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Dead Center: Polarization and the Democratic Party, 1932-2000

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Colin S. Campbell
August 2016

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Dr. John Rankin

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ABSTRACT

Dead Center: Polarization and the Democratic Party, 1932-2000

by

Colin Campbell

Polarization forced massive changes in the institutions of Washington throughout the 20th century, and the Democratic Party played a key role throughout. Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democratic Party formed the powerful New Deal coalition. The coalition faltered in the turbulent 1960s under the pressures of the Vietnam War and racial unrest. The chaotic 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago dealt the coalition a mortal wound. Young voters and activists gained an outsized voice in the party. Several crushing defeats in presidential elections followed as the party chose unelectable candidates who appealed to the passions of left-wing activists and interests. In 1992, Bill Clinton won the nomination and forced the party back to the center. Clinton's success, however, drove the Republican Party further right as its efforts to destroy Clinton grew increasingly obsessive. The cumulative effect has been an increase in polarization and the weakening of institutions in Washington.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In her 2001 Academy Award acceptance speech, Julia Roberts memorably thanked “everyone I’ve ever met in my life.” I share her sentiment, but, to limit this section to a readable length, I will pare the list down.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A bizarre spectacle in presidential politics hit the papers in 1972. George Meany, then the head of the AFL-CIO and thus the de facto spokesman for American labor, refused to endorse George McGovern, the Democratic candidate for president. Labor's relationship with the Democrats went back a generation or more. Why would the central player in the labor movement forsake them now?

Meany detested McGovern's opponent, Republican Richard Nixon. However, he detested McGovern's uncompromising New Left brand of politics just as much. Columnist Ralph Toledano speculated that Meany wanted to "remain aloof" from McGovern, so that when McGovern lost, Meany himself "can emerge as the one man who can put together once more the coalition which since 1932 made the Democratic Party dominant in this country."¹ "[B]eing a practical man," Toledano said, "Meany would rather deal with practical men."²

American politics used to operate under principles of pragmatic compromise, both within parties and between them. The legislative process forces agreements acceptable to numerous groups. Proposed bills become law only with broad consensus involving the House, Senate, and the executive branch. Founding Father James Madison argued for such a system in the *Federalist Papers*. In *Federalist No. 62*, he wrote, "No law ... can now be passed without the concurrence,

¹ Toledano, "Meany Is Suspicious of McGovern Supporters."

² Ralph Toledano, "Meany Is Suspicious of McGovern Supporters," *Connecticut Sunday Herald*, July 30, 1972.

first, of a majority of the people” represented by the House of Representatives and “of a majority of the States,” represented by the Senate.³

The system began to enter a breakdown in the twentieth century due to growing partisanship. By then, the two parties had settled into their familiar ideological positions. Democrats, emboldened by Woodrow Wilson’s progressive uses of government power, were fast becoming the party of a robust, active government. Republicans, representatives of northeastern business and financial interests, gravitated toward the laissez-faire brand of capitalism favored by titans of industry. On social issues, the once-Southern white Democrats became more accepting of racial equality, while the once-Northern Republicans became increasingly Southern and white. Democrats and Republicans soon represented what we understand as modern liberalism and conservatism, respectively.

Once the ideological lines were drawn, Democrats helped foster greater partisanship. Samuel Lubell’s *The Future of American Politics* argued in 1952 that “[o]ur political solar system ... had been characterized not by two equally competing suns, but by a sun and a moon.”⁴ The Democratic Party, the “sun” in Lubell’s analogy, generated the ideas and passions that framed public debate. The Republican Party, Lubell’s “moon,” merely reflected on ideas put forward by Democrats, offering its own perspectives and voices on issues brought forward by Democrats but rarely able to fundamentally alter the terms of public discourse.

Polarization sometimes produces grand public melodramas, but the effect is usually subtle. Routine votes on raising the debt ceiling and confirming federal court nominees continue to grow increasingly contentious. Party loyalty has risen and bipartisan agreements have become

³ Brian Robertson, “The Federalist Offers Important Lessons in How to Cope with the Current Gridlock in American Government,” London School of Economics, *LSE US Centre*, (November 2, 2013).

⁴ Thomas Byrne Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1985). 23.

rare. For Republicans at least, the phrase “party-line vote” has become nearly tautological. The National Journal reported that in 2013, House Republicans “voted with their caucus an average of 92 percent of the time.”⁵ Consequently, legislative productivity has largely stalled. The 112th Congress in 2011-2013 ranks as the least productive since the infamous 80th US Congress in 1947-1949, dubbed the “do-nothing Congress” by President Harry Truman.⁶

Along with this decline in productivity has come a predictable dip in public approval. Americans rarely view Congress favorably in opinion polls, but recent estimates of Congressional approval show the legislature at ruinously low numbers. In 2014, Gallup reported that only “[s]even percent of Americans say they have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in Congress as an American institution, down from the previous low of 10% in 2013.

Many trends that dominated American politics in the twentieth century originated in the Democratic Party. In the early 20th century, the Democratic Party created a new political center with its New Deal coalition, then it abandoned that political center under the pressures of Vietnam and civil rights agitation, and then rejoined the political mainstream (which, in turn, helped drive the Republican Party out of the mainstream). Throughout, the party played an instrumental role in creating the polarized environment of the late 20th century.

Polarization is a popular topic among writers in politics and history, though many place more emphasis on Republicans than Democrats. *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*, a 2012 book by political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (the latter a fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute), ranks among the most notable recent works on polarization. Mann and Ornstein discuss issues with both parties but train their fire largely on the Republican Party, which they describe as a uniquely destructive insurgent force, distinct from the

⁵ Elahe Izadi, “Congress Sets Record for Voting Along Party Lines,” *Nationaljournal.com*, February 3, 2014.

⁶ Chris Cilizza, “The Least Productive Congress Ever,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 2013.

Democratic Party by the severity of its polarization. Another, more history-oriented example is Rick Perlstein's *Nixonland*, which cites Republican Richard Nixon as a major catalyst of polarization. Nixonland, according to the book, is "the America where two separate and irreconcilable sets of apocalyptic fears coexist in the minds of two separate and irreconcilable groups of Americans."⁷

Some of the most useful insights of polarization focus on the Republican backlash to the Clinton years. David Brock's *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative* examines the right-wing media, a major driver of anti-Clinton polarization. Left-leaning journalists Joe Conason and Gene Lyons offered *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton*, another expose on the conservative anti-Clinton movement that Hillary dubbed the "vast right-wing conspiracy."

Many authors see 1968 as the banner year for national disunity. Historian Mark Kurlansky's *1968*, though global in scope, pays special attention to the disasters affecting the United States: The Tet Offensive, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Political scientist Walter Dean Burnham described the 1968 election as a realignment.⁸ Others, like Richard Wirthlin, see '68 merely as flashpoint in the middle of a "rolling realignment," a series of changes that unfolded gradually across several decades.⁹ James E. Campbell even cites 1968 as the possible beginning of a party "dealignment" that weakened political parties in general.¹⁰ Historians and political scientists debate what constitutes a true

⁷ Rebecca Riffkin, "Public Faith in Congress Falls Again, Hits Historic Low," *Gallup.com*, June 19, 2014.

⁸ Andrew L. Johns, *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015). 110.

⁹ Johns, *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*. 110.

¹⁰ James E. Campbell, *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections* (University Press of Kentucky, 2015). 215.

“realignment,” but the emphasis on the 1968-1972 period underscores the importance of the change.

My contribution to this body of literature on polarization explores the Democratic Party’s seminal contributions to the polarized climate of the 20th century, placing modern American polarization in its proper context as a byproduct in no small part of the Democrats’ intraparty divisions in the ‘60s and ‘70s and, then, as an agent of polarization in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

In my first chapter, I cover the Roosevelt years. The fracturing of the Democratic Party began with arguably the greatest consolidation of political power in modern US history: The New Deal coalition, which defined American politics in the twentieth century. Franklin Roosevelt served as the standard-bearer for the New Deal coalition. His administration set in place the power dynamics of Washington for a generation. Roosevelt won reelection an unprecedented three times, allowing him plenty of time to embed the reforms of the New Deal into American governance.

In the second chapter, I will turn to Lyndon Johnson and the backlash to his administration. Beginning in the 1960s, activists seized the party, pushing the Democrats to the left and alienating much of the country. These activists effectively shut Democrats out of serious contention in presidential politics for two decades (with the exception of Jimmy Carter’s post-Watergate win in 1976). Johnson also signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which drove the Solid South out of the Democratic Party and toward ultraconservative Republican Barry Goldwater. The cumulative effect was a weakened Democratic Party, especially in terms of presidential politics.

Chapter three focuses on the post-McGovern years, with particular emphasis on the party’s rebirth under Bill Clinton. By the late 1980s, the Democratic Party began to inch back

toward the political center. Clinton formalized the change. Under the banner of the “New Democrats,” Clinton embraced centrist economics and progressive social policies that put the party in line with mainstream thought. Clinton won the presidency in 1992, and in doing so removed the Republican Party from its long-held position as the more electorally viable party.

Both parties contributed to the divisions of recent decades, but the Democratic Party made some of the most important contributions to increasing ideological fervor on both sides. Understanding the development of the Democratic Party in the twentieth century is crucial to understanding the complex interplay between the government and the two parties.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEW DEAL

The Depression threw America into panic and desperation. A sobering example is found in Tennessee. In 1932, the most tumultuous year of the Depression, violence erupted in Wilder, a mining town in the Cumberland Mountains in Middle Tennessee. Depression worsened an already bad situation for Appalachian miners. Employers repeatedly cut wages and hours to compete with nearby mines. One miner said of the pay cuts:

It just kept gradually going down, down, down. The companies would keep fightin' us with West Kentucky, West Kentucky. That's all we could hear. West Kentucky would cut the prices on the coal, and they had to come cut us in order to compete with them. And so it was gettin' ridiculous.¹¹

The miners organized a strike, which met with brutal suppression. Myles Horton, founder of the then-new Highlander School, said, "That just killed me. You get involved with death of people ... and you can't do anything about it. ... If I hadn't already been a radical, that would've made me a radical right then."¹² The authors of *Tennessee: A Guide to the State*, wrote that the strike brought so much chaos that the National Guard had to be summoned "to stop killings and property damage."¹³

In the years after, the state rebounded. The *Guide* cited the Tennessee Valley Authority as a driver of the recovery: "Federal and State relief measures and the building program of the Tennessee Valley Authority reduced unemployment during the years following 1933."¹⁴ TVA,

¹¹ Sue Thrasher et al., *No More Moanin'* (The Institute for Southern Studies, 1974). 117.

¹² Thrasher, et al. *No More Moanin'*. 127.

¹³ *Tennessee: A Guide to the State* (State of Tennessee Department of Conservation, 1939). 61

¹⁴ *Tennessee: A Guide to the State*. 61.

the *Guide* says, “is one of the most important chapters in the history of Tennessee.” The Tennessee Valley became “the proving ground one of the most comprehensive social experiments in America.”¹⁵

The social experiment in question, the New Deal, stretched far beyond the Tennessee Valley and TVA. The New Deal touched nearly every corner of the American experience. The Civilian Conservation Corps built and renovated public works. The Agricultural Adjustment Act prevented falling crop prices by subsidizing farmers not to grow certain plants. The National Recovery Administration sought to improve collaboration among businesses and government. The Maritime Commission aimed to overhaul merchant ship production. The Securities and Exchange Commission regulated financial markets. Indeed, the aforementioned *Tennessee: A Guide to the State* was a product of the Work Projects Administration, another New Deal program that transformed America’s relationship with its federal government.¹⁶

The relationship needed transforming. According to *Fortune*, “34 million men, women, and children were without any income whatever.”¹⁷ Vagrancy increased. President Herbert Hoover, faced with calls for action, shirked from the task. He said in 1929 of the Depression that “conditions are fundamentally sound.”¹⁸ He told reporters in 1932, “Nobody is actually starving. The hoboes are better fed than they have ever been.”¹⁹ That year, voters removed Hoover in favor of his Democratic opponent, New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt.

¹⁵ *Tennessee: A Guide to the State*. 61.

¹⁶ *Tennessee: A Guide to the State*. 61.

¹⁷ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2013). 36.

¹⁸ Robert A. Caro, *The Path to Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson I* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 246.

¹⁹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 36.

Franklin Roosevelt changed the dynamics of power in America, broadening the scope of federal government by treating the Depression as a national security threat. Where Hoover saw the Depression as a routine downturn, Roosevelt saw a much deeper problem: George Creel of *Collier's* observed that Roosevelt's "fixed belief" was that "what we are now enduring is in no sense a 'slump,' but the breakdown of a system."²⁰ In William Manchester's phrasing, Roosevelt viewed the crisis "not in terms of principles or high policy, but as a human calamity."²¹

Roosevelt used every tactic available to him to alleviate the human calamity. His presidency increased public expectations for what the government can and should do to address economic problems. He worked the levers of party patronage to ensure loyalty. He wooed reporters with insider access. He used technology to bypass conservative editors and speak directly to the public.

Watching President Hoover from the governor's mansion in New York, Roosevelt lamented, "there is nothing inside the man [Hoover] but jelly."²² He foreshadowed his plans for the nation by creating the first statewide Department of Welfare in New York. His departure from Hoover's policies began immediately after he became president. The new president sensed the need for greater executive power. His famous inaugural address announced his new approach:

I am prepared under my constitutional duty to recommend the measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require. These measures, or such other measures as the Congress may build out of its experience and wisdom, I shall seek, within my constitutional authority, to bring to speedy adoption.

But in the event that the Congress shall fail to take one of these two courses, and in the event that the national emergency is still critical, I shall not

²⁰ George Creel, "What Roosevelt Intends to Do," *Collier's*, March 11, 1933.

²¹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 18.

²² Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 18.

evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.²³

Herein the new president signaled a massive change. Manchester wrote that “the news capital of the country” moved “from New York to Washington,” in a symbolic shift of power toward the federal government at the expense of Wall Street titans.²⁴ “The United Press tripled its Washington staff,” while “25 percent of all Associated Press news was coming from the capital.”²⁵ Within his party, Roosevelt’s programs catered to a massive swath of different interests. These interests formed the “New Deal coalition,” which dominated federal politics for several decades. Even more significantly, Roosevelt shifted the center of power within Washington. Congress no longer formed the nexus of federal activity as the body largely deferred to the president in those crucial early years of his administration. This produced a happy side-effect: it ended a disturbing trend toward support of revolution and totalitarianism that grew under the heat of the Depression.

“For Dictatorship if Necessary:” Radicalism and Authoritarianism

A natural corollary of desperation is political extremism.²⁶ As people around the world grew increasingly frustrated at the failures of their governments to remedy the Depression, many turned to radical ideologies. Such was the case in parts of Europe, where forms of fascism stepped into the power vacuum created by the Depression, sometimes by violent coups, and sometimes merely by tempting citizens to trade freedom for security.

²³ The National Archives. “FDR’s First Inaugural Address Declaring ‘War’ on the Great Depression.” Accessed November 2, 2015.

²⁴ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 84.

²⁵ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 84.

²⁶ Francis Castles, *Politics and Social Insight (Routledge Revivals)* (Routledge, 2009). 88.

Americans fought the same temptations as the ranks of the hungry and homeless exploded. The unimaginable poverty of tens of millions forced various groups to resort to the most extreme methods. The extremism underscored Roosevelt's prudence in declining to take full advantage of the opportunities for near-absolute power that could potentially have been afforded him. At the same time, political extremists actually helped Roosevelt. Their radical proposals made Roosevelt's own reforms look modest by comparison.

Signs of extremism took various forms. A Communist Party meeting in New York drew a crowd of 35,000.²⁷ The Ohio Unemployed League, under the aegis of Communist Louis Budenz, marched on the Columbus statehouse. Budenz's slogan, according to Manchester, was "We must take control of the government and establish a workers' and farmers' republic."²⁸ Manchester wrote of the feelings of anger, "Here and there the starving were muttering violence. ... Governor O. Max Gardner of North Carolina warned of the danger of a 'violent social and political revolution.'"²⁹

Farmers felt the effects of Depression more acutely than most, so naturally their extremism ran deeper (Philip Salisbury wrote that "revolt became commonplace among farmers").³⁰ Agricultural prices plummeted. Farm delinquency rates skyrocketed, as high as 48 percent in Iowa in 1932.³¹ Armed farmers stormed auction houses to buy their own farms back for a few dollars a piece.³² John A. Simpson, president of the National Farmers Union, warned

²⁷ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 55.

