to accept an amendment, sponsored by Lodge, that would have proscribed the purchase of German ships, nor would he explicitly disavow any intention to purchase German ships. To do so would qualify both Wilson’s reading of the rights of neutral nations, which it was his policy to uphold, and the president’s control of American diplomacy.

To overcome the Republican challenge to his policy and prerogatives and to retain the support of congressional Democrats, many of whom shared the objections of the GOP, Wilson sought to frame the bill as a domestic issue, as yet another fight against the “interests” in which disciplined partisanship was therefore not only legitimate but necessary. Yet Wilson’s partisan tone, in what was essentially a demand for executive discretion in foreign affairs, only hardened the resentment of the Republican senators filibustering against the bill and the seven dissenting Democrats who gave them crucial support.

The filibusterers won out. Wilson and the Democratic Party in the end could not unite what the Constitution had put asunder. That there was no
British-style responsibility in the American regime was by no means a complete disaster for Wilson. He was therefore able to stay in power in the wake of an unmistakable legislative defeat and to continue to fight for his policy. Over the next eighteen months, Wilson and McAdoo kept pushing for shipping legislation. It eventually passed in 1916, but only after a provision similar to that embodied in the Lodge Amendment, forbidding the purchase of belligerent ships, was included.9

The other major legislative initiatives of the administration in response to the war were bills enhancing the preparedness of the army and navy. Wilson initially denied that the war in Europe required changes in the size and organization of the U.S. armed forces (as many were contending, most notably—and stridently—Theodore Roosevelt). However, the Lusitania crisis in the spring of 1915 and the risks accompanying Wilson’s insistence on standing up for the rights of neutral nations under international law led him to reconsider. In July, he asked the secretaries of the War and Navy Departments to consult with the military leadership and develop plans for preparedness.10

Later that year, when Wilson introduced his administration’s preparedness legislation, he declared that “for the time being, I speak as the trustee and guardian of a nation’s rights, charged with the duty of speaking for that nation in matters involving her sovereignty.”11 He certainly was not speaking for his party. Indeed, the bills went nowhere in the Democratic Congress, opposed as they were by pacifistic Bryanites and southerners, including House Majority Leader Claude Kitchin of North Carolina, who objected to the augmentation of federal military power. The Democratic disunion was aptly spoofed at a meeting of the Gridiron Club by two men in a donkey costume: the front end answered to the call of preparedness calmly and steadily, while the rear end kicked and struggled.12

In early 1916, to overcome the congressional opposition to preparedness, Wilson headed out to the Midwest for a weeklong publicity tour, the first of his presidency. In his opening speech, he emphasized that “we live in a world which we did not make, which we cannot alter, which we cannot think into a different condition from that which actually exists.”13 Necessity dictated that if the United States was to protect its rights and deter attacks that might lead the nation into war, then something had to be done. Wilson reiterated his claim to be the officer best situated to determine what this might be, telling his audience in Pittsburgh, for example, “I want you to go home determined that, within the whole circle of your influence, the President—not as partisan, but as representative of the national honor—shall be backed up by the whole force that is in the nation.”14
Wilson’s weeklong swing impressed many observers, most notably Herbert Croly of the *New Republic*. Croly had been increasingly critical of the compromises necessitated by Wilson’s efforts to govern with the Democratic regulars in Congress. His inability to unite his party on preparedness confirmed Croly’s deep suspicion that the Democratic Party was an especially unfit instrument for policies that were truly national in scope. While Wilson believed that leadership of his party and national opinion were compatible, indeed synergistic roles, Croly saw them as mutually exclusive. The president’s decision to appeal to the public on the matter of preparedness, undertaken in large part to pressure members of his own party, in the manner of Theodore Roosevelt, indicated to Croly that Wilson had at last recognized the futility of party government and opted instead for national leadership. “He has ceased to be a responsible Prime Minister,” Croly proposed, “and has become an independent executive whose power rests on his direct influence on popular opinion.”

However, this power, for all of the drama accompanying Wilson’s exercise of it, had not generated congressional majorities for the administration’s proposals, as he discovered upon his return to Washington. Wilson thus had little choice but to strike a bargain with congressional Democrats who wanted to preserve more of a role for the locally based National Guard than the administration’s initial plans for a large federal army allowed. Through persistent negotiations with Congress, in which Wilson played off the House bills against the stronger measures passed in the Senate, which was more inclined toward a larger army and navy, he salvaged the essence of “reasonable preparedness” that had been his goal from the start.

That Wilson ultimately had to make compromises in reaching this goal led some advocates of preparedness, including Croly’s *New Republic*, to suggest that for all of the sound and fury of his preparedness tour, the president had ultimately backtracked to playing politics as usual with congressional Democrats, as he had earlier during the New Freedom. Yet, as the president’s critics admitted, had Wilson not compromised, no preparedness legislation would have been likely to pass. This certainly was the lesson of the initial fight over shipping in 1915. Moreover, Wilson had gone to considerable lengths—the greatest of his presidency—to lead public opinion on the issue, to stand as an executive above partisan concerns, to move policy in a direction opposed by the Democratic majorities in Congress, and to assert his authority over legislators in matters involving national security. If circumstances prevented Wilson’s leadership on the preparedness issue from being exclusively that of Croly’s uncompromising “independent executive,” it was nonetheless closer to this role than to that of a “responsible prime minister.”
In February and March of 1916, when congressional Democrats rebelled against Wilson’s diplomacy, he was in a much better position to assert control of national security policy, and he did so sharply. After Germany declared that armed merchant ships in the war zone would be sunk without warning, Democrats in both the House and Senate formulated resolutions that would have warned Americans traveling through the war zone on such ships that they did so at their own risk. Supporters of the warning resolutions believed that the president, by insisting that he would hold the Germans strictly accountable for the safety of American passengers, in accordance with his interpretation of the rights of neutral nations, would take the nation into the war.  

The Democratic leaders in Congress, who were virtually unanimous in opposing their president’s position, urged Wilson to allow them to let the warnings lie dormant on the congressional agenda, thereby avoiding an embarrassing intraparty showdown. Of course, doing so would have left open the question of which branch had the final say in the matter of U.S. neutrality and was thus unacceptable to Wilson. Through public statements and intensive administration lobbying, he moved to spike the resolutions as quickly as possible.  

Wilson bypassed the Democratic leadership in Congress by writing directly, and publicly, to an administration supporter on the House Rules Committee, urging him to force a vote as soon as possible.  

Wilson acknowledged the unusual nature of his request but justified it by appealing to both necessity and the Constitution: “The matter is of so grave importance,” he argued, “and lies so clearly within the field of Executive initiative.”  

Wilson’s campaign to defeat the warning resolutions soon came to fruition. Within a week, both houses debated and voted them down by wide margins. Afterward, Walter Lippmann, like Herbert Croly wont to complain about Wilson’s collaboration with Democratic legislators in domestic concerns, declared, “Mr. Wilson eliminated the legislature from diplomacy . . . he abolished . . . the democratic initiative in the conduct of foreign affairs; he smashed a rebellion.” But this triumph was not unambiguous for Wilson. In the process of “smashing” the congressional rebellion, he also gave considerable affront to the many dissident Democrats and heightened the interbranch jealousy that he had long sought to eradicate. The Nation made a telling observation after Wilson’s defeat of the warning resolutions: “He won, not after the fashion of a Prime Minister of England, drawing out the opinion of the House, but after the fashion of a President of the United
States demanding that Congress stand by the Government in its dealings with a foreign nation. As a precedent, the incident of the past week does not carry us towards, but rather away from, the approximation of the role of the President of the United States to that of a Prime Minister of England.”