²⁸ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 55.

²⁹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 55.

³⁰ Philip S. Salisbury, *The Current Economic Crisis and the Great Depression* (Xlibris Corporation, 2010). 74.

³¹ Jon C. Teafor, *The Rise of the States: Evolution of American State Government* (JHU Press, 2002). 131.

³² Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 60.

the Senate that “[t]he biggest and finest crop of revolutions you ever saw is sprouting all over the country right now.”³³

Roosevelt entertained the possibility of emergency powers in his inaugural address, but others suggested even more drastic measures. For a period in 1932, many Americans flirted with the idea of an American dictator, spurred in part by Benito Mussolini’s tremendous popularity in the United States.³⁴ A headline in the *New York Herald-Tribune* declared the paper’s preference “For Dictatorship If Necessary.”³⁵ The *Boston Evening Transcript* wrote that “dictatorial authority” was needed, granting that “this is unprecedented in its implications, but such is the desperate temper of the people that it is welcome.”³⁶ Walter Lippman called for “a mild species of dictatorship” to “help us over the roughest spots in the road ahead.”³⁷

Mussolini’s popularity can be partly traced to his positive portrayal in the media. Strains of fascism and radicalism infected popular culture and politics. Radio listeners witnessed the bizarre metamorphosis of Father Charles E. Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest whose pro-New Deal broadcast mutated into a grotesque, fascist spectacle. On his nightly program throughout the mid-1930s, Coughlin could be heard praising *Il Duce* Mussolini, as well as German Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Coughlin routinely read excerpts from the antisemitic conspiracy tract *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, and he defended the violent Nazi pogrom Kristallnacht as necessary to protect Christianity. He branded the New Deal he once favored as

³³ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 60.

³⁴ Benjamin Leontief Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003). 19.

³⁵ “Dictatorship: The Road Not Taken,” The Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

³⁶ “Dictatorship: The Road Not Taken.”

³⁷ “Dictatorship: The Road Not Taken.”

the “Jew Deal,” and insisted that organized labor was a Communist conspiracy orchestrated from Moscow to wipe out Christianity.³⁸

In politics, no one better embodied the radical mindset than Louisiana governor Huey Long. Long, a Democrat who supported Roosevelt in 1932, took a left turn with a massive redistribution plan he called “Share Our Wealth” and a catchy slogan: “Every man a king, but no man wears a crown.”³⁹

Long became an archetype, a national symbol of political power. He rewarded friends. He punished enemies. He transformed Louisiana into a sprawling welfare state replete with huge infrastructure projects, ensuring loyalty with patronage and freeing the state from control by big corporations.⁴⁰ He also terrified FDR, who considered him a dangerous demagogue and a legitimate threat.⁴¹ Long was assassinated in 1935, but his oversized personality lingered, mythologized by Robert Penn Warren’s novel *All the King’s Men* and musician Randy Newman’s song “Kingfish.” William Manchester wrote that “Huey Long was one of the few Americans about which it can be said that, had he lived, American history would’ve been dramatically different.”⁴²

Letters sent to the Roosevelt White House offer some hints into why people embraced characters like Long and Coughlin. Many voters urged the president on a totalitarian course far beyond the emergency powers he requests in his inaugural address. One letter from J.H. Meaux of Mayville, Wisconsin, said, “[s]hould the politicians in the Senate and House, fail to give you the power to cope with the situation that confronts you, we the people of this country will come

³⁸ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 114.

³⁹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 116.

⁴⁰ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 112.

⁴¹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 111.

⁴² Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 117.

to Washington and clothe you with power, irrespective of them.”⁴³ Another letter from Joseph T. O’Neill encouraged the president to “Assume a Dictatorship, eliminate red tape” and “turn about the ship.”⁴⁴

Such rash measures were not needed. Roosevelt enjoyed the nearly unprecedented congressional backing. *The Literary Digest* fretted in March 1933 that “Congress has just given him almost dictatorial powers of reorganization of the government machinery in the direction of economy.”⁴⁵ Roosevelt, wrote David Kennedy, sensed “the unexpected pliancy of Congress” and “determined to hold it in session and to forge ahead with additional proposals, proposals that would begin to ... give meaning and substance to the New Deal.”⁴⁶ The resulting expansion in executive power and flood of new programs somewhat quelled the public’s thirst for action.

Roosevelt negotiated a moderate course, broadening executive power without sacrificing democracy. Richard Kirkendall wrote that “Roosevelt’s philosophy involved a belief in the conservative function of reform.” The resulting approach fell more in line with Lippman’s “mild species of dictatorship” than the extreme measures suggested by those who wrote pro-dictatorship letters to the White House. “Opposed to revolution,” Kirkendall wrote, “he [Roosevelt] believed that democratic statesmen must reform capitalism in ways that would convince Americans that they had no need to turn to other economic and political systems.”⁴⁷

Roosevelt convinced them. America’s dictatorship impulse proved as brief as it was fervent. Benjamin Alpers charted the “Dictatorial Moment in U.S. Political Culture” as

⁴³ “Dictatorship: The Road Not Taken.”

⁴⁴ “Dictatorship: The Road Not Taken.”

⁴⁵ “Grave Problems the New President Faces,” *The Literary Digest*, March 4, 1933.

⁴⁶ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1999). 139.

⁴⁷ Richard Stewart Kirkendall, *The United States 1929-1945: Years of Crisis and Change* (McGraw-Hill, 1973). 32.

beginning in fall and winter of 1932 and ending around spring 1933.⁴⁸ The alarming rise in extremist and totalitarian views led William Manchester to conclude, “[t]he evidence so strongly suggests that had Roosevelt in fact been another Hoover, the United States would have followed seven Latin American countries whose governments had been overthrown by Depression victims.”⁴⁹

Moving Out of Hooverville: The New Deal at Work

Why was it so crucial that Roosevelt not be “another Hoover?” Herbert Hoover failed on two important fronts. First and most obviously, he failed to alleviate the Depression. David Kennedy argued that it is unfair to censure Hoover for this failure. Hoover, Kennedy says, was constrained by “the boundaries of available intelligence and inherited institutions in Depression-era America.”⁵⁰ Kirkendall noted that Hoover “did not endorse the do-nothing philosophy for government.” Instead, Hoover “promoted change, enlarging the operations of government while trying to rely chiefly on business leaders.”⁵¹ Calvin Coolidge cautioned Hoover that “this is no time for rash experiments in men or measures.”⁵² Hoover, ever an ally of capitalism, simply opposed government interference in the markets. He also internalized the conventional wisdom that markets were self-correcting. In Hoover’s thinking, government needed only to nudge the market toward fixing the problem, and it would take care of the rest.

Hoover had reason to be optimistic. A year before the stock market crash heralded the beginning of the Depression, he easily won reelection, buoyed by a strong economy and an

⁴⁸ Benjamin Leontief Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003). 28.

⁴⁹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream..* 56.

⁵⁰ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1999). 56.

⁵¹ Richard Stewart Kirkendall, *The United States 1929-1945: Years of Crisis and Change* (McGraw-Hill, 1973). 13.

⁵² Krikendall, *The United States 1929-1945.*

adoring electorate. His Democratic opponent, four-time New York governor Al Smith, lost nearly every state in the union, including his home state of New York.⁵³

Smith had gained fame during his long tenure in New York for his interventionist, pro-worker policies. As governor, he secured many victories to labor, including shorter hours, worker's compensation, and wage legislation.⁵⁴ *LIFE* magazine's 1944 obituary of Smith praised him for "brid[ging] the chasm between the people and the government by making government real and interesting." "He campaigned on the record and made it glow," *LIFE*'s obituary beamed.⁵⁵

Smith's popularity as a governor could not overcome the handicaps he faced. *LIFE* wrote of "an uglier wave of hypocrisy and intolerance," from the South and West.⁵⁶ The public showed little interest in Smith's economic triumphs. Instead, voters showed hostility toward his Catholicism, contempt for his "Wet" anti-Prohibition views, and skepticism of his urban demeanor (as *LIFE* noted, "millions of Americans heard a New York accent for the first time" from Smith's 1928 radio addresses).⁵⁷

The pro-business mentality that helped Hoover win in 1928 caused him to underestimate the severity of the Depression in 1932. Hoover could perhaps be forgiven for this failure. His second mistake is more damning: Hoover failed to give the public even the impression that he was making any effort to end the Depression.⁵⁸ His resolute calm, which he thought crucial to maintaining business confidence, was interpreted by the public as indifference.

⁵³ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 31.

⁵⁴ "Smith and Willkie: Between them, they might have made the ideal president," *LIFE*. Oct. 23, 1944 edition.

⁵⁵ "Smith and Willkie."

⁵⁶ "Smith and Willkie."

⁵⁷ "Smith and Willkie."

⁵⁸ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 91.

Roosevelt learned from Hoover's mistakes. Rather than carry on Hoover's policies of inaction, FDR borrowed heavily from his Democratic forebear Al Smith. Roosevelt not only cribbed from Smith's ideas of an activist government, he also made use of the support base Smith established in urban centers (ironically, however, Smith despised Roosevelt and the New Deal). Though Smith was bitterly unpopular in rural America in 1928, he fared much better with urban voters, winning all twelve of America's largest cities.⁵⁹

Swept into office by a public desperate for action, Roosevelt dramatically increased his the president's power and influence over national policy. He turned his attention first to the rising tide of bank panics that flooded the financial sector. Governors in Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and California had temporarily shuttered banks to prevent mass withdrawals. *The Ladies' Home Journal* warned that "HOARDED DOLLARS ARE TRAITOR DOLLARS."⁶⁰ "They are serving only the enemy—depression," the *Journal* scolded.⁶¹

The president declared a national bank holiday, closing banks across the country to stanch the hemorrhaging of reserve funds. Five days after Roosevelt's inauguration, Congress passed the Emergency Banking Act, which authorized the Federal Reserve to issue currency to buttress private bank reserves.⁶² The Federal Deposit Insurance Banking Act, establishing the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, followed in June 1933. The measures worked.⁶³ Under the headline "BIG DEPOSITS MADE IN EAGLE ROCK BANKS," California's *Eagle Rock Advertiser* reported on March 20, 1933, that "the most pronounced feature following the end of the banking holiday" was "the spirit of confidence and optimism with which the public has

⁵⁹ "Smith and Willkie"

⁶⁰ "HOARDED DOLLARS ARE TRAITOR DOLLARS," *The Anamosa Journal*, January 14, 1933.

⁶¹ "HOARDED DOLLARS ARE TRAITOR DOLLARS."

⁶² Kirkendall, *The United States 1929-1945*. 39.

⁶³ Kirkendall, *The United States 1929-1945*. 39.

joined in the resumption of normal business.”⁶⁴ Richard Kirkendall wrote, “bank failures and depositors’ losses ... soon ceased to be features of American life.”⁶⁵

Soon, the famous “alphabet soup” of programs proliferated. By April 1933, Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps put 250,000 young men to work making \$30 a month. Other programs met with mixed results, but there were enough encouraging signs to satisfy the public. The National Recovery Act in particular disappointed supporters and was eventually struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional. In general, however, New Deal programs were wildly popular. The *Literary Digest* reported in June 1934, that “forty-seven of the 48 states are solidly behind President Roosevelt and the ‘New Deal’ policies.”⁶⁶ The *Digest* poll revealed the South as the New Deal’s stronghold: support in southern states was three to one in favor of the New Deal.⁶⁷ “His measures,” fawned *The Nation*, “have been designed with consummate skill to give the country what it most desires: a sense of vigor and action.”⁶⁸ Roosevelt understood the importance of that perception of action. He directed his administration, “Take a method and try it. If it fails, try another. But above all, try something.”⁶⁹

The tone of letters to the White House changed, reflecting the easing of national nerves somewhat after those frantic months of 1932. One such letter read, “Dear Mr. President: This is just to tell you that everything is all right now. The man you sent found our house all right ... and the mortgage can go on a while longer. ... I never heard of a president like you.”⁷⁰ Works Progress Administration employees in Battle Creek, Michigan, wrote Roosevelt to “[p]lease

⁶⁴ “BIG DEPOSITS MADE IN EAGLE ROCK BANKS,” *The Eagle Rock Advertiser*, March 20, 1933.

⁶⁵ Kirkendall, *The United States 1929-1945*. 39.

⁶⁶ “47 States Support Roosevelt Policies, New Deal Poll Shows,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, June 15, 1934.

⁶⁷ “47 States Support Roosevelt Policies, New Deal Poll Shows.”

⁶⁸ “The Week,” *The Nation*, March 22, 1933.

⁶⁹ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 104.

⁷⁰ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 83.

continue this W.P.A. program. It makes us feel like an American citizen to earn our own living.”⁷¹

Polling data bears out the optimism of the letters and editorials. With the caveats that most large polling operations did not exist until the mid-1930s and respondents were mostly affluent whites, contemporary polls showed remarkably high spirits. According to the Pew Research Center, “half (50%) expected general business conditions to improve over the next six months, while only 29% expected a worsening” and “fully 60% thought that opportunities for getting ahead were better (45%) or at least as good (15%) as in their father’s day.”⁷²

The polls may have ignored African-Americans, but even their situation improved under the New Deal. A 1935 executive order prohibited exclusion of African-Americans from relief work.⁷³ Southerners took notice of the change in the traditionally white-centric Democratic Party; Carter Glass commented that “... the so-called Democratic party at the North is now the negro party ... but most of our Southern leaders seem to disregard this socialistic threat to the South in their eagerness to retain Mr. Roosevelt in power.”⁷⁴

Despite the herculean efforts of Southern politicians to stifle African-Americans, many found work. African-Americans thus joined the New Deal coalition, an unlikely marriage of interests including organized labor, progressives, and the urban poor.⁷⁵ The New Deal coalition provided a durable source of political power for both the president and the Democratic Party, reelecting Roosevelt three times.

⁷¹ Robert S. McElvaine, *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2009). 127

⁷² Jodie T. Allen, “How a Different America Responded to the Great Depression.” Pew Research Center.

⁷³ Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Duke University Press, 1994). 33.

⁷⁴ Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Harvard University Press, 1998). 78.

⁷⁵ Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. 86.

A number of Supreme Court battles and a spike in unemployment in 1938 (precipitated, in part, by Roosevelt's deficit reduction plan) weakened the New Deal in the late '30s. The same year, Southern Democrats turned against the New Deal as they began to see its empowering effects on African-Americans. They teamed with anti-New Deal Republicans from the Midwest to form a legislative coalition to block any further New Deal programs.⁷⁶

With whiplash intensity, the country swung from enthusiastic support of Roosevelt's call for emergency powers to fight the Depression to an overwhelming suspicion of government. Walter Lippmann captured the intellectual mood when he dropped his earlier support of a "mild species of dictatorship" and embraced the thinking of the Friedrich Hayek, the fiercely anti-New Deal economist with whom he corresponded frequently. The two plotted "ways to mobilize what [they] called the 'real' liberals around the world to rescue liberalism, the liberalism of freedom and economic liberty, from its statist traducers."⁷⁷

As the situation overseas worsened, Roosevelt called a special session of Congress.⁷⁸ This aroused panic among isolationists. Many Americans still subscribed to Father Coughlin's paranoid antisemitism. Others joined aviator Charles Lindbergh's America First movement. Lindbergh, a committed isolationist, told radio listeners that "[t]he destiny of this country does not call for our involvement in European wars."⁷⁹ Lindbergh, too, courted antisemitism, warning that Jews would be blamed for the disastrous war due to their "ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government."⁸⁰ However, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, isolationism was discarded as the New Deal state readied itself for war.

⁷⁶ Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2002). 108.

⁷⁷ Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. 86.

⁷⁸ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 432.

⁷⁹ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 433.

⁸⁰ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 220.