Was Wilson giving up his long-held convictions regarding party government in the course of his disputes with congressional Democrats over preparedness and neutrality? In May 1916, Ray Stannard Baker posed this question to the president in a revealing interview at the White House. Baker’s notes record that Wilson “reiterated again his belief in ‘responsible government,’ & a closer working together of party and president. . . . He thought some modification of the English system would bring about better team work in public affairs.” And Wilson argued that his success during the New Freedom was due to the logic of party government, “having a definite program—approved by the people & in the party platform, which he carried out.” He explained the New Freedom anomaly of his push for a repeal of the Panama Canal tolls by simply noting that it “concerned foreign affairs & was properly within the initiative of the president.” In discussing his leadership of “the new program which came in with the war,” Wilson cited the arguments he had presented in Constitutional Government: “In times of peace when domestic problems are uppermost Congress comes to the front, but when foreign affairs intrude the people look to the president. His foreign affairs policy must then be his own.”

The unilateral trend of Wilson’s leadership on issues relating to the war was even more evident a year later in yet another serious interbranch confrontation over American neutrality. In February 1917, U.S. shipping came to a standstill in the wake of the German commencement of unrestricted submarine warfare. Wilson decided to go to Congress and seek the funds and authority to arm American merchant vessels, if he deemed it necessary, in order to restore overseas trade. He did so even though some in his inner circle, most notably Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, argued that he did not need legislative permission to arm the ships.

The prospects for permission being granted were not promising. A unanimous Senate Republican caucus had already agreed to filibuster essential appropriations measures through the end of the 64th Congress, which would force Wilson to call a special early session of the 65th Congress, bringing legislators wanting to oversee his diplomacy back to Washington. As Lodge wrote to Roosevelt on February 27, “Although I have not much faith in Congress we should be safer here with Congress than we should be with Wilson alone for nine months.”

In his address to Congress on February 26, an angry Wilson sought to re-
solve both the immediate issue of armed neutrality and the broader question of who controlled American diplomacy. Wilson emphasized that he was not asking for permission to arm the ships: “No doubt I already possess that authority without any special warrant of law, by the plain implication of my constitutional duties and powers.” What he did want was a symbolic ratification of his leadership. “I wish to feel that the authority and power of Congress are behind me in whatever it may become necessary for me to do.” Standing confidently as president, Wilson at the same time wanted to cloak his policy with the sort of legislative confidence that a prime minister might enjoy.

On March 1, an overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives, braced by the White House’s release of the Zimmermann telegram, granted Wilson authority to arm the ships. But in the early morning of March 3, eleven Senators (six Republicans and five Democrats) began a filibuster. These senators refused to grant the president the complete control over American neutrality that he sought, and they ultimately blocked every attempt to bring the matter to a vote before the 64th Congress adjourned the next day.

In Wilson’s screed against the “little group of willful men” who had thwarted him, he charged that in a moment of crisis they had left “the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible.” However, the U.S. government was not as helpless as he had proposed. After Congress adjourned, he went ahead and armed the ships anyway, acting upon his stipulated premise that he already had the power to do so. Denied the confidence of the legislature, Wilson nevertheless had the capacity, as an independent executive within the separation of powers, to proceed as he wished. His leadership during the controversy over armed neutrality anticipated the general direction his presidency would take during the U.S. involvement in World War I.

III

In the weeks after the dispute over arming merchant ships, the tensions between the United States and Germany that had flared up with the initiation of unrestricted submarine warfare and been exacerbated by the Zimmermann telegram continued to mount. As there was little that even armed merchant vessels could do to defend themselves against the U-boats, the reluctance of U.S. shippers to sail for Europe continued. And between March 16 and 18, German submarines sunk three American vessels, two without warning, killing sixteen sailors. Would the United States acquiesce in the face of these attacks or was its entry into the war necessitated by
them? Wilson’s efforts to deny his cabinet and Congress a significant role in answering this question speaks volumes about his determination to exercise single-handed control of the nation’s diplomacy, even in the most fateful days of his presidency.

That Wilson would largely freeze out his cabinet in making his decision for war was not surprising. In the Palmer letter of 1913, Wilson had spoken of the president’s need to serve as the nation’s spokesman in “even the momentous and most delicate dealings of the government with foreign nations.” In keeping with this imperative, Wilson had essentially been his own secretary of state on issues relating to the war, writing many of the key communiques to the belligerents, including the protests to Germany over the sinking of the Lusitania. What Wilson could not do, he entrusted not to his secretaries of state but to Colonel House, the personal associate with whom he believed he had a rare communion of views. Wilson’s domination of American diplomacy vis-à-vis the war lay behind Bryan’s resignation in 1915, as well as the selection of a replacement, Robert Lansing, whom Wilson (and House) could easily subordinate.31

Wilson’s cabinet nevertheless expected to have a say in the decision for war. In a meeting on March 20, after Wilson had been pondering on his own for ten days the question of whether to go to war, he at least paid his secretaries the courtesy of soliciting their views. They were unanimously and forcefully in favor of war. An inscrutable Wilson merely thanked his colleagues for their advice. Secretary of State Robert Lansing observed afterward that “the ten councilors of the President had spoken as one, and he—well, no one could be sure that he would echo the same opinion.”32

During the next two weeks, cabinet members could infer the president’s decision for war from his calling Congress into special session and the executive orders he issued on military matters, but Wilson was not forthcoming about what he planned to say to the legislators. Secretaries Burleson and McAdoo came to talk with Wilson about the war message, but he refused to see them. When Colonel House, whom Wilson had taken into his confidence, asked him why he had not shown the message to the cabinet, “he replied that, if he had, every man in it would have had some suggestion to make. . . . He said he preferred to keep it to himself and to take the responsibility. I feel that he does his Cabinet an injustice. He should not humiliate them to such an extent.”33

While drafting his message, Wilson also took care to limit Congress’s role in the declaration of war, which was not easy to do, of course, given that the Constitution invested the legislature with this power. Amid the rampant rumors and apparent drift in administration policy that marked the days
immediately preceding Wilson’s address to Congress, Secretary Lansing prepared a statement for Wilson to release that announced that the president’s silence was only a product of his deference to Congress’s prerogatives. While it no doubt would have helped alleviate the growing unrest and uncertainty, Lansing’s statement also would have offered a constitutional interpretation that contradicted Wilson’s desire to reduce the legislators’ influence on American statecraft. Wilson thus instructed Lansing not to release it.34

Colonel House observed in his diary that in this period Wilson was wrestling with the question of whether “he should ask Congress to declare war or whether he should say that a state of war exists, and ask them for the necessary means to carry it on.”35 The former course gave an active, determinative role to the Congress and, as House warned Wilson, portended a more acrimonious debate. In contrast, asking Congress simply to acknowledge that a state of war existed left it with a passive role, in which the legislators would accept the international imperatives laid out by the executive. Wilson opted for the latter, asking Congress to “declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States, that it formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it.”36

IV

Although Wilson implicitly proposed that the decision of whether the United States would go to war was essentially the president’s, he was more explicit in his assumption that once the nation was at war he should and would receive unusual deference from Congress, not only in executing the war effort but also in framing the legislative preparations for it. In Wilson’s war message, after discussing the necessity of raising and supporting a larger army and navy and mobilizing the country’s economic resources, he noted that he would have his administrators prepare and submit bills to Congress for these purposes. Wilson went on to “hope that it will be your pleasure to deal with them as having been framed after very careful thought by the branch of Government upon which the responsibility of conducting the war and safeguarding the nation will most directly fall.”37

Almost immediately after the declaration of war, the administration began sending sweeping bills down Pennsylvania Avenue for ratification by Congress. These included plans for a draft that would marshal American conscripts for the war in Europe, an espionage bill containing expansive provisions for government censorship of the press and control of exports, and a bill creating a food administration empowered to regulate the production and consumption of foodstuffs.
The administration’s controversial proposals incited bipartisan opposition. For the same reasons that they had opposed preparedness, southern Democrats led the opposition to conscription and joined the movement of Theodore Roosevelt and his supporters for a volunteer army. Prominent Democratic leaders like Speaker Champ Clark and Senator Robert Owen sided with the Republicans protesting against government censorship of the press. And Democratic populists from the South and West, notably T.P. Gore of Oklahoma and James Reed of Missouri, were the most vocal opponents of the Administration’s food bill. Wilson, however, was unwilling to compromise on the controversial provisions of the bills, even with members of his own party, insisting that the legislators had to defer to the executive judgments embodied in the administration’s proposals. The concessions that Wilson eventually did make, such as the elimination of some of the censorship provisions, were forced upon him by the need to secure the key components of the administration bills.