The New Deal at War

The rise of Hitler and Mussolini formed the international backdrop for the Great Depression. On March, 24, 1933, thirteen days after J.H. Meaux wrote Roosevelt urging him to dissolve the legislature, Chancellor Adolf Hitler put the idea into practice in Germany. Roosevelt summarily spurned any possibility of becoming a dictator.

Though it did not in any way compare to the power of the European fascists, Roosevelt's emergency authority proved effective. From 1933 to 1937, the New Deal steadily reduced unemployment. The president's flirtation with deficit reduction increased the unemployment rate in 1938, but by the following year returned to its downward course.⁸¹ Gross national product rebounded throughout the 1930s.⁸² The Social Security Act and the Tennessee Valley Authority permanently cemented the New Deal as a major component of American life.

So, when finally the international crisis forced itself upon America, the president marshaled that same federal vigor toward the war effort. Although many New Deal programs (such as the CCC) were terminated during the war, the New Deal survived as a tool of American mobilization and logistical support. In Roosevelt's words, World War II became "a New Deal war."⁸³ Programs like the Federal Security Agency remained and contributed to the war effort. Derek Kotiowski wrote,

The administration sought to consolidate the gains won by unions; boost public-sector spending; broaden access to employment via an 'economic bill of rights'; cultivate entrepreneurs who were friendly toward labor and hostile to monopolies; and cast reform in global terms.⁸⁴

⁸¹Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 139.

⁸² Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. 139.

⁸³ Dean J. Kotlowski, *Paul V. McNutt and the Age of FDR* (Indiana University Press, 2015). 312.

⁸⁴ Kotlowski, *Paul V. McNutt and the Age of FDR*. 312.

This is consistent with the New Deal's original intent. Roosevelt framed the New Deal in terms of recovery and security.

Opposition to American entry into World War II followed many of the same patterns as opposition to the New Deal had almost a decade earlier. Conservatives were "opposed to big government on every front, foreign and domestic."⁸⁵ Even some liberal doves who supported the domestic version of the New Deal turned against it when the war came. Joseph Scottie wrote that "antiwar progressives" such as Senators William Borah and Gerald Nye "began to realize that there was something very wrong with a strong state that could expand into foreign adventures, and so they gradually became anti-New Dealers in every sense of the word."⁸⁶

The "war on the emergency" metaphor Roosevelt employed in his first inaugural address betrayed a realization that economic and national security were bound. Indeed, economic insecurity materially affected readiness for war. Newspapers reported that "draftees had been rejected for various health reasons."⁸⁷ A National Nutrition Conference for Defense in 1941 found that malnutrition was the main reason the Army turned away 40% of draftees.⁸⁸

The Roosevelt administration created two programs to deal with the national security threat of malnutrition. First, the Emergency Education Program increased the number of public nurseries tenfold.⁸⁹ Second, the Department of Agriculture launched the Penny Milk Program, which provided milk to low-income children by selling milk to schools for one penny per half pint. Both programs were extended into World War II.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Joseph Scottie, *The Paleoconservatives: New Voices of the Old Right* (Transaction Publishers). 22.

⁸⁶ Scottie, *The Paleoconservatives*. 22.

⁸⁷ Steven Conn (ed.), *To Promote the General Welfare: The Case for Big Government* (OUP USA, 2012). 119.

⁸⁸ Conn (ed.), *To Promote the General Welfare*. 119.

⁸⁹ Conn (ed.), *To Promote the General Welfare*. 47.

⁹⁰ Conn (ed.), *To Promote the General Welfare*. 47.

The American war effort is properly understood not as a discrete component of national policy but rather as a natural extension of the New Deal to the realm of defense. The best illustration of the domestic New Deal's connection to the war effort is artist Norman Rockwell's famous "Four Freedoms" paintings, inspired by Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address. In the address, Roosevelt called for international recognition of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Rockwell's depiction of "freedom from want," a family gathered around a table for dinner, "illustrated the promise of the New Deal—a society in which every family could enjoy such a meal, and whose government took active steps to make it possible."⁹¹ The Office of War Information, a government propaganda outlet, found the visuals so inspiring that they adopted Rockwell's Four Freedoms paintings as advertisements for war bonds.⁹²

Legacy of the New Deal

Economist Paul Krugman christened the period following World War II "the Great Compression." A confluence of factors, among them progressive taxation and New Deal programs, significantly narrowed the income gap between the wealthiest Americans and the rest. Income inequality defined America for most of its existence. In his book *The Conscience of a Liberal*, Krugman writes about the disintegration of Long Island's Gold Coast, a haven for wealthy playboys and socialites. "Some of the mansions had been sold for a pittance," Krugman said, "then either torn down to make room for middle-class tract housing or adopted for institutional use."⁹³ The estates faced "a triple whammy dealt by the advent of a federal income tax, the financial losses of the Great Depression and changes in the U.S. economic structure that

⁹¹ Richard A. Harris and Daniel J. Tichenor, *A History of the U.S. Political System: Ideas, Interests, and Institutions [3 Volumes]: Ideas, Interests, and Institutions* (ABC-CLIO, 2009). 40.

⁹² Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World* (Harvard University Press, 2007). 47.

⁹³ Paul Krugman. *The Conscience of a Liberal*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2009. 40.

made domestic service a less attractive job for the legions of workers needed to keep this way of life humming.”⁹⁴ The Gold Coast was replaced by Levittown, a symbol of middle class suburban values.⁹⁵

By design, the New Deal effected a changing of political order in a decidedly Democratic direction. The New Deal consensus ensured 20th century Democrats a level of power virtually without precedent in American history. As CBS reporter Eric Sevareid warned, however, “if hardships do things to the mind, so do comforts.”⁹⁶

He was right, but it took some time to see the impact comforts would have on the American mind. The New Deal had reshuffled allegiances and the New Deal coalition dominated politics for nearly 50 years. Interests crucial to Democratic politics even today initially joined the party under the New Deal. African-Americans, long a reliable constituency of the Republican Party, embraced the Democratic Party for the first time under Roosevelt. After decades of resistance, the Republicans finally abandoned the anti-New Deal Robert Taft wing in favor of Dwight Eisenhower. The moderate Eisenhower embraced most of Roosevelt’s programs and prevailed upon fellow Republicans the necessity of making peace with the New Deal consensus.

Liberals saw problems that remained to be solved. In 1946, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that the “long fight to put the control of our economic system in the hands of the Government, where it can be administered in the interests of the people as a whole” was being compromised by “Congress, under the influence of powerful lobbies.”⁹⁷ Americans for Democratic Action, a progressive organization whose ranks included liberal powerhouse Hubert

⁹⁴ Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*. 40.

⁹⁵ Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*. 40.

⁹⁶ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 83.

⁹⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, *Eleanor Roosevelt’s My Day, Volume II: The Post-War Years* (New York: Pharos Books, 1990) 56.

Humphrey and left-wing economist John Kenneth Galbraith, grew increasingly influential through the mid-20th century. The ADA fought a two-front battle, seeking to reverse the growing conservative tide in Congress while fiercely denouncing communism overseas.⁹⁸

Yet the success of the Great Compression ultimately proved deadly for Democrats. The comforts of the Great Compression caused serious electoral problems. Historian Rick Perlstein explained in *Nixonland*:

Liberals had written the New Deal social and labor legislation that let ordinary Americans win back a measure of economic security. Then liberals helped lead a war against fascism, a war conservatives opposed, and the worked to create, in the postwar reconversion, the consumer economy that built the middle class, a prosperity for ordinary laborers unprecedented in the history of the world. ... Now history had caught them in a bind: with the boom they had helped build, ordinary workers were becoming ever less reliably downtrodden, vulnerable to appeal from the Republicans.⁹⁹

In the absence of economic want, voters turned their attention to other issues. Crime increased. Racial tensions heightened. Middle class voters demanded something be done. They were deeply dissatisfied with the Democrats' answer.

To their credit, many liberals recognized the problem. An idea called “qualitative liberalism” popped up in liberal intellectual circles in the post-New Deal years. Historian Arthur Schlesinger set the tone. In a piece called “The Challenge of Abundance,” Schlesinger divided liberalism into two distinct types: qualitative and quantitative. “Quantitative” liberalism, according to Schlesinger, is “a liberalism that thought primarily—and necessarily—in quantitative terms. It has to deal with immediate problems of subsistence and survival.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (Oxford University Press, 1996). 146.

⁹⁹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (Simon and Schuster, 2010). 41.

¹⁰⁰ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Challenge of Abundance,” *The Reporter*.

In Schlesinger's telling, the New Deal is the paramount example of quantitative liberalism. Roosevelt's immediate concerns were ensuring basic needs of subsistence and survival, such as food, housing, and jobs. At the time Schlesinger wrote "The Future of Liberalism," the New Deal consensus still reigned. He naturally declared quantitative liberalism "a brilliant success" that "laid the foundations for a new age in America."¹⁰¹

Democrats seized on qualitative liberalism as the solution to the electoral woes produced by New Deal prosperity. Liberals turned away from the economic metrics of quantitative liberalism around the 1950s. In response to the social unrest of the late 20th century, they embraced Schlesinger's second form of liberal thought, qualitative liberalism. Schlesinger urged liberals on this course, arguing that "[i]nstead of talking as if the necessities of living ... were still at stake, we should be able to count that fight won and move on to the more subtle and complicated problem of fighting for individual dignity, identity, and fulfillment".¹⁰² Qualitative liberalism "respects, accepts, and absorbs the triumphs of the New and Fair Deals ... and seeks to move beyond them toward new goals of national development."¹⁰³

Schlesinger's qualitative agenda included education, health care, "more equal opportunities for minority groups," "better planning of our cities and our suburbs," "the improvement of life for the sick and the aged," and "the bettering of our mass media and the elevation of our popular culture."¹⁰⁴ "In short," he concluded, liberals must be concerned "with the *quality* of civilization to which our nation aspires in an age of ever-increasing abundance and leisure."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Schlesinger, "The Challenge of Abundance."

¹⁰² Schlesinger, "The Challenge of Abundance."

¹⁰³ Schlesinger, "The Challenge of Abundance."

¹⁰⁴ Schlesinger, "The Challenge of Abundance."

¹⁰⁵ Schlesinger, "The Challenge of Abundance."

Seven years after Schlesinger's piece was published, Lyndon Johnson, a Texas New Dealer, led his party and state through the restless 1960s. He became the unlikely standard bearer for qualitative liberalism as president, seven years after Schlesinger's piece was published. Johnson simply reapplied the New Deal to this new set of problems, just as Roosevelt had done during the war. First, Roosevelt focused the New Deal inward, as a tool of economic recovery. Then, he directed New Deal policies and New Deal rhetoric outward, on the conflict in Europe and the Pacific. President Johnson burdened the New Deal with another task. Under the banner of the "Great Society," Johnson refashioned outdated New Deal machinery toward qualitative social progress, addressing issues of race, class, health, and education. This proved too cumbersome for the New Deal coalition, already weakened by the Vietnam War. It collapsed. With it went much of America's political power structure.

CHAPTER 3

THE GREAT SOCIETY AND THE FALL OF THE NEW DEAL CONSENSUS

A problem dogged leftists after the New Deal: how would they adapt the liberal ideals of Roosevelt to a modern setting? Roosevelt launched the New Deal to help the country recover from the Great Depression and to set up a social safety net to prevent future economic crises. He leaned heavily on the New Deal when mobilizing the country for entry into World War II. New Deal liberalism was designed for dire conditions, where economic recovery and national security were urgent concerns.

These programs sprang from “quantitative liberalism.”¹⁰⁶ The Depression and the war were confined to memory by the 1950s. America’s rising middle class ushered in a period of unprecedented prosperity and a new consumer culture.¹⁰⁷ Liberals such as historian Arthur Schlesinger began to fret about how left-wing politics would stay relevant as the prosperity increased.¹⁰⁸ As pollster Samuel Lubell warned, “the inner dynamics of the Roosevelt coalition have shifted from those of getting to those of keeping.”¹⁰⁹

The left found its solution in qualitative liberalism. Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman, took the first steps toward qualitative liberalism with his “Fair Deal.” The Fair Deal took the first steps into new territory by focusing “on the creation and equitable distribution of abundance, which now loomed as an attainable reality.”¹¹⁰ Truman’s Fair Deal proposals ranged from tax

¹⁰⁶ Arthur Schlesinger. “The Challenge of Abundance.” *The Reporter*, May 17, 1956.

¹⁰⁷ William Manchester. *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972*. New York: RosettaBooks, 2013. 473.

¹⁰⁸ “Schlesinger Favors ‘Qualitative’ Liberalism Suited to Prosperity,” *The Harvard Crimson*.

¹⁰⁹ Rick Perlstein. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. Simon and Schuster, 2010. 41.

¹¹⁰ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 473.

cuts for the poor to expansions of civil rights.¹¹¹ Schlesinger defined qualitative liberalism as “liberalism in an age of abundance.”¹¹² His idea gained traction in the intelligentsia in the 1950s. Schlesinger hoped that qualitative liberalism would fix the “spiritual malaise” of postwar America.¹¹³

Another proponent of qualitative liberalism, John Kenneth Galbraith, depicted qualitative liberalism as a left-wing culture war. As the right would in the ‘80s and ‘90s lament the culture of relativism and permissiveness, so the left decades earlier lamented mass consumerism and intellectual decline. In *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith wrote about cultural decay in the mass consumerism created by the New Deal: “... litter, blighted buildings, billboards... a countryside that has been rendered largely invisible by commercial art.”¹¹⁴ FCC chair Newton Minow called television “a vast wasteland.”¹¹⁵ These petty issues of cultural refinement later mingled with the far more serious problems of civil rights and educational reform, both of which were key planks of qualitative liberalism in Schlesinger’s conception.¹¹⁶

In the 1960s, qualitative liberalism influenced national policy. President John F. Kennedy incorporated many tenets of qualitative liberalism into his New Frontier programs, including a commitment to civil rights.¹¹⁷ After Kennedy’s death, Kennedy’s New Frontier vision found an unlikely proponent in President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson launched a series of programs collectively called the Great Society. These programs, targeted primarily at addressing poverty, racial equality, healthcare, and education, achieved significant gains in reducing poverty and

¹¹¹ Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*. 473.

¹¹² Arthur Schlesinger. “The Challenge of Abundance.” *The Reporter*, May 17, 1956.

¹¹³ Schlesinger. “The Challenge of Abundance.”

¹¹⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958.

¹¹⁵ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 42.

¹¹⁶ Schlesinger. “The Challenge of Abundance.”

¹¹⁷ Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

promoting social progress.¹¹⁸ However, Johnson presented them as programs of social and cultural betterment, promising “a society of success without squalor, beauty without barrenness, works of genius without the wretchedness of poverty.”¹¹⁹

In other words, Johnson was promising a qualitative transformation of America. This proved too overwhelming a task, so much that it eclipsed the legitimate quantitative accomplishments of Johnson’s sweeping programs. The Great Society was perceived to be a failure on its own qualitative terms, and this perception forever changed the American power structure.

Johnson himself was a Texas Democrat who, early in his career, embraced states’ rights to enforce Jim Crow against federal power.¹²⁰ Later Johnson, protégé of anti-civil rights conservative coalition leader Richard Russell, became a champion of the liberal agenda.¹²¹ The story of Johnson’s transformation bears revisiting.

Lyndon Johnson: Dogmatic Pragmatist

A character sketch of President Johnson is instructive. Historian Robert Caro, in his lauded series *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, depicts a relentless, imposing, unflappably pragmatic career climber. In the Senate, Johnson denounced “bomb throwers” who passionately argued their views.¹²² Once, he chided his colleagues that “it’s the politician’s task to pass legislation, not to sit around saying principled things.”¹²³ When he spoke, he took note of his audience and made a

¹¹⁸ Ben Wattenberg. “Did The Great Society Work? There Are Some Positive Results.” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 19, 1985.

¹¹⁹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 5.

¹²⁰ Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson III* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009). 215.

¹²¹ Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson III* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), xv.

¹²² Caro, *Master of the Senate*, xv.

¹²³ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, xv.

habit of “telling liberals one thing, conservatives the opposite, and asserting both positions with equal, and seemingly total, conviction.”¹²⁴ Johnson was a great “reader of men,” who could quickly identify strengths, weaknesses, wants, needs, fears, and manipulate all of them with equal aplomb.¹²⁵

Johnson also held a deep suspicion of idealism. His brother, Sam Houston, explained that “the most important thing to Lyndon was not to be like Daddy.”¹²⁶ Johnson’s father, Sam Ealy, was, according to Caro, “a dreamer, a man who had ‘no sense’.”¹²⁷ “[I]t was important ... to Lyndon,” Caro continued, “that he be regarded as a man who scorned ideals and causes as impractical dreams, that he be regarded as pragmatic, cynical, tough, shrewd.”¹²⁸

Contemporary accounts show that he largely succeeded. A 1958 profile in *LIFE* magazine described Johnson as “a man of urgency” who was “tremendously persuasive” and possessed “an uncanny knack for getting other people to work with him.”¹²⁹ *LIFE* characterized him as “coldly practical.”¹³⁰

Johnson’s disdain for “principled things” made many of his liberal colleagues uncomfortable. Aside from his wobbly record on civil rights, many liberals simply found Johnson to be too obsessed with expediency and lacking in any sincere beliefs. “Tough politicians though some of the liberals were,” Robert Caro wrote, “they felt themselves bound ... by at least some fundamental rules of conduct; he [Johnson] seemed to be bound by nothing.”¹³¹

¹²⁴ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, xvi.

¹²⁵ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 136.

¹²⁶ Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power* (Vintage books, a division of Random house, Incorporated, 2013). 520.

¹²⁷ Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power* (Vintage books, a division of Random house, Incorporated, 2013). 21.

¹²⁸ Caro, *The Passage of Power*. 21.

¹²⁹ ‘Lyndon Johnson Has the Ball,’ *LIFE*, January 20, 1958.

¹³⁰ John Steele, “A Kingmaker or a Dark Horse?,” *LIFE*, June 26, 1956.

¹³¹ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, xvi.

For Johnson, respect was a scarce resource. Those who in his mind deserved respect (usually powerful old men who could advance his career, like Texas congressman Sam Rayburn) got more than enough, and those who did not (such as his wife, Lady Bird) got almost none.¹³² In *Path to Power*, Caro wrote about how Lyndon's attitude toward his father seemed to change over time. Caro wrote in *Master of the Senate*, the third volume of the series, of Johnson's tendency to seek out staffers "who had demonstrated an unusual willingness to absorb personal abuse."¹³³

Johnson's relationship with liberal Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey offers a unique glimpse into Johnson's character. Humphrey, Caro wrote, was "regarded as a very strong man, strong and tough enough to have stood up to the South."¹³⁴ Caro says that Johnson saw him differently:

At the bottom of Humphrey's character, as Johnson saw, was a fundamental sweetness, a gentleness, a reluctance to cause pain; a desire, if he fought with someone, to later seek a reconciliation, to let bygones be bygones, to shake hands and be friends again. And to Lyndon Johnson that meant that at the bottom of Humphrey's character, beneath the strength and the ambition and the energy, there was weakness.¹³⁵

The story of how Johnson allied with Hubert Humphrey provides answers to another mystery of Johnson's professional life: how he became a champion of the liberals. It seems odd at first blush that a man whose only guiding principle seemed to be his own advancement came to embrace economic justice and racial equality. Johnson betrayed no such inclinations in his early years in the Senate. A protégé of Southern segregationist Senators Richard Russell and Sam Rayburn, Johnson dutifully parroted his mentors' opposition to federal encroachment on states' rights, and on the necessity of letting the South manage its own racial affairs. Indeed,

¹³² Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 154.

¹³³ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 146.

¹³⁴ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 459.

¹³⁵ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 459.

Johnson's first speech on the Senate floor was a passionate defense of states' rights against the encroachment of federal civil rights legislation (for which he received a standing ovation from Senator Russell).¹³⁶

Johnson carried with him the humiliation of his youth, when his family fell into poverty in part because of his father's idealism. "The Hill Country was a land that broke romantics, dreamers, wishful thinkers, idealists," Caro wrote. "It broke Sam Johnson."¹³⁷ He wanted power, but he also wanted to ensure that others would not have to suffer the same loss of dignity. His famous 1965 speech "We Shall Overcome" offers the best explanation of how Johnson transitioned from states' rights to civil rights:

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school. Few of them could speak English, and I could speak much Spanish. ... They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice.

...

It never occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country. But now I do have that chance—I'll let you in on a secret—I mean to use it.¹³⁸

One common misconception about Johnson's presidency holds that he completely controlled the Senate through force of his domineering personality. During the early years of his presidency, however, Johnson grappled with a conservative Congress that had stood firm against liberal legislation ever since Roosevelt's court packing fiasco of 1938.¹³⁹ UPI ran a story in January 1964 saying that the logjam had become so serious that procedural reforms were considered. Under the almost metaphysical headline "Overhaul of Self Sought In Congress," UPI reported that Senators Clifford Case (R-NJ) and Joseph Clark (D-PA) had jointly urged sweeping

¹³⁶ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 215.

¹³⁷ Robert A. Caro, *The Path to Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson I* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 111.

¹³⁸ Lyndon Johnson, "We Shall Overcome," *The Crisis*, April 1973.

¹³⁹ Caro, *The Passage of Power*, 346.

congressional reforms, with Chase arguing that “[i]t is one thing for the majority to work its will on a bill. It is quite different and, I think inexcusable, to avoid a vote and let a bill be killed by the decision of one person.”¹⁴⁰

A unique set of circumstances helped Johnson past the logjam. A “liberal moment” gripped Congress beginning in 1964 with the election of Johnson and the numerous Democrats who clung to his coattails.¹⁴¹ Johnson knew the moment would be brief, with the 1966 midterms looming, and he conveyed a sense of urgency to Congressional Democrats.

Johnson secured many achievements that had eluded his predecessor and confounded the left for decades, among them the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He also targeted issues of poverty, waging a rare ideological battle in the midst of a career of transactional politics.

War on Poverty

Johnson set the tone for his administration in his first State of the Union address when he announced that “[t]his administration, today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”¹⁴² By this, Johnson did not mean that the poor would receive free handouts from the government simply for being poor, but rather that the government would use its resources to offer the poor opportunity to recover, receive a good education, and be trained to work in the new economy.

Sargent Shriver explained that the administration’s goal was “a hand up, not a hand out.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. Simon and Schuster, 2010. 198.

¹⁴¹ Julian E. Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (Penguin, 2015). 227.

¹⁴² James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (Oxford University Press, 1996). 535.

¹⁴³ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*.

The administration sought to empower the poor to end poverty themselves. Shriver played a crucial role in the initiative. One of the few members of the Kennedy family to remain in the executive branch after JFK's death, Shriver had been in charge of the nascent Peace Corps when Johnson asked him to oversee the War on Poverty. Once he accepted the new job, Shriver formed a task force of academics (including Michael Harrington, author of an influential exploration of poverty, *The Other America*, and one of the early intellectual proponents of qualitative liberalism) to develop strategies to fight poverty.

The War on Poverty drew from a mainstream academic understanding of the nature and origins of poverty. Activist Michael Harrington's book *The Other America* explained the thinking: "People are poor because they made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry or in the wrong racial or ethnic group."¹⁴⁴ The War on Poverty sought to "help the poor fill in their background with education and training and experience, the stuff that will enable them to break through the poverty barrier."¹⁴⁵

Johnson also hoped to use the War on Poverty to rebut charges that he was soft on crime. He believed crime and political extremism were largely byproducts of poverty. With the wounds of the 1964 race riot in Harlem still fresh, Johnson explained that "the War on Poverty is a war against crime and a war against disorder."¹⁴⁶

At its core, the War on Poverty hoped to grant dignity through economic security. A *Milwaukee Sentinel* piece on Shriver and the War on Poverty quoted an elderly poor man saying, "Back in the depression, when everybody—or at least a majority of the people—were poor, it

¹⁴⁴ Tom Brooks, "Head Start for Tomorrow: Sargent Shriver & the Program," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, Jun. 14, 1966 edition.

¹⁴⁵ Brooks, "Head Start for Tomorrow: Sargent Shriver & the Program."

¹⁴⁶ Richard Bessel and Clive Emsley, *Patterns of Provocation: Police and Public Disorder* (Berghahn Books, 2000). 91.

wasn't so humiliating, you might say. But now, you can't have dignity in being poor."¹⁴⁷ To that end, the War on Poverty relied on the poor themselves to end poverty. The roots of the programs were "community effort" and "self-help projects," as envisioned in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which gave rise to the Office of Economic Opportunity that Shriver directed.¹⁴⁸

Johnson and Shriver may not have seen the War on Poverty as a welfare initiative. The white middle class, however, did. Middle America was "sorely offended" by the War on Poverty.¹⁴⁹ Novelist Tom Wolfe's 1970 essay "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers" explains, in Wolfe's signature wit, why.

Wolfe argued that anti-poverty programs were an easily exploited farce. The frontpiece of "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers" depicts the story as the meeting of "black rage and white guilt."¹⁵⁰ Wolfe writes about black radicals who aggressively confronted white bureaucrats in the San Francisco Office of Economic Opportunity in San Francisco, browbeating the Office into financing them and their organizations.¹⁵¹ Wolfe claimed that anyone who could "shake up the bureaucrats so bad that their eyes froze into iceballs and their mouths twisted up into smiles of sheer physical panic" could easily game the system for free money.¹⁵² He continued:

Nobody kept records on the confrontations, which is too bad. There must have been hundreds of them in San Francisco alone. Across the country there must have been thousands. When the confrontations touched the white middle class in a big way, like when black students started strikes and disruptions at San Francisco State, Columbia, Cornell, or Yale ... then the media described it blow by blow. ... Bad dudes were out mau-mauing at all the poverty agencies, at boards of education, at city halls, hospitals, conventions, foundations, schools, charities, civic organizations, all sorts of places. It got

¹⁴⁷ Brooks, "Head Start for Tomorrow: Sargent Shriver & the Program."

¹⁴⁸ Brooks, "Head Start for Tomorrow: Sargent Shriver & the Program."

¹⁴⁹ Tom Wolfe, "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers," *New York Magazine*, June 1970.

¹⁵⁰ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (University of Virginia Press, 2010). 58.

¹⁵¹ Wolfe, "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers."

¹⁵² Wolfe, "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers."

to be an American custom, like talk shows, Face the Nation, marriage counseling, marathon encounters, or zoning hearings.¹⁵³

“Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers” reflects what conservative critics saw as the dramatic failure of the War on Poverty. The effect, historian Rick Perlstein observed, is one of the most important “lesson[s] of the sixties:” “liberals get in the biggest political trouble ... when they presume that reform is an inevitable concomitant of progress. It is then that they are most likely to establish their reforms by top-down bureaucratic means. A blindsiding backlash often ensues.”¹⁵⁴

The backlash arrived in the form of a restless middle class and a resurgent right wing. Prior to the War on Poverty, 59 percent of Americans polled believed that “the federal government bore responsibility to make sure every American had an adequate job and income.” By 1969, that number had shrunk to 31 percent.¹⁵⁵ Conservatives increased their influence as the backlash intensified, led by intellectuals such as William Kristol. Kristol commented that conservatives “were especially provoked by the widespread acceptance of left-wing sociological ideas that were incorporated into the War on Poverty.”¹⁵⁶ Kristol’s brand of conservatism became the dominant force in the Republican Party in 1964 with the nomination of Barry Goldwater to run against Lyndon Johnson. At the core of the conservative identity, often sublimated as general opposition to big-government welfare, was race.

Johnson’s War on Poverty illustrates the problem of qualitative liberalism. Proponents of qualitative liberalism failed to consider that the issues of culture and social status move far

¹⁵³ Wolfe, “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers.”

¹⁵⁴ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 509.

¹⁵⁵ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 198.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009). 117.

beyond the realm of recovery and security, and force the government into a thicket of thorny issues such as personal identity and cultural politics.

As with the New Deal, the War on Poverty allowed local control over implementation of many programs, which in the South meant that state and local officials strove to exclude blacks from any benefits. Nonetheless, many observers reported that black economic gains as a result of the War on Poverty caused resentment among white southerners. Bruce Schulman argued that southerners, who had once embraced the New Deal and held up Franklin D. Roosevelt as a hero and savior, saw the War on Poverty as a tool of black empowerment. Schools in Wilcox, Alabama saw whites refusing to participate in the free lunch program there because “[t]hey viewed school lunches as a program for blacks.”¹⁵⁷

The problems were not limited to the South. Establishment Democrats in the North fretted about the War on Poverty too. The War on Poverty’s emphasis on community action upended the power structures in many cities, leading machine politicians to lament a loss of power to activists. Historian Julian Zelizer wrote that “some mayors felt that unelected activists were gaining too much control over federal funds from the Economic Opportunity Act, particularly when the activists criticized the Democratic machines for failing to do enough to solve the problems of the poor.”¹⁵⁸

Republicans saw opportunity in southern white resentment. They offered southern whites a way to protect their superior position over blacks through economic conservatism. The reaction was swift. Southern conservatives already despised Johnson for his signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In Mississippi in the 1964 presidential election, Johnson’s opponent Barry

¹⁵⁷ Bruce J. Schulman. *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980*. Duke University Press, 1994. 202.

¹⁵⁸ Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*. 222.

Goldwater won a startling 87 percent of the vote. The previous Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, won only 25 percent.¹⁵⁹ In Johnson, Republicans found a Democrat who had a strong civil rights record and had supported social welfare programs. Republicans conveyed to southern conservatives that there was a connection between social welfare programs and black empowerment turned their contempt toward all social welfare programs. This made southern conservatives a natural fit for the Republican Party.

Once the narrative took hold, Republicans manipulated the facts to fit their conclusion. Conservative whites gave credence to even the flimsiest rumors and the most spurious claims, provided they reinforced the idea that any government assistance amounted to a handout to lazy, ungrateful poor people. California gubernatorial hopeful Ronald Reagan took advantage of the outrage when he told an audience there was “[a] segment of society capable of caring for itself but which prefers making welfare a way of life, freeloading at the expense of more conscientious citizens.”¹⁶⁰ A *Los Angeles Times* investigation found that welfare fraud was virtually nonexistent: only four-tenths of one percent of welfare recipients had abused the system.¹⁶¹ Reagan also claimed that anyone in the country could move to California and get welfare within 21 days.¹⁶² This too was false: all welfare applicants had to prove they had been California residents for five years.¹⁶³

Misleading rhetoric about welfare and race served the party well in the coming decades. Among the most famous lies, another Ronald Reagan chestnut, told of a “woman in Chicago” who “has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards.” “She’s got Medicaid, getting food

¹⁵⁹ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*. 213.

¹⁶⁰ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 114.

¹⁶¹ Perlstein, *Nixonland* 114-115.

¹⁶² Perlstein, *Nixonland* 115.

¹⁶³ Perlstein, *Nixonland* 115.

stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names,” Reagan claimed. “Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000.”¹⁶⁴ This purported “welfare queen” one of the most memorable characters in the conservative mythos. Reporters found little to corroborate her existence: the welfare queen “may have been based on a then-47-year-old woman in Chicago,” but the story was “wildly exaggerated.”

Patrick Buchanan, a speechwriter for Richard Nixon and, later, commentator and presidential candidate, built an entire career around lying about race. In his autobiography *Right from the Beginning*, Buchanan wrote wistfully of the Jim Crow era, “[t]here were no politics to polarize us then, to magnify every slight. The ‘negroes’ of Washington had their public schools, restaurants, bars, movie houses, playgrounds and churches; and we had ours.”¹⁶⁵

Conservatives to this day hold the same views on the War on Poverty. On his TV show *The O’Reilly Factor*, on June 26, 2011, conservative commentator Bill O’Reilly told viewers that Johnson’s Great Society failed: “In 1965, the poverty rate in this country stood at 14 percent. Now, after untold trillions have been spent fighting poverty, the poverty rate is 14.3 percent. ... The conclusion, America is bankrupting itself with an entitlement philosophy that does little.”¹⁶⁶

Did the War on Poverty work? By any realistic standard, yes. A recent Columbia University study found that War on Poverty programs slashed the poverty rate from 26 percent in 1967 to 16 percent in 2012.¹⁶⁷ Even more striking, the study’s projections found that, without War on Poverty programs, poverty over the same period would have actually increased.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ John Blake, “Return of the ‘Welfare Queen,’” *CNN.com*, January 23, 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Eric Deggans, *Race-Baiter: How the Media Wields Dangerous Words to Divide a Nation* (Macmillan, 2012). 153.