The intense congressional reaction to the proposals stemmed not only from their content but also from the way in which the administration demanded that the legislators—the ostensible lawmakers—simply endorse, without qualification, these unprecedented requests. During the debate over the administration’s conscription bill, for example, Hubert Dent of Alabama, the Democratic chair of the House Military Affairs Committee and an avowed opponent of the bill, declared that he would resign his seat before he would accept “the argument . . . that, in time of war the executive department shall draft its legislation and send it to Congress, and Congress shall not exercise the right to cross a ‘t’ nor dot an ‘i’.” The same resentment boiled over in the Senate on May 16, during a debate on an emergency appropriation bill submitted and termed essential by the administration. Furious, the senators voted to go into a closed session, where for more than three hours various members, and reports observed that they came from both parties, railed against the administration’s presumptuous treatment of Congress.

The legislators’ protests were by no means unprecedented. During the Civil War, Lincoln had encountered similar criticism from radical Republicans for his dramatic assumption of the policy initiative, which extended to his taking the then unprecedented step of sending drafts of proposed legislation to Congress. That Wilson was receiving a similar response from a wartime Congress controlled by his party, while not surprising, did put the lie to his hope that the administration bills would be readily accepted on Capitol Hill.
While members of Congress bemoaned the administration's usurpation of their legislative role, they also sought, again like their Civil War counterparts, to extend their oversight of the administration's prosecution of the war effort. Wilson strenuously and successfully opposed the plans for special oversight, claiming that they were prompted by partisan Republican opposition to his presidency, a claim that has since been reiterated by historian Seward Livermore. However, the most serious efforts to set up a Civil War-style congressional committee on the conduct of the war were bipartisan; indeed, they were spearheaded by Democratic leaders and derived crucial support from members of Wilson's own party. The bipartisan nature of the efforts, though, did not keep him from reacting to them as illegitimate encroachments on his constitutional powers or from vigorously using the energy those powers put at his disposal to thwart them.

Democratic Senator Robert Owen offered a proposal for a Joint Committee on Expenditures in the Conduct of the War as an amendment to the administration's food bill on July 21, 1917. Fifteen Democrats joined with the thirty-eight Republicans in favor of an oversight committee and provided the votes necessary for the amendment's passage. In urging Wilson to accept his proposal, Owen argued that the oversight was only fitting, given the massive sums Congress was appropriating for the war effort. Owen also noted that the committee would be controlled by Democrats and that the idea was consistent with Wilson's oft-repeated belief in "common counsel"—the sort of give-and-take that Wilson and Owen had engaged in, for example, during the crafting of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 and the social justice plank for the Democratic Party platform in 1916.

In a sharply worded public letter, however, Wilson declared that the Owen proposal would "render my task of conducting the war practically impossible." War was an executive business; common counsel was out of the question. A congressional initiative merely to supervise the financial aspects of that business, even one controlled by his legislative supporters, would still "amount to nothing less than an assumption on the part of the legislative body of the executive work of the administration." By issuing this declaration, twisting arms, and throwing down a veto threat, Wilson was able to get the Owen Amendment stripped and the food bill passed in the Senate.