¹⁶⁶ Louis Jacobson, “Bill O’Reilly Says Poverty Hasn’t Budged since 1965 despite ‘Trillions’ Spent,” *PolitiFact*, July 29, 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Zachary A. Goldfarb, “Study: U.S. Poverty Rate Decreased over Past Half-Century Thanks to Safety-Net Programs,” *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Goldfarb, “Study: U.S. Poverty Rate Decreased.”

Modern liberals concur. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman wrote in 2014 that the War on Poverty “achieved quite a lot.”¹⁶⁹ “Lower-income Americans are much healthier and better-nourished than they were in the 1960s,” he concludes.¹⁷⁰

Still, a sad irony plagues the War on Poverty. Reducing poverty rates is a quantitative goal, and the terms of the War on Poverty were qualitative. While it may have failed to meet its qualitative goals, quantitatively it was successful. True, poverty was neither cured nor prevented. The problem persisted well after the War on Poverty was abandoned.¹⁷¹ Still, poverty rates fell by nearly half over Johnson’s presidency.¹⁷² Johnson even succeeded on a few quantitative goals that eluded Roosevelt and the New Deal, such as securing federal funding for education reform.¹⁷³ The reform bill passed the Senate by an overwhelming margin.¹⁷⁴

Quantitative liberalism succeeded because it addressed urgent needs of survival and security, but also because quantitative outcomes are easily measurable. Qualitative outcomes are subjective. How would one measure “social malaise”? How would a society eliminate it? Qualitative liberalism’s interest in fighting intellectual decay left liberals open to a devastating line of attack: that liberalism was a pastime of the snobby eggheads who thought they were enlightened than the lower classes. Perlstein noted that this perception aided the shift toward the Republican Party, as the middle class formed “a political identity based on seeing through the pretensions of cosmopolitan liberals who claimed they knew so much better than you what was best for the country.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ Paul Krugman, “The War over Poverty.” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2014.

¹⁷⁰ Krugman, “The War over Poverty.”

¹⁷¹ Ben Wattenberg. “Did The Great Society Work? There Are Some Positive Results.” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 19, 1985.

¹⁷² Wattenberg. “Did The Great Society Work?”

¹⁷³ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 7.

¹⁷⁵ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 43.

Further, the issues addressed by the Great Society simply did not inspire the same sense of urgency in most voters as those faced during the New Deal. The cumulative effect of the Great Society failures heightened contradictions within the social order, exposing deep cultural divisions that had previously been somewhat contained. The 1968 Democratic National Convention laid the conflict bare.

Chicago, 1968: “The Whole World is Watching”

By 1968, the New Left resented Johnson nearly as much as the right. Richard Stolley wrote in a 1965 issue of *LIFE* magazine that many Great Society programs would likely pass Congress, but “[i]t was in the area of foreign policy that Johnson’s Great Society sketch became notably hazy.”¹⁷⁶ “The things he left unsaid,” Stolley continued, “did little to calm congressional uneasiness in both parties, especially over the commanding question of Vietnam.”¹⁷⁷

Here, Stolley identified a problem that would cripple Johnson’s reputation among young Democrats in the coming years. Meanwhile, a “credibility gap” emerged as the administration insisted things were going well despite evidence to the contrary. Beloved CBS anchor Walter Cronkite’s dispassionate façade cracked in 1968 when he reported on the Tet offensive. “It seems more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate,” Cronkite editorialized.¹⁷⁸

Politically, Vietnam helped cause an utter meltdown of the Democratic Party. A “credibility gap” had emerged between the public’s perception of the war and the Johnson administration’s statements. “Lying about Vietnam: it was now a Washington way of life,” Rick Perlstein said.¹⁷⁹ In 1968 came the Tet offensive, an attack on the US Embassy in Saigon. The

¹⁷⁶ Richard B. Stolley, “Will Congress Nail Together the Great Society?,” *LIFE*, January 15, 1965.

¹⁷⁷ Stolley, “Will Congress Nail Together the Great Society?”

¹⁷⁸ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 703.

¹⁷⁹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 99.

brutal assault undermined the administration's insistence that the war was Even Johnson's closest Senate ally, Richard Russell, warned, "I can't see anything but catastrophe for my country."¹⁸⁰

Many black draftees did not see why they should fight for a country that discriminated against them. Capturing the mood of much of America's youth, Muhammad Ali famously explained, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong."¹⁸¹ Young people did not understand why they were fighting. The Fort Hood Three, a group of soldiers who refused to go to Vietnam, said during a press conference, "No one uses the word winning anymore because in Vietnam it has no more meaning. Our officers just talk about five and ten more years of war with at least a half million of our boys into the grinder."¹⁸² Opposition to the war among young voters escalated into a personal hatred of Johnson himself. A favorite refrain of young protesters, "Hey, hey, LBJ/How many kids did you kill today?" echoed through college campuses.¹⁸³

Johnson faced problems with his domestic policy, too. Unrest in the black community marred Johnson's momentous civil rights achievements. The bloody race riots in Watts, California in 1965 helped drive the movement in a more militant direction. Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the most influential voices in civil rights activism, told a Montgomery crowd in 1966 that Alabama Governor George Wallace and his wife, not the Vietcong, were the: if the military gives a black man a gun, Carmichael said, "and tells him to shoot his enemy and if he don't shoot Lurleen and George and little junior, he's a fool."¹⁸⁴ That same year, Oaklanders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed a

¹⁸⁰ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 180.

¹⁸¹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*.102.

¹⁸² Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 102.

¹⁸³ Thomas Griffith, "What the Election Wasn't about," *LIFE*, November 15, 1968.

¹⁸⁴ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 187.

new organization called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The Panthers grew out of Seale and Newton's frustration with the political powerlessness of blacks in Oakland.

A challenge to Johnson's nomination grew inevitable. Johnson, sensing little mandate for another term, announced that he would not seek nomination in 1968. Even after his withdrawal, young Democrats campaigned vigorously against Johnson's handpicked heir, Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

Allard Lowenstein, intellectual father of the "New Politics" (a leftist movement that sought aggressive, revolutionary political action outside the two-party system) and founder of the Dump Johnson movement, sought an alternative to Hubert Humphrey. Dump Johnson's first choice was Robert Kennedy, who often straddled the boundary between idealistic liberal and pragmatic politico. Kennedy wooed the antiwar left when, as a senator, he turned against the war and offered a plan for withdrawal. Kennedy's listened to party elders who told him there was little chance of beating Humphrey. He declined to run.¹⁸⁵ True to his anti-establishment New Politics bona fides, Lowenstein attacked Kennedy for his decision in a futile outburst: "The people who think that the future and the honor of this country are at stake because of Vietnam don't give a shit what Mayor Daley and Governor Y and Chairman Z think. We're going to do it, and we're going to win, and it's a shame you're not with us because you could have been president."¹⁸⁶

Dump Johnson then settled on Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, an eccentric who in his early years dabbled in poetry and aspired to be a monk. McCarthy evinced a smug, brainy attitude that recalled Adlai Stevenson's "egghead" persona. He clearly felt himself above the

¹⁸⁵ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 714.

¹⁸⁶ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 714.

process he entered, detesting the “glad-handing rituals of democratic campaigning” and consciously avoiding civil rights issues.¹⁸⁷

The war protesters, black radicals, and other anti-Johnson groups meshed. Rick Perlstein in *Nixonland* wrote that “[t]he old distinctions and gradations on the left—freak, pacifist, New Leftist, black militant—were breaking down into an undifferentiated, and paranoid, insurrectionism.”¹⁸⁸ All the squabbling culminated in the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Mayor Richard Daley (the consummate symbol of the old politics against which the New Left railed) beefed up police presence in anticipation of raucous protests inside and out.

Chaos ensued. Outside the convention, New Politics luminaries Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin put on a ridiculous spectacle. Their farcical Youth International Party announced its nominee for president, Pigasus, a 60-pound black and white pig. Police arrested the YIP demonstrators (known as “Yippies”) and confiscated the swine before the nominating speech was given.¹⁸⁹ The National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (or, in shorthand, the “Mobe”) set up a massive demonstration and prepared for violence.¹⁹⁰ The Mobe and the Yippies clashed violently with Chicago police. Protesters chanted “pig, pig, fascist pig,” and “the whole world is watching.”¹⁹¹

Things went little better inside the convention. Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff endorsed George McGovern and attacked Mayor Daley, telling the mayor that “[w]ith George McGovern we wouldn’t have to have Gestapo tactics on the streets of Chicago.”¹⁹² The mayor shot back in an anti-Semitic rage, “Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy motherfucker, go

¹⁸⁷ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 713.

¹⁸⁸ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 339.

¹⁸⁹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 339.

¹⁹⁰ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 718.

¹⁹¹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 719.

¹⁹² Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 719.

home.”¹⁹³ Ultimately, Vice President Humphrey won the nomination, but at considerable cost to the party’s legitimacy.

The Chicago debacle offered voters a stark contrast between order and chaos. Republicans were the party of responsible, sensible adults who loved their country and respected the law. Democrats were the party of pot-smokers, hippies, black radicals, rowdy campus protesters, and disrespectful youth. Whether or not that perception reflected reality was barely relevant. The New Politics had arrived.

“You Won’t Even Recognize It:” A New Right

Concurrently with the rupture of the Democratic Party, the country continued on its rightward course as the ‘60s came to a close. Around this time began the culture wars that enveloped politics throughout the 20th century. “In this election year,” *LIFE* wrote in 1966, “the mood of the people is extraordinarily uneasy.” “Ranging from coast to coast, *LIFE* reporters found worry, discontent, resentment, anger, outright political rebellion.”¹⁹⁴

The 1965 mayoral election in New York offers a microcosm. Pundits predicted that liberal Republican John Lindsay would handily defeat his Democratic opponent, Abraham Beame. A handsome young congressman from the East Side of Manhattan, Lindsay promoted himself as a sensible moderate, a “‘fusion’ candidate who could unite a broad spectrum of voters, Democrats and Republicans, sick of machine politics, of cronyism and waste, of clubhouse accommodations, of mediocre self-interest.”¹⁹⁵ Republicans were so pleased with his spectacular showing in his 1964 reelection campaign (in an otherwise dismal election for Republicans) that

¹⁹³ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 719.

¹⁹⁴ Keith Wheeler, “An Off-Year Election with a Difference,” November 4, 1966.

¹⁹⁵ Sam Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2005.

whispers of John Lindsay as a presidential candidate could already be heard in GOP circles.¹⁹⁶ Lindsay, however, faced a longshot challenge from William F. Buckley.

Buckley, founder of the ultraconservative periodical *The National Review*, stirred controversy in 1965 when he engaged black intellectual James Baldwin in a memorable debate before the Cambridge Union Society on the topic, “The American Dream is at the expense of the American negro.” (Buckley argued against the proposition and, according to the vote tally that evening, he lost decisively.) He also once referred to Spain’s fascist leader General Francisco Franco as “an authentic national hero.”¹⁹⁷ Buckley ran under the Conservative Party banner. He drew up a platform of far-right priorities that included quarantines for drug addicts and “a ‘pilot program’ that would ‘explore the feasibility of relocating chronic welfare cases outside the City limits.’”¹⁹⁸

Perhaps understandably, the media at first saw challenger Buckley more as a protest candidate than a serious contender. Buckley himself agreed, having once told reporters that if he won his first act as mayor would be to “demand a recount.”¹⁹⁹ Yet Buckley emerged as a stronger contender than even he himself predicted. He siphoned votes from Lindsay, forcing Lindsay to acknowledge the conservative agitator.²⁰⁰ Under the headline “LINDSAY AND BUCKLEY DUEL/Attack shifts to Buckley,” the *New York Times* reported in October 1965 that Lindsay “dropped his seeming unconcern about William F. Buckley Jr.” to attack the candidate.²⁰¹ The *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* praised Buckley as “an articulate, incisive spokesman for the conservative cause” who “is making a surprisingly strong showing as the

¹⁹⁶ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

¹⁹⁷ John Griswold, “Why James Baldwin Beat William F. Buckley in a Debate, 540-160,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 8, 2012.

¹⁹⁸ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

¹⁹⁹ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

²⁰⁰ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

²⁰¹ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

Conservative Party candidate.”²⁰² “Lindsay’s alarm became evident when, after weeks of treating the Buckley campaign casually, he suddenly began hitting hard at his Conservative opponent,” the *Enterprise* wrote.²⁰³

Buckley ultimately lost, but won 13% of the popular vote.²⁰⁴ Lindsay, who strode into the election the overwhelming favorite, limped away with a humbling four-percent margin of victory over Abe Beame.²⁰⁵ A right-wing protest candidate nearly cost an establishment politician an easy election.

This phenomenon repeated itself throughout the last years of the decade. The media and political class anointed their pick in a race, and the voters resisted the choice with a vigor that almost seemed spiteful. In Georgia, Democrat Lester Maddox narrowly won the 1966 gubernatorial race against Howard “Bo” Callaway. Maddox, whom *LIFE* magazine described as a “tub-thumping racist,” handily won the Democratic nomination over more palatable options like liberal Ellis Arnall and soft-spoken centrist Jimmy Carter.²⁰⁶ During his campaign, Maddox said, “We’ve had it with socialists like Rockefeller, LBJ, Humpty-Dumpty and Give-the-Commies-Blood Bobby [Senator Robert Kennedy]. We want God and liberty.”²⁰⁷

Why were the Lester Maddoxes of the political world winning? Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* explained:

The complexion of things has changed dramatically in just two years. Jack Kennedy was not exactly a hero to many white Southerners, mainly because of civil rights. But never have I seen these feelings [of hate] centering around one man as I do now with President Johnson ... I think the real answer lies in the fact that they see the civil rights movement *working*. To them, school integration was bad enough. But now they’re seeing it getting into the areas of integrated hospitals, the H.E.W. [Department of

²⁰² Robert Gray, “Capitol Corridors,” *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, no. 1965/10/28 (October 28, 1965): 9.

²⁰³ Gray, “Capitol Corridors.”

²⁰⁴ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

²⁰⁵ Tanenhaus, “The Buckley Effect.”

²⁰⁶ Keith Wheeler, “An Off-Year Election with a Difference,” *LIFE*, November 4, 1966.

²⁰⁷ Wheeler, “An Off-Year Election with a Difference.”

Health, Education, and Welfare] guidelines, and to top it all off the new cry of ‘black power.’ The fears and hostilities of the segregationists are mounting. They need somebody to blame. They’ve found him.²⁰⁸

By 1968, the fear and hostility of segregationists (and others) peaked. Dissatisfaction with Johnson’s War on Poverty and the Great Society had driven much of the electorate away from the Democratic Party by 1968. Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee, proved a controversial choice bitterly opposed by the New Left. Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, captured the fatal unpopularity of qualitative liberalism in a succinct phrase: the “silent majority.” Nixon’s “silent majority” comprised middle-class whites, particularly conservative whites living in the South, embittered by the civil rights movement and resentful of student antiwar protesters.

Nixon’s “silent majority” alarmed some. *LIFE* magazine fretted that “Nixon country [looks] a little too much like Marlboro country.”²⁰⁹ In the prosperous ‘60s, elections no longer turned on economic issues. The racist feelings of the white middle class, sublimated as a clash between youth culture and traditional culture, would be the defining dynamic of the 1968 election.

The Nixon campaign spotted this trend early and capitalized. *LIFE* magazine wrote in 1966 that politicians in the South were “learning to put the idea across without using the words.”²¹⁰ Facing a three-way race in 1968, with Humphrey on his left and segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace on his right, Nixon did just that. Nixon tiptoed delicately across the layers of racial hatred that lay beneath the surface of most issues, adopting the Southern argument of states’ rights without explicitly appealing to racism as did George

²⁰⁸ Wheeler, “An Off-Year Election with a Difference.”

²⁰⁹ Time Inc, “To the President-Elect,” *LIFE*, November 15, 1968.

²¹⁰ Wheeler, “An Off-Year Election with a Difference.”

Wallace. Nixon won a narrow popular vote victory (besting Democrat Hubert Humphrey by about 500,000 votes) but a significant electoral college victory: 301 to Humphrey's 191.

Nixon's slight victory belies the vast implications of the 1968 election. The change in the electoral map was nearly complete: The South would become a Republican stronghold in the coming years. Race, and its innumerable different manifestations in politics, destroyed the New Deal consensus, casting working class whites out of the Democratic Party for several elections. More even than all that, 1968 marked the onset of an altogether new sociopolitical landscape. As a Nixon Chief of Staff John Mitchell once explained to a reporter who asked him what he thought of the New Left, "There is no such thing as the New Left. This country is going so far to the right you are not even going to recognize it."²¹¹

²¹¹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 526.

CHAPTER 4

NEW LEFT, NEW RIGHT, AND NEW DEMOCRATS

At the national level, Democratic politics divides into two distinct phases in the late-twentieth century. The first phase, from the aftermath of the '68 Chicago convention to around 1988, finds the party becoming an ideological vehicle of the left-wing activists and interests that disrupted the Chicago convention and effectively controlled the 1972 convention.

During the second phase, beginning around the early '90s, the party moved back to the center. This shift is defined by a group, the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, and more specifically, by an individual, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton. Clinton called his movement the “New Democrats,” distinguished from the old Democrats by their pragmatism, economic centrism, and commitment to strict crime policies. Clinton’s nomination in 1992 helped finalize the transition.

More significant than the transition within the Democratic Party, though, was the Republican response. While Democrats shifted toward the political mainstream in the '90s, Republicans responded with destructive tactics that weakened the institutional fabric of Washington. The Republican Party by 1992 was accustomed to dominating the executive branch. They panicked at the prospect of facing an opposition party that was actually competitive at the national level.

The Democratic move to the center thus helped redefine the GOP as the party of obstructionism, opposed to virtually any idea promoted by President Clinton, even ideas that the Republican Party itself once supported. Political scientists Norm Ornstein and Thomas Mann, in their 2012 book *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, described this new Republican Party as “an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic

policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”²¹²

Congress intensified the problem. Legislators in Washington did not socialize as much as in previous generations, and thus did not feel as much camaraderie with their colleagues.

According to data from a 1993 survey conducted by the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, 68 percent of members of Congress said they spent “a great deal of time” meeting with constituents in their home states or districts.²¹³ Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi complained in 1991 that “[t]here is very little socializing here. If I have any free time I spend it with my staff. You begin to feel introverted and self-centered.”²¹⁴ Political scientist Kenneth Mayer concluded, “Members who don’t know each other personally are less likely to treat one another with respect, and are less likely to be able to work productively together to pass legislation.”²¹⁵

They also evidently had fewer reservations about trying to destroy the opposing party’s sitting president, as Republicans tried to do throughout the ‘90s. The true roots of this new Republican Party lay in the reaction to Bill Clinton. The party started on this course a decade prior under Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich. Clinton’s electoral success hastened and deepened the transformation. A well-financed network of conservatives united in an unprecedented effort to deny the sitting president any chance to enact his agenda. Republicans engaged in vicious personal attacks that questioned the basic human decency of their opponents, culminating in the impeachment of President Clinton for lying under oath about his affair with

²¹² Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (Basic Books, 2013). xxiv.

²¹³ Kenneth R. Mayer and David T. Canon, *The Dysfunctional Congress?: The Individual Roots Of An Institutional Dilemma* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1999). 84.

²¹⁴ Mayer and Canon, *The Dysfunctional Congress?* 85.

²¹⁵ Mayer and Canon, *The Dysfunctional Congress?* 85.

White House aide Monica Lewinsky. Understanding the aftermath of 1968, and the electoral failure that followed, is essential to understanding the dysfunction of the '90s.

The Immediate Aftermath of 1968: The McGovern Commission

The calamity of the Chicago Convention defined the Democratic Party to the general public in a profoundly negative way. Many of the party's problems were anticipated by the 1964 Democratic National Convention, in which activist Fannie Lou Hamer's Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party protested black voter suppression in Mississippi by demanding delegate seats at the convention that year. In 1968, those pressures from civil rights activists dovetailed with the growing antiwar movement to undo the party. The raucous protests, and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's heavy-handed response, tarnished the party's reputation with no hope for repair before the election. Richard Nixon won handily.

In response to the 1968 Convention, the Democratic Party convened the Committee on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, which became known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission. George McGovern explained the Commission in an editorial for *Harper's* magazine. "The Democratic National Convention of 1968 already has settled into the folklore of American politics," he wrote. "Its mere mention evokes the vision of tumultuous floor debate, bloodshed and tear gas in the streets, demonstrators and delegates standing together, arm-in-arm, in confrontation with the police."²¹⁶

McGovern listed some of the changes his Commission instituted. Among them: an end to "discrimination on the grounds of age or sex;" "fairer representation of minority views at all stages of the delegate process," including a recommendation that "political minority views should be preserved until the final stage of the selection process—the National Convention;" and

²¹⁶ George McGovern, "The Lessons of 1968," *Harper's*, Jan. 1970.

mandatory representation for “minority group members,” including steps “to overcome the effects of past discrimination” by “specifically inviting black and brown Democrats to party meetings.”²¹⁷ These reforms acknowledged the struggle of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to secure delegate seats in the 1964 convention.

The McGovern Commission reforms produced several interesting effects: first, a significantly more open nominating process. “No longer,” wrote *New York Times* reporter Tom Wicker, “could the Georgia party chairman, in consultation with only the Governor, choose the state’s entire delegation ... and have it in place long before the national convention, awaiting the highest bid from Presidential candidates...”²¹⁸ The new rules guaranteed no more situations like 1968, where Hubert Humphrey defeated Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy without competing in any primaries, securing his nomination through caucuses controlled by party bosses.²¹⁹ Only seventeen states in 1968 used primaries. By 1972, the year of the next election, 23 states selected delegates via primary. (Interestingly, the new rules also nudged the Republican Party toward the primary system: by 1972, Republicans had 22 primary states, up from sixteen in 1968.)²²⁰ Today, only fourteen states still use the caucus system.²²¹ Any serious candidate for the nomination of either party today has to appeal to a much wider voter base, and the McGovern Commission is heavily responsible.

Second, the Commission dramatically increased the power of activists, younger voters, and upper-middle class whites at the expense of party bosses and long-established interests.²²² Blue-collar social conservatives, who formed a key component of the New Deal coalition, were

²¹⁷ McGovern, “Lessons of 1968.”

²¹⁸ Tom Wicker, “Let Some Smoke In,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 1992, sec. Magazine.

²¹⁹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (Simon and Schuster). 511.

²²⁰ Wicker, “Let Some Smoke In.”

²²¹ “The U.S. Presidential Nominating Process,” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

²²² Mark Stricherz, “Primary Colors: How a Little-Known Task Force Helped Create Red State/Blue State America,” *The Boston Globe*, Nov. 23, 2003.

much less likely to vote in primaries and thus lost influence under the new rules.²²³ They also did not like the expanded influence of blacks, women, and the young. McGovern, they believed, “spoke for middle-class liberals and intellectuals, not blue-collar people.”²²⁴ Al Barkan of the AFL-CIO defiantly exclaimed that “We aren’t going to let these Harvard-Berkeley Camelots take over our party.”²²⁵ As the party fell under the sway of young leftists, Barkan took to referring to the Democrats as “the party of acid, amnesty, and abortion.”²²⁶

The McGovern Commission rules incensed old-guard Democrats. AFL-CIO President George Meany detested Commission reforms so much that he abandoned the party and the AFL-CIO declined to endorse a candidate.²²⁷ With him followed much of the working-class white demographic. The party moved even further left by their absence. “The crowning insult to these party faithful,” wrote James Patterson, “came when the delegates voted to exclude Mayor Richard Daley and his followers” in favor of Reverend Jesse Jackson.²²⁸

Third, and most important, the McGovern Commission changed “the rationale of the party’s presidential nomination process.”²²⁹ “The old boss system focused on selecting candidates who would win,” Mark Stricherz wrote in *The Boston Globe*. “The new primary system ends up producing candidates who appeal not only to primary voters but also to various ideological interest groups—not to mention the TV camera.”²³⁰ Rick Perlstein noted in *Nixonland* that “[activists] never seemed to ponder whether the kind of candidate that could win majorities in open Democratic primaries, where activists are overrepresented, would always be

²²³ McGovern, “The Lessons of 1968.”

²²⁴ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (Oxford University Press, 1996). 762.

²²⁵ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (Simon and Schuster, 2010). 514.

²²⁶ Frank Swoboda, “Union Mulls Strategy As Barkan Retires,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 16, 1981 edition.

²²⁷ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 695.

²²⁸ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*. 760.

²²⁹ Stricherz, “Primary Colors: How a Little-Known Task Force Helped Create Red State/Blue State America.”

²³⁰ Stricherz, “Primary Colors: How a Little-Known Task Force Helped Create Red State/Blue State America.”

the best ones to win over the full electorate... They viewed ‘openness’ and ‘participation’ as ends in themselves, and presumed victory would follow.”²³¹ For his part, McGovern agreed with these assessments, saying decades later that his intent was never to make the party more viable in a general election: “I’m not saying we’d get a better presidential nominee. It just means that whoever we nominate would go through a democratic process. Democracy has always been a gamble, and if we make mistakes, at least they are our mistakes.”²³²

“Our Mistakes:” George McGovern’s Very Predictable Loss

In *What I Saw at the Revolution*, Reagan speechwriter and ex-liberal Peggy Noonan recounted her conversion to conservatism. Her road to Damascus took the form of a bus ride to Washington for an antiwar protest. Listening to her fellow protesters rail against the “uneducated and somewhat crude” soldiers fighting in Vietnam, and the “racist, genocidal nation” they fought for, Noonan was disgusted.²³³ “As far as I was concerned from here on in I would use my McGovern button as a roach clip,” she decided. “And what was the Democratic party doing on the side of these people?”²³⁴

“These people,” the activist wing, had taken over the party by 1972. Though the ‘72 Democratic National Convention lacked the spectacular violence of Chicago, it nonetheless gave little consolation to Democrats hoping the party might choose a viable candidate in the general election that year. Like Noonan, “millions of them bolted to the other party,” *The Village Voice*’s Jonathan Cottin wrote in 1973, “disregarding even the many pieces of the Watergate scandal that were known last November.”²³⁵

²³¹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*. 512.

²³² Stricherz, “Primary Colors: How a Little-Known Task Force Helped Create Red State/Blue State America.”

²³³ Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (Random House, 2003). 15-16.

²³⁴ Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution*. 15-16.

²³⁵ Jonathan Cottin, “The Unmaking of the McGovern Commission,” *The Village Voice*, Jul. 5, 1973.

The well-meaning reforms of the McGovern Commission contributed heavily to the electoral disaster that would befall Democratic candidates through the next two decades, during which time the party lost four of five presidential elections. By allowing such activist control, the party gave the public the impression that the party was beholden to narrow special interests at the expense of the broader public. Throughout the '70s, establishment Democrats groped for an answer that would broaden their voter appeal while appeasing the fervent activists who nearly destroyed the party in 1968.

George McGovern won the Democratic nomination in 1972 with help from the McGovern Commission reforms, and would face Richard Nixon, the incumbent, that fall. The strikingly different McGovern Commission-mandated nomination process helped the liberal firebrand leap-frog Maine Senator Edmund Muskie, who led significantly in the polls when McGovern announced his candidacy.²³⁶ Journalist Clayton Fritchey said that Muskie was also “the overwhelming choice of those who had run previous Democratic conventions – that is, the state and county chairmen, the national committeemen, the governors, mayors, and congressional hierarchy and the wealthy financial angels.”²³⁷ In the wake of the Commission, however, “the old leaders can’t deliver anymore.”²³⁸ The new rules “changed [McGovern] from a 100-to-1 dark horse into perhaps the most probable winner.”²³⁹

Foreign policy hawks balked at the prospect of ceding the White House to McGovern, an antiwar leftist. The direction of the party in general alarmed them. “The simple fact is that you cannot beat a sitting President ... with a challenger bent upon the liquidation of the United States

²³⁶ Mark Shields, “Democrats Nominate Dark Horses, Not Front-Runners,” *CNN.com*, August 11, 2003.

²³⁷ Clayton Fritchey, “McGovern Skilled Politician: Battle to Reform Party Pays off,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, May 1, 1972 edition.

²³⁸ Fritchey, “McGovern Skilled Politician: Battle to Reform Party Pays off”

²³⁹ Fritchey, “McGovern Skilled Politician: Battle to Reform Party Pays off”

of America as a first-class power,” wrote William S. White in North Carolina’s *Times-News* in 1971.²⁴⁰ He described an “unspoken determination” of members of both parties that “come what may, no George McGovern, no Harold Hughes, and in all probability to Hubert Humphrey or Edmund Muskie, is going to sit in the White House in 1973.”²⁴¹ “... Democrats of great muscle and unimpeachably loyal partisan records believe that the world is too dangerous to risk putting it in the hands of any man whose idea of the way to protect this nation is by unilateral disarmament, one-sided and endless concessions in Vietnam, and a progressive dismantling of our military establishment everywhere.”²⁴²

Many Americans shared White’s dismay. Rowland Evans and Bob Novak charted the growth of an “anybody but McGovern” movement in the Democratic Party. “They fear McGovern is the Democratic party’s Goldwater,” Evans and Novak wrote.²⁴³ One senator told them that McGovern’s popularity came from an ignorance of his actual positions. “The people don’t know McGovern is for amnesty, abortion, and legalization of pot. Once Middle America – Catholic Middle America, in particular – finds this out, he’s dead.”²⁴⁴

Richard Nixon meanwhile spent much of his presidency making himself more electable. Nixon, according to historian James Patterson, “was easily the most liberal Republican American President, excepting Theodore Roosevelt, in the twentieth century.”²⁴⁵ With no real competition for the political center from his Democratic opponents, Nixon claimed it for himself. During his first term, Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency, signed the Title IX ban on

²⁴⁰ William S. White, “A Flat Assertion,” *The Times-News*, n.d., May 31, 1971 edition.

²⁴¹ White, “A Flat Assertion.”

²⁴² White, “A Flat Assertion.”

²⁴³ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “‘Anybody But McGovern,’ Say the Democratic Pros,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, n.d., Apr. 28, 1972 edition.

²⁴⁴ Evans and Novak, “‘Anybody But McGovern,’ Say the Democratic Pros.”

²⁴⁵ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*. 719.

gender discrimination in education, proposed a national health insurance plan, and even introduced a “Family Assistance Plan (FAP) that would have largely replaced AFDC with guaranteed annual incomes for poor families—working or not.”²⁴⁶ The tactic worked. Nixon enjoyed an average 56 percent approval rating during his first term.²⁴⁷

Nixon also used centrist and left-leaning policies to play liberal interests against one another. Organized labor already felt spurned by the McGovern Commission, and Nixon exacerbated the tension. His “Philadelphia Plan” imposed racial hiring quotas on federal construction contractors. It worked. George Meany mocked the plan as a “Madison Avenue” tactic designed to obscure “this administration’s record on civil rights” and give them “a few Brownie points” in the black community.²⁴⁸ The plan passed the House on a split Democratic vote, 115 to 84 against, underscoring a growing divide in the party.²⁴⁹

Such infighting made McGovern an even longer shot in the 1972 election. The shattering of the New Deal coalition deeply worsened McGovern’s already-long odds, running as he was against a popular incumbent. He alienated organized labor during his Senate years as a representative of the farming interests of South Dakota.²⁵⁰ One unidentified labor leader quoted in *New York Magazine* hoped Democrats faced a crushing defeat, in another of many comparisons prominent Democrats made between McGovern and Barry Goldwater. “If Nixon wins big against McGovern, if he makes McGovern the landslide victim of the seventies like Barry Goldwater in 1964, labor will be back on top in ’76.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁶ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*. 759.

²⁴⁷ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986). 24.