The next congressional attempt to expand oversight of the war effort came at the end of 1917. It was prompted by sensational hearings in December before the Senate's Military Affairs Committee, chaired by Democratic
Senator George Chamberlain of Oregon. Given the comparatively underdeveloped status of the American administrative state, the sudden mobilization for World War I was destined to be plagued by serious problems and inefficiencies. And, indeed, the committee’s hearings aired several horror stories of poorly constructed, disease-ridden camps and soldiers who lacked not only guns and equipment to train with but even winter clothing. In response to what appeared to them to be a crisis of management, Chamberlain and his Democratic colleague Gilbert Hitchcock drew up plans for the creation of an executive Munitions Ministry to coordinate the war effort. Chamberlain’s plan was supported by a majority of the Armed Services Committee, and its provision for a new executive body bypassed Wilson’s earlier objections to congressional oversight. Still, the plan was being proposed by Congress and provided for Senate confirmation of the new munitions secretary. Wilson could not accept it. He would not be seen as conceding to Congress, even to members of his own party, the right to structure the prosecution of the war. After private efforts to dissuade the bill’s proponents failed, Wilson, determined to stave off the proposal, went public with a letter declaring that the plan would undermine his ability as a commander in chief to coordinate the war effort.50

However, two weeks later, after the administration imposed a “coal holiday” in order to resolve a chronic shortage of fuel on the eastern seaboard, there was no stopping Chamberlain. The order appeared to Congress, the newspapers, and the public at large—not to mention many Wilsonians—as yet another example, albeit the most unsettling one, of the administration’s mismanagement of mobilization. The senators on the Military Affairs Committee began formulating plans for the creation of a war cabinet. The proposal called for the president to appoint, with the advice and consent of the Senate, “three distinguished citizens of demonstrated ability” and to grant them control over all the aspects of his administration that pertained to the war.51

Wilson struck back quickly and vehemently. He told legislators that if there was to be a war cabinet, it would happen not simply over his veto pen but over his dead body. He also issued a vitriolic public attack on Chamberlain and his proposal, contending that it “sprang out of opposition to the administration’s whole policy rather than out of any serious intention to reform its practice.” The vociferous GOP support for the proposal, which Chamberlain openly welcomed, gave credence to the president’s charge.52

Nevertheless, Chamberlain had been a staunch defender of even the most controversial war policies that the administration had pressed upon Congress, and he had voted against the Owen Amendment the previous sum-
mer. Moreover, when the plan for the war cabinet was first announced, it was widely supported among Democrats in Congress, especially in the Senate. Whatever else it may have been, Chamberlain’s war cabinet bill was also a bipartisan attempt by legislators to exercise, albeit indirectly, the influence over the war effort that they believed was rightfully theirs but that Wilson had thus far managed to deny them.

Wilson was able to fend off Congress using his standard formula of arm-twisting, veto threats, and public confrontation. Once more he defended and exemplified the Hamiltonian idea of an energetic and independent executive. By spiking the Chamberlain plan, Wilson enhanced the overall efficiency of the war effort and protected the constitutional position of his office against legislative encroachment. For all of the shortcomings that were then bedeviling his administration’s prosecution of the war, the legislators’ efforts to boost their oversight and influence no doubt would have compounded the problems. At the same time, Wilson’s vigorous executive leadership required him to put aside his own notions of responsible government and “common counsel.” The same trend is evident in the administrative changes that Wilson made in the wake of the last of these battles with Congress.

VI

The idea of an “administrative presidency,” in which the president takes firm control of the executive branch and actively seeks to shape policy by means of this control, is implicit in the Founders’ executive office. The personal responsibility that presidents bear for the executive branch sooner or later bids them to preside in such an energetic and independent fashion. This tendency is true even of presidents whose initial predispositions are to delegate responsibility for administration to lower-ranking officials and pursue a “legislative strategy” of cooperation with Congress. This logic played itself out in Woodrow Wilson’s handling of the war effort.

Wilson’s initial view of his office did not leave him inclined to take firm control of the executive branch; as noted above, his method was to serve as the political leader and leave the administrative details to his cabinet secretaries. This division of labor also entailed that the chief task of the department heads was to serve independently as administrators, not as a council of political advisers. The U.S. entrance into World War I did not change things; Wilson let his war administrators handle their departments and agencies essentially as each saw fit. He did so even though several of his advisers, including Colonel House, William McAdoo, Herbert Hoover, and Bernard Baruch, urged him to create and rely on an administrative “war machine.”
in House's phrase, in order to foster the requisite efficiency and coordination in the mobilization.\textsuperscript{56}

Wilson's adherence to his theory was no doubt reinforced by his feelings for the two administrators drawing the most criticism (the men whose power the advocates of a "war machine" wanted to get their hands on): Newton Baker and Josephus Daniels, the secretaries of the War and Navy Departments, respectively. Baker, a professed pacifist and reform mayor of Cleveland, and Daniels, a teetotaling, Bryanite editor from North Carolina, were unlikely warlords. Wilson had selected them because of their personal loyalty and political service. They also shared his views on administration.\textsuperscript{57} To replace or subordinate these men in a wartime reorganization of his administration would only validate his critics.

Wilson's administrative philosophy in the early phases of the war and the congressional ire it produced, especially in light of the appearance of faulty management, were aptly represented in an exchange between Secretary Newton Baker and Senator John Weeks, Republican of Massachusetts, on January 12, 1918. The setting was a congressional hearing on Chamberlain's plan for a Munitions Ministry. Baker argued that "if you are omniscient and have an omnipotent man to run things you have the ideal. My idea is that you have a multiplicity of wisdom, although a decrease in speed, in a number of men. Consultation makes for accuracy." To this, Senator Weeks protested: "What is being done in the War Department is opposed to the theory of the Government at this moment. The Government has asked for and obtained, at the hands of Congress, broad power of centralized control, yet you scatter it."\textsuperscript{58} For his part, Wilson maintained, "I would be willing to have a minister of munitions if I had a superman to put in the place. But it requires a superman, and there is no superman."\textsuperscript{59}

In the end, however, Wilson had little choice but to alter his direction of the war effort in order to ward off congressional encroachments on his administration.\textsuperscript{60} His first step, taken in conjunction with his attack on the war cabinet bill, was to push through the Overman Act. Drafted in the administration, this measure granted the commander in chief virtually complete freedom to create, reorganize, and fund executive agencies as he deemed appropriate for the war effort. Legislators protested Wilson's demand for what seemed nothing less than the "abdication by Congress of its lawmaking power," as Democratic senator Gilbert Hitchcock put it.\textsuperscript{61} But under the circumstances, the legislators found they had little choice but to grant Wilson the authority he sought. In a skillful bit of rhetorical judo, Wilson argued that "Senator after Senator has appealed to me most earnestly to 'cut the red tape.' I am only asking for the scissors."\textsuperscript{62}
Wilson’s second administrative initiative was to enhance the power of Bernard Baruch and the War Industries Board he chaired. In February 1917, at Wilson’s urging, Newton Baker finally bowed to the arguments of Baruch and others regarding the need for a “legal, authoritative, responsible, centralized agency for the purpose of coordinating the demands of the fighting forces.” In March, Wilson placed the board under Baruch’s personal control and authorized him to coordinate and set priorities for the procurement, production, and conservation of war supplies needed by the federal government and the Allies. To be sure, Baruch’s newly empowered board was not an omnipotent agency. The War and Navy Departments retained control of their purchasing, and while Baruch had a seat on the administration’s price-fixing committee, it was chaired by Robert Brookings. Wilson, having fought off Chamberlain’s Munitions Ministry, was not going to create one himself. Nevertheless, through the enhanced War Industries Board, Wilson had created the interagency clearinghouse, under the control of one hand-picked administrator, that he long had been resistant to establishing.

Wilson’s other major administrative initiative was the creation of an informal war cabinet that began meeting on March 20, 1918, in lieu of one of the biweekly meetings of the regular cabinet. The usual participants were Wilson, Baruch, and Secretaries Baker, Daniels, and McAdoo; the food, fuel, and shipping administrators; and the chairman of the War Trade Board. Thus the war cabinet brought together the men in charge of the key aspects of the war effort. In their meetings, Wilson and his top administrators attempted to hash out the broader questions of policy and conflicting administrative objectives that arose during the remainder of the war—“to keep together and obtain a common bird’s eye view of the whole situation,” as Newton Baker put it.