²⁴⁸ Donald Finley, “Meany Blasts ‘Philly Plan’ as Political Move by Nixon,” *The Dispatch*, n.d., Jan. 13, 1970 edition.

²⁴⁹ Richard D. Kahlenberg, *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action* (Basic Books, 1997).

²⁵⁰ Michael Kramer, “Early Warnings,” *New York Magazine*, Jun. 12, 1972.

²⁵¹ Kramer, “Early Warnings.”

McGovern hoped to turn out huge numbers of young voters. Michael Kramer of *New York Magazine* dumped cold water on the plan in August 1972, pointing out that non-college educated young voters preferred Nixon to McGovern by a margin of 48 to 44 percent. McGovern did lead Nixon among all registered young voters, 57 to 41 percent, but his lead was far below the dizzyingly high youth turnout McGovern's own team said was necessary.²⁵² Kramer saw even more alarming problems in state-by-state matchups with Nixon. For example, to offset Nixon's 1968 margin of victory in Florida, Kramer estimated that McGovern would need to win 89 percent of the youth vote there. He concluded that "[i]f McGovern's national prospects are discouraging, his prospects state by state are downright depressing."²⁵³

Without overwhelming youth turnout, union support, or support from working class voters, the McGovern campaign was going nowhere but off the rails. Kramer's dire predictions were, if anything, too optimistic. McGovern lost even more resoundingly than Hubert Humphrey had four years prior.²⁵⁴ Nixon won 60.7 percent of the popular vote, nearly matching Johnson's 61.1 percent of the vote in 1964.²⁵⁵ Nixon won every state except Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.²⁵⁶ McGovern's strategy of relying almost entirely on the youth vote, though effective in the new Democratic nomination process he himself helped create, failed catastrophically in the general election.

In 1973, the party convened another Commission on Delegate Selection and Party Structure, this one headed by Baltimore City Council member and future congresswoman

²⁵² Terry Ryan, "Garnering Youth Vote Is Critical in McGovern Strategy," *The Victoria Advocate*, n.d., Aug 16, 1972 edition.

²⁵³ Michael Kramer, "McGovern's Youth Vote--The Numbers Don't Add Up," *New York Magazine*, August 28, 1972.

²⁵⁴ Douglas Schoen, *The Nixon Effect: How His Presidency Has Changed American Politics* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015). 141.

²⁵⁵ Schoen, *The Nixon Effect*. 141.

²⁵⁶ Schoen, *The Nixon Effect*. 141.

Barbara Mikulski.²⁵⁷ The commission was convened to address criticisms of the McGovern Commission reforms, but pressure from traditional Democrats and activists pulling in opposite directions hamstrung its efforts.²⁵⁸ The Mikulski Commission did not significantly deviate from the earlier work of the McGovern Commission.²⁵⁹

The Carter Years

1976 offered Democrats a brief respite from the activist wing of the party. The fractious left, united by their opposition to Vietnam, collapsed after the war ended. The public hungered for fresh perspectives in Washington.

Nixon's resignation in 1974 in the wake of the Watergate scandal afforded Democrats a rare victory in presidential politics. Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer and former governor of Georgia, clinched the nomination. An August 26, 1974 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* reflected on the impact Watergate could have on American politics. The magazine listed three major effects the scandal might have, "in the view of political leaders and students of politics and government." One of their predictions: "Mounting pressure on Democrats to pick a candidate who appears to have a morally unblemished record." Carter, a born-again Christian and Georgia governor who had never held federal office, was a natural choice.

Democratic National Committee chairman Robert Strauss took great pains to ensure a staid, orderly convention in 1976. Doubtless, he helped Carter defeated Gerald Ford, Nixon's vice president, in 1976.

The Carter presidency introduced yet another crisis into the fraught world of Democratic presidential politics: the heavy burden of a failed presidency. Carter became bitterly unpopular as

²⁵⁷ James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton University Press, 1979). 284.

²⁵⁸ Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*. 284.

²⁵⁹ Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*. 284.

he presided over a catastrophic gas crisis, a disastrous hostage negotiation with Iran, and the decline of a 30-year postwar economic boom.

Carter's disastrous presidency ended with another battle in the Democrats' ideological war. In 1980, Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy challenged the sitting president for his party's nomination. Kennedy embodied the liberal wing of the party eager to carry the legacy of the New Deal, and he had the support of 65 percent of Democrats.²⁶⁰ Carter, meanwhile, stuck to centrist politics and conservative fiscal policy.²⁶¹ Regarding his primary fight with Ted Kennedy, Carter confidently predicted, "I'll whip his ass."²⁶²

Kennedy's campaign suffered an overwhelming setback during interview with CBS's Roger Mudd in which he asked Kennedy, "Why do you want to be president?" Kennedy's response was stilted, tentative, and meandering, to the point that many observers began to doubt that he even wanted to run. David Burke, a longtime Kennedy confidant, said of Kennedy's presidential campaign, "He didn't focus on 'I'm deeply ambivalent,' but it would not have bothered him if it went away nicely."²⁶³ In the first contest in Iowa, Carter won resoundingly, 59 percent to 31 percent, and later claimed the nomination.²⁶⁴ Kennedy's speech to the Democratic National Convention contained a subtle jab at centrists like Carter: "The commitment I seek is not to outworn ideas, but to old values that will never wear out. Programs may sometimes become obsolete but the idea of fairness always endures."²⁶⁵ Kennedy then vowed to his supporters, "The dream will never die."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁰ Sam Allis, "Losing a Quest for the Top, Finding a New Freedom: Carter's Failed Challenger Carved Giant Senate Role," *The Boston Globe*, February 18, 2009.

²⁶¹ James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (Oxford University Press, 2007). 128.

²⁶² Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 128.

²⁶³ Allis, "Losing a Quest for the Top, Finding a New Freedom."

²⁶⁴ Allis, "Losing a Quest for the Top, Finding a New Freedom."

²⁶⁵ Allis, "Losing a Quest for the Top, Finding a New Freedom."

²⁶⁶ Allis, "Losing a Quest for the Top, Finding a New Freedom."

Jimmy Carter then faced his own resounding loss. His Republican opponent in the 1980 election, California governor Ronald Reagan, proved much more popular than the incumbent.²⁶⁷ In his loss, Carter became a rare one-term president in modern US history. The party's electoral misfortune continued throughout the '80s, as they fielded liberals Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis, both of whom went on to crushing defeat.

Gingrich Outflanks the Democrats

While Democrats evolved in the '70s and '80s, the Republican Party underwent its own ideological makeover. The New Right gained significantly in influence in the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan heralded a conservative revolution in national politics. Reagan's famous 1984 campaign slogan, "It's Morning Again in America" signaled his plan to remake the austere conservatism of Barry Goldwater with a more palatable, sunny sheen.

Behind that new sheen lay a familiar conservative message. Reagan was drawn to supply-side economics, the idea that cutting taxes on the wealthy would give them incentive to produce more wealth, thus increasing revenues.²⁶⁸ He swung the Supreme Court right by appointing Justices William Rehnquist, Anthony Kennedy, Antonin Scalia, and Sandra Day O'Connor, and his administration also included future justices John Roberts, Samuel Alito, and Clarence Thomas.^{269 270} He masterfully courted conservative Southern voters as well as the Christian right, bringing him an easy reelection in 1984.²⁷¹

With Reagan as commander in chief, Georgia congressman Newt Gingrich assumed the role of the New Right's field general, perfecting the political strategy that helped movement

²⁶⁷ U. S. News Staff, "Effects of Watergate: The Good and the Bad," *US News & World Report*.

²⁶⁸ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 154-155.

²⁶⁹ Michael Dorf, "Reagan and the Courts: A Sober Assessment," *CNN.com*, June 9, 2004.

²⁷⁰ David G. Savage, "Alito Seen as Carrying the Torch of Reagan," *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 2006.

²⁷¹ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 189.

conservatives take over the federal government and implements their policy goals. He rose to national prominence in the '90s as the leader of the "Republican Revolution" that took control of the House in the 1994 midterms, but his undeniable political skill made him essential to the movement well before then.

Gingrich's career began in 1978, when he won his first House election to a seat in Georgia. Gingrich stood out from his fellow Republican freshmen by his ambition and keen sense of the public mood. Americans had soured on government after the turbulent '60s and '70s. Watergate improved Democrats' political fortunes initially, since it was a Republican scandal. However, the absolute mistrust and hatred of government it created ultimately benefited Republicans more. Newt Gingrich was among the first Republicans to recognize the true potential of antigovernment sentiment. "I sense that the Baby Boom generation is tired of corruption," he said in 1989. "They're tired of a sense that you can't govern in America."²⁷² Gingrich took advantage of the public's cynical mood and harnessed voters' contempt for government to create a durable Republican power base in Washington.

He first put his insights to work by coming up with a plan to break Democratic control of the House. Democrats held a majority in the chamber that dated back to 1954. Gingrich's plan took into account a perennial problem, that people disliked Congress as a whole but tended to like their own representative (or, at least, they did not dislike their own representative enough to actively work for his removal). Political scientists Norm Ornstein and Thomas Mann described Gingrich's plan in *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*:

The core strategy was to destroy the institution in order to save it, to so intensify public hatred of Congress that voters would buy into the notion of the need for sweeping change and throw the majority bums out. His method? To unite his Republicans in refusing to cooperate with Democrats in committee and on the floor, while publicly

²⁷² Hallett, Joe. "Gingrich Keeps up Attacks on Wright." *Toledo Blade*, Mar. 28, 1989 edition

attacking them as a permanent majority presiding over and benefiting from a thoroughly corrupt institution.²⁷³

Gingrich employed several public relations stunts aimed at weakening the House's reputation. One tactic involved using a then-new technology, C-SPAN, a 24-hour cable network broadcasting congressional sessions. In its early years, C-SPAN broadcast "evening speeches" in the House, in which a House member would speak to the camera after the body had adjourned for the day. A stationary camera pointed at the speaker. Gingrich took advantage of the new medium by delivering harsh, invective-filled speeches. Here he showed the earliest signs of the flair for theatrics, calling Democrats "blind to communism," accusing them of spreading communist propaganda, and vowing to "file charges" against a group of Democrats who wrote a letter praising President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua.²⁷⁴ The stationary camera created the impression of "the lawmaker speaking as if he were addressing Democrats in the chamber, and the lack of response made it appear as if those in the audience either accepted the charges or were unwilling or unable to counter them."²⁷⁵ Gingrich's C-SPAN shenanigans incensed Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. O'Neill ordered that C-SPAN cameras must pan around the House during evening speeches, to show viewers that Gingrich was in fact speaking before an empty room.²⁷⁶

In 1988, Gingrich turned his fire against House Speaker Jim Wright, blaming him for the "systemic problem" of ethical violations among congressional Democrats.²⁷⁷ Gingrich kept up the pressure, saying that after Jim Wright's resignation "there are more congressmen there who

²⁷³ Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (Basic Books, 2013). 33.

²⁷⁴ David Osborne, "Newt Gingrich: Shining Knight of the Post-Reagan Right," *Mother Jones*, November 1984.

²⁷⁵ Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*. 35.

²⁷⁶ David Osborne, "Newt Gingrich: Shining Knight of the Post-Reagan Right," *Mother Jones*, November 1984.

²⁷⁷ Joe Hallett, "Gingrich Keeps up Attacks on Wright," *Toledo Blade*, n.d., Mar. 28, 1989 edition.

have to be looked at, because the Democratic party, after two generations of running the House, is riddled with real problems of ethics.”²⁷⁸ Gingrich filed charges. Wright resigned in the summer of 1988, owing to “this period of mindless cannibalism” led by Gingrich and the Republicans. Gingrich positioned himself to become the Speaker of the House once the Democrats lost their majority.

More than any other figure in movement, Gingrich pioneered a brand of opportunistic politics and an approach to political battles that was distinctly New Right. Gingrich took the core assumption of the New Right, that government is inherently corrupt and broken, and distilled it into a powerful political strategy that the movement would continually reuse for decades. In 1995, Gingrich achieved his goal of leading a Republican revolution in the House becoming the first Republican Speaker of the House in decades.

The Clinton Decade

Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis’s crushing loss in 1988 forced Democrats to seek new ideas. The Democratic Leadership Council, a group of centrist, mostly southern Democrats, gained in influence. In 1992, former DLC chair Bill Clinton became the Democratic nominee for president and defeated the incumbent Bush.²⁷⁹ Clinton embraced moderate positions, even sometimes echoing the Republican platform on welfare and law and order.

Though remaining largely progressive on social issues, with liberal positions on abortion and gun control, Clinton notably moved the party to the center on economics and fiscal policy. Clinton embraced a new economic principle known as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as advanced by intellectuals like Robert Reich (later Clinton’s Secretary of Labor) sought to adapt liberal ideals to new economic norms in technology and globalization.

²⁷⁸ Hallett, “Gingrich Keeps up Attacks on Wright.”

²⁷⁹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*. 147.

Neoliberalism started with the proposition that the liberalism of the New Deal and the Great Society was no longer tenable. In his book *The Resurgent Liberal*, Reich argued that “postwar liberalism was doomed to excess.”²⁸⁰ America in the 1960s and ’70s “was a sheltered and rich environment, a cultural hothouse unlike anything America had experienced before or is likely to ever experience again.”²⁸¹ Globalization, Reich warned, changed everything: “[a]round the globe, millions of potential workers are ready to underbid American labor.”²⁸²

Ironically, Republicans despised Clinton much more fiercely than they had more conventionally liberal Democrats in previous election cycles. The liberal, northeastern Democratic Party that existed in the ‘70s and ‘80s benefited the Republican Party. Democrats’ tendency to cater to left-leaning interests virtually guaranteed electoral failure at the national level. Clinton challenged the Republican Party because he stole their ideas. His success threatened to undermine the entire conservative movement.

Conservatives also saw Clinton as a symbol of America’s moral degradation. Clinton personified the hedonistic ‘60s: he was, in the words of one Republican, a “pot-smoking, philandering, draft-dodger.”²⁸³ His wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was an ambitious career-driven feminist who kept her maiden name after marriage.²⁸⁴ Hollywood liberals loved the Clintons.²⁸⁵

Conservative opposition to Bill Clinton thus took on a distinctly harsh, personal tone. More so than Clinton’s presidency itself, the acerbic, hostile tone of modern discourse is defined by the Republican response to the Clinton years. The Republican plan to derail Bill Clinton

²⁸⁰ Robert B. Reich, *The Resurgent Liberal: And Other Unfashionable Prophecies* (Vintage Books, 1991).

²⁸¹ Reich, *The Resurgent Liberal*. 281.

²⁸² Reich, *The Resurgent Liberal*. 89.

²⁸³ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 190.

²⁸⁴ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 215.

²⁸⁵ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 215.

revolved around scandal politics, which had recently been legitimized as a political strategy by the defeat of Reagan Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork and proto-New Democrat Gary Hart's career-ending extramarital affair.

During a 2015 interview with CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria about the controversies surrounding his wife during her 2016 presidential run, Bill Clinton drew a parallel to his own brush with scandal on the campaign trail: "All of a sudden something nobody thought was an issue, Whitewater, that never turned out to be an issue, winds up being a \$70 million investigation ... and you ask voters, 'do you really believe this amounts to anything?' 'No.' 'But do you trust him as much?'" "No. There must be something'."²⁸⁶

Republicans employed a "where there's smoke, there must be fire" strategy, using surrogates in the right-wing media to produce a relentless stream of scandals. Even if the general public did not believe a specific allegation, the constant rumors created a general impression that the Clintons were corrupt and immoral.

Personality-based conservative talk radio contributed heavily to the strategy's success. The most successful right-wing talker, Rush Limbaugh, pushed conservatism further right with his outrageous pronouncements. He served as a mouthpiece for the Clinton smear operation, promoting scandals, conspiracy theories, and anything else unflattering to the Clintons. He was also influential with top conservatives. The *Observer-Reporter* in Washington, PA, reported that Rush "routinely rubs elbows with conservative bigwigs."²⁸⁷ "He has spent the night at the White House. Vice President Dan Quayle and, last week, President Bush have dropped in on his radio show."²⁸⁸ A *Frontline* special on Limbaugh featured footage of a Heritage Foundation speaker

²⁸⁶ "Interview with Bill Clinton. Aired 1-2p ET.," *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, Sept. 27, 2015.

²⁸⁷ Frazier Moore, "Rush Limbaugh: Right-Thinking Radio Host Comes to Television," *The Observer-Reporter*, n.d., Sept. 30, 1992 edition.

²⁸⁸ Moore, "Rush Limbaugh: Right-Thinking Radio Host Comes to Television."

excitedly telling his audience that, in the 1994 midterms, “the people that listen to ten hours of talk radio a week or more voted Republican by a three-to-one margin.” He referred to the Republican revolution as “the Limbaugh Congress.”²⁸⁹

Limbaugh also provided a useful barometer for right-wing resentments that drove the anti-Clinton movement. In 1992, Limbaugh released his first book, *The Way Things Ought to Be*. It served as a New Right manifesto. Limbaugh strained to shock and offend throughout, describing poor Americans as “a collection of sycophants sidling up to the pig and looking for the biggest nipple they can find.”²⁹⁰ The tone alternated between snarky condescension and righteous outrage. The book featured sensational chapter titles like “Abortion: Our Next Civil War,” “To Ogle or Not to Ogle” (Limbaugh’s takedown of the feminist movement), and “Animals Have No Rights—Go Ahead and Lick That Frog.”²⁹¹ Liberals, Limbaugh sarcastically explained, “have a monopoly on caring,” and “because of that they’re more moral.”²⁹² Of feminism, Limbaugh said, “I love the women’s movement...especially when I’m walking behind it.”²⁹³ Of AIDS, Limbaugh said it’s “a terrible disease” but “largely behaviorally spread.”²⁹⁴ Such self-consciously outrageous pronouncements propelled *The Way Things Ought to Be* to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list.²⁹⁵

Media figures like Limbaugh comprised only part of the anti-Clinton effort. A network of conservative financiers, operatives, attorneys, journalists, and publications coalesced to destroy Clinton. Richard Mellon Scaife, scion of the vast Mellon fortune, bankrolled much of the work. Right-wing operatives like David Brock (who later recanted his anti-Clinton work and became a

²⁸⁹ Rush Limbaugh’s *America*, Frontline (PBS, 1995).

²⁹⁰ Rush H. Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be* (Pocket Star Books, 1993). 41.

²⁹¹ Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*. xiii.

²⁹² Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*. 42.

²⁹³ Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*. 145.

²⁹⁴ Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*. 46.

²⁹⁵ Walter Goodman, “He’s No. 1,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1993 edition, sec. Books.

staunch defender of the Clintons) funneled scandals to the conservative press, who in turn pushed them into the mainstream media. Mainstream journalists, incentivized by the career opportunities afforded by political scandal, often participated. The legal arm of the anti-Clinton coalition was represented by special counsel Kenneth Starr, a devoted movement conservative.²⁹⁶

These were the core components of what Hillary Clinton would later infamously refer to on the *Today* show as a “vast right-wing conspiracy.”²⁹⁷ She told viewers that Starr was “a politically motivated prosecutor who ... has literally spent four years looking at every telephone ... call we’ve made, every check we’ve ever written, scratching for dirt, intimidating witnesses ... It’s not just one person. It’s an entire operation.”²⁹⁸

In his 2002 bestseller *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*, David Brock described the right’s reaction to Clinton as “a level of malice that transcended normal partisan opposition.”²⁹⁹ Brock explained:

By moderating on key fiscal, defense, and crime issues, while at the same time proposing to lead through government activism in health care, the environment, and education, Clinton, with his awesome powers of intellect and charisma, represented a unique challenge. ... If Clinton and Clintonism succeeded, the right would be marginalized for a generation.³⁰⁰

Journalists Gene Lyons and Joe Conason, in their book *The Hunting of the President*, largely agreed with Brock’s assessment. Clinton, they wrote, broke “the Republican ‘lock’ on southern states, muted his own party’s clamorous left wing, ... and outmaneuvered his bitterest foes in the GOP leadership again and again.”³⁰¹ “... [T]he better the president and the country

²⁹⁶ Gene Lyons and Joe Conason, *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton* (Macmillan, 2001). 133.

²⁹⁷ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 312.

²⁹⁸ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 312.

²⁹⁹ David Brock, *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*, 1st edition (New York: Crown, 2002). 138.

³⁰⁰ Brock, *Blinded by the Right*. 138.

³⁰¹ Lyons and Conason, *The Hunting of the President*.

did,” they concluded, “the more his adversaries appeared willing to endorse almost anything short of assassination to do him in.”³⁰²

The first of the Clinton scandals emerged not from the right-wing media but rather the *New York Times*. A *Times* reporter named Jeff Gerth reported on the Clintons involvement in Whitewater, a land deal that tied the Clintons to a failed Arkansas savings and loan run by family friend Jim McDougal. The reporting raised legitimate questions but also contained some critical errors. After independent counsel Robert Fiske failed to find evidence of wrongdoing, Kenneth Starr was tapped to head a second investigation.

Whitewater ignited a rush to produce more Clinton scandals. Two state troopers from Arkansas who claimed that they had witnessed Governor Clinton “[having] affairs with at least seven women during his marriage.”³⁰³ David Brock, who at the time was a writer for the right-wing *American Spectator*, broke the story, under the headline “His Cheatin’ Heart.”³⁰⁴ Bush White House counsel C. Boyden Gray swore that, with this information, “Clinton will be debilitated.”³⁰⁵ A media sensation that would become known as “Troopergate” was thus born. The Arkansas Project, a Scaife-funded muckraking operation, launched soon after, yielding the Paula Jones scandal, in which Jones came forward claiming the president had sexually harassed her.

In the midst of these, the right promoted several other scandals that failed to seriously damage the president. One of the most popular was the supposed murder of Clinton aide Vince Foster. Foster, a close friend of Hillary Clinton, committed suicide in 1993. A conspiracy theory emerged that Foster and Mrs. Clinton were in the throes of a years-long affair and that he was

³⁰² Lyons and Conason, *The Hunting of the President*.

³⁰³ Brock, *Blinded by the Right*. 151.

³⁰⁴ Brock, *Blinded by the Right*. 170.

³⁰⁵ Brock, *Blinded by the Right*. 147.

murdered by the Clintons to cover up the Whitewater scandal. Clinton conspiracists then claimed that Foster's death was but one of a handful of murders perpetrated by the Clintons. A documentary funded by conservative religious leader Jerry Falwell and released in 1994, *The Clinton Chronicles*, purported to prove a nefarious string of Clinton murders dating back to his days as governor of Arkansas.³⁰⁶ The video was widely debunked, so much so that Arkansas journalists struggled "to find a single 'true' or 'documented' statement in *The Clinton Chronicles*."³⁰⁷ Whether the public believed the accusations or not, they yielded the desired effect: Clinton's approval ratings plummeted to unprecedented levels in 1994, and in the midterms that year the "Republican Revolution" helmed by Newt Gingrich swept Congress.³⁰⁸

Sexual misconduct accusations of varying degrees of plausibility and severity emerged. Clinton was accused of (and later confirmed) an affair with model Gennifer Flowers.³⁰⁹ A former staffer named Juanita Broaddrick accused Clinton of rape.³¹⁰ The most damaging of these, of course, was Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky.

What Conspiracy?

Clinton himself compounded the damage from the scandals. "No politician," wrote Joseph Hayden, "no matter how popular, likable, or talented, can afford to exercise bad judgment or otherwise blunder in the sometimes-egregious manner that President Clinton did."³¹¹ Hayden cited the Clinton administration's "[m]ishandling of some of the documents in Foster's possession" with exacerbating claims that he was murdered.³¹² The Clintons' response to

³⁰⁶ Lyons and Conason, *The Hunting of the President*. 140.

³⁰⁷ Lyons and Conason, *The Hunting of the President*. 140.

³⁰⁸ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002). 34.

³⁰⁹ Hayden, *Covering Clinton*. 7.

³¹⁰ Lyons and Conason, *The Hunting of the President*. 63.

³¹¹ Hayden, *Covering Clinton*. 39.

³¹² Hayden, *Covering Clinton*. 32.

Whitewater, described by *Wall Street Journal* reporter James Stewart as “brush it aside, promise full support, then frustrate every inquiry,” also heightened suspicion.³¹³ Famed *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward charged that the Clintons “reacted too many times as if the scandal were Watergate.” “They seemed to be hiding.”³¹⁴ The Clintons grew increasingly insular and mistrustful of the press in response to the constant scrutiny, which only intensified feelings that the couple had something to hide. Moreover, some of the anti-Clinton narrative, such as his infidelity, had at least some basis in confirmed fact.

Clinton was impeached on December 19, 1998. The impeachment grew from the same admixture as much of the rest of the Clinton scandal culture: Clinton’s own missteps and the virulent conservative effort to destroy him. The Lewinsky scandal originated in Ken Starr’s investigation of the Paula Jones scandal, during which Starr asked Clinton if he had ever had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky.³¹⁵ From here, the story is well-known: Clinton testified under oath, denying the affair. It later emerged that Clinton lied, and he was impeached for perjury and obstruction of justice.

A fundamental irony permeated the Republican anti-Clinton movement. The constant claims of Clinton conspiracies to destroy political enemies belied the reality that his political enemies had in fact conspired to destroy him. The paranoia of the Clintons fed the paranoia of the anti-Clinton forces, and vice versa.

³¹³ Hayden, *Covering Clinton*. 84.

³¹⁴ Hayden, *Covering Clinton*. 84.

³¹⁵ Patterson, *Restless Giant*. 311.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Predictably, the Democrats' shift to the center in the '90s rankled some in the left wing of the party. Eugene McCarthy, an agent of the party's earlier shift to the left, shared his antipathy for Clinton's New Democrats in his final book, *Parting Shots from My Brittle Bow*. "By embracing a vaguely Republican form of moderate-ism," he wrote, "the party has been able, at least in the short run, to co-opt the Republican national ticket ... But the sacrifice the party has made has been the loss of its soul."³¹⁶ "The party can no longer articulate what principles it stands for; it cannot hold together congressional coalitions because it no longer has the principles with which to do this; it can no longer inspire the young," he lamented, in a nod to his 1968 campaign's reliance on the youth vote.³¹⁷

McCarthy died shortly after the book's publication in 2005. The *New York Times* remembered him as "a man of needling wit" who "triggered one of the most tumultuous years in American political history."³¹⁸ McCarthy, the *Times*' obituary said, "tried to explain himself to a nation ... in upheaval."³¹⁹ The McCarthy campaign navigated that upheaval in a way that heightened political polarization, both between and within the parties.

The Democrats' various ideological shifts helped define polarization in the twentieth century. Democrats The New Deal coalition in many ways represented the peak of transactional politics, the art of building a broad voter base by appealing to numerous interests simultaneously.

³¹⁶ Eugene McCarthy, *Parting Shots from My Brittle Bow: Reflections on American Politics and Life* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2005). 69.

³¹⁷ McCarthy, *Parting Shots from My Brittle Bow*. 69.

³¹⁸ Francis X. Clines, "Eugene J. McCarthy, Senate Dove Who Jolted '68 Race, Dies at 89," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2005.

³¹⁹ Clines, "Eugene J. McCarthy, Senate Dove Who Jolted '68 Race, Dies at 89."

Then, during the internal strife that culminated in the 1968 Chicago convention, the party offered a template for activists who hoped to take over a major political party through aggressive action. In the '90s under Clinton and the New Democrats, the party showed how to move back into political mainstream. That the Democrats' move back to its broad-based coalition-building roots in the '90s only worsened polarization makes the story as ironic as it is instructive.

Polarization continues apace. As of this writing, the presumptive Republican nominee for the 2016 election is Donald J. Trump, a real estate billionaire who has never held political office. He ridicules prominent Republicans. His authoritarian domestic policy runs afoul of modern Republican principles of limited government at home, and his insular foreign policy defies the party foreign policy of the past two Republican presidents. The editors of the *National Review*, William F. Buckley's influential conservative magazine, described Trump as "a philosophically unmoored political opportunist who would trash the broad conservative ideological consensus within the GOP in favor of a free-floating populism with strong-man overtones."³²⁰ David Plotz, on the *Slate Political Gabfest* podcast, described Trump's performance during the first Republican debate as like watching "nine German Shepherds and one raccoon." "You just had no idea what was going to happen because he was a different species."³²¹

Many commentators, for instance statistician Nate Silver, see this bizarre phenomenon as the harbinger of a realignment of the Republican Party. "Major partisan realignments do happen in America," wrote Silver, "on average about once every 40 years." We probably will not know for years the shape of the GOP and the impact of the 2016 election on the party.

³²⁰ National Review Editors, "Against Trump," *The National Review*, Jan. 21, 2016.

³²¹ David Plotz, Emily Bazelon, and John Dickerson, *The "Nine German Shepherds and One Raccoon" Edition*, *Slate Political Gabfest*, 2015.

Democrats too are facing ideological insurgency, albeit of a less surreal variety. Bernie Sanders, a democratic socialist and senator from Vermont, began his campaign with little hope of winning any contests. He has far outperformed expectations. Unsurprisingly, Bernie Sanders has occasioned comparisons to the late Eugene McCarthy, as “a single-issue candidate who gets the kids fired up.”³²²

As Yeats wrote in his immortal poem “The Second Coming,” “the centre cannot hold.”³²³ The other frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, who was a fixture of her husband Bill’s centrist New Democrat campaign and presidency, has been forced to run much further to the left than she did in her previous campaign in 2008. She has reversed her previous position in favor of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade agreement with Pacific Rim countries designed in the mold of the North American Free Trade Agreement signed by President Clinton in 1994. Bernie Sanders opposes both NAFTA and the TPP.

Bill Clinton’s New Democrats have lost influence in the Democratic Party. Hillary remains the likely Democratic nominee, though her position is much weaker than polling and most commentary suggested last year. A Gallup poll from March 2015 found that Hillary Clinton was “one of a few potential 2016 presidential candidates to have a significantly higher favorable (50%) than unfavorable (39%) rating among the American public.”³²⁴ By May 24, 2016, Hillary’s unfavorable rating in Gallup’s polling had shot up to 54% in the midst of a bruising primary fight with Bernie Sanders and the emerging general election battle with Donald Trump. Her favorable numbers had tumbled to 40%.³²⁵

³²² Nate Silver, “Don’t Assume Conservatives Will Rally Behind Trump,” *FiveThirtyEight*, Feb. 29, 2016.

³²³ William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd Revised edition (New York: Scribner, 1996). 187.

³²⁴ Jeffrey Jones, “Clinton Favorability, Familiarity Bests 2016 Contenders,” *Gallup.com*, March 12, 2015.

³²⁵ Frank Newport, “Hillary Clinton Maintains Image Advantage Over Donald Trump,” *Gallup.com*, May 24, 2016.

The intensely polarized climate giving rise to Trump owes a debt to the precedent set by Democrats in the 1960s and '70s. George McGovern embraced unrealistic general election schemes that relied on massive turnout among a single demographic group (young people, in his case). Michael Kramer's piece in *New York Magazine* arguing against McGovern's youth vote expectations offered a powerful refutation of this kind of wishful demography. Under the title "The Implausible Dream," Kramer offered a state-by-state chart of the level of youth turnout McGovern would need to beat Nixon, Kramer concluded:

Even assuming that all youths who register will actually make it to the polls, the youth vote that Senator McGovern will need to offset Nixon-Wallace is, in every state, greater than currently awarded to McGovern in nationwide surveys. ... McGovern's work will be difficult, if not impossible.³²⁶

2016 occasionally recalls 1972. A recent article by Greg Sargent of the *Washington Post* broke down, state by state, the daunting task facing the Trump campaign to turn out the white vote in high enough numbers to offset his flagging ratings in nearly every other demographic. For example, in Michigan, "Trump would have to win [whites] by 62-36, an improvement of 18 points" over previous Republican candidate Mitt Romney's performance in 2012.³²⁷ In Wisconsin, "Trump would have to win among them by 56-42, an improvement of 12 points."³²⁸

One would strain to ignore the parallels between the 1972 Kramer piece and the Sargent's 2016 piece. "To succeed