By 1918, then, on top of his duties as the political and national leader that he aspired to be, Wilson also was taking up questions concerning the basic structure and day-to-day operation of the administration over which he was presiding. If serving as a chief executive in this way was not what he had in mind upon taking office, it was part of the Founders’ conception, and it was toward the latter view that Wilson was moving during the war.

VII

Paradoxically, at no point was Wilson’s shift in this regard more evident than when he issued his surprising and ill-fated appeal for a Democratic Congress just before the midterm elections in 1918. Edward Corwin proposed that with this appeal, “Wilson was asking the country for a vote of confidence for himself and his party. His action is therefore in line with his own pecu-
liar conception of the President as Prime Minister." Upon closer scrutiny, however, it is clear that Wilson appealed as a president, not a prime minister, for if he truly was asking for a parliamentary vote of confidence heading into the peace negotiations, then he would have resigned after the Democrats lost control of Congress.

Wilson might well have taken such a dramatic step; indeed, he was prepared to take it in 1916, when it appeared as though he might lose his bid for reelection to Charles Evans Hughes. But this option was never a part of his plan in 1918. In September, a month before Wilson gave the appeal (which was already in the works), a friend familiar with the 1916 scheme asked him if he would resign should the Democrats lose Congress. Wilson said he would not: "I cannot do it on account of the world-wide situation, in which American influence is very important and may be decisive. It happens to be a case where, even if defeated by the people, I shall try to obtain the objects for which we went to war."

The Republican reactions to Wilson’s appeal charged that it posed a severe threat to the separation of powers; Wilson was asking for control not only of his branch, they alleged, but also of the legislature. This criticism missed the basic thrust of his appeal. For partisans to make appeals during wartime elections was no radical innovation; indeed, the GOP had done it in 1864, 1898, and 1918 as well. That Wilson would not resign if the vote of confidence failed was likewise not a radical stance but rather in keeping with the independence of the constitutional executive. The radical challenge to the separation of powers would have come had Wilson resigned in 1918, but he had no intention of doing so. The change in Wilson’s stance from the election of 1916 to that of 1918 reflected the ways in which the experience of leading the United States during the war had led him to harden his conception of his office; for the time being, it was grounded not on public opinion or party mandates but on the Constitution itself.

Striking evidence of the transformation in Wilson’s views in this regard is found in a conversation that he had with friends and reporters on the deck of the George Washington, the liner that was transporting the president and his entourage to Europe for the peace negotiations in December 1918. In this conversation, Wilson saluted the separation of powers for enabling him to preside as he had during the period of American belligerency. While he had not given up his faith in the parliamentary system, he was now prepared to admit that it was not always the best form of government. Wilson’s physician recorded his remarks: “The President said that [parliamentary] government has a greater responsibility to the people than our own government. He added however that he thought our present form of government
was the best in time of war. This was indicated by the fluidity of the situations developing and overturning the cabinets on the other side; whereas, ours was compact all the time.”

The leading critic of the “Newtonian” Constitution thus had come to view it differently in the sharp light of his wartime experience. The war had forced Wilson’s program and leadership to take startling new directions. The controversies in Washington arising from the conflict in Europe overwhelmed a tenuous assumption of his program, namely, that legislators and politicians would defer to the necessity of presidential leadership in matters of war and peace. In doing so, the war presented Wilson with a stark choice between his two presidencies. He could still push to control national security policy, but to do so in the face of opposition in Congress and within his own party would require him to act as an independent and energetic executive, not as the prime minister of a responsible party. The pressures of governing during a World War, when combined with Wilson’s theoretical belief in the necessity of executive control in diplomacy and command and with the incentives, powers, and perspective that the Founders’ executive office gives to its inhabitants, bid him to act unilaterally, boldly pursuing his own course and warding off challenges to his power. Although Wilson had assured members of Congress in his first appearance before them that he would not preside as an “isolated island of jealous power,” by the end of World War I that is exactly how he stood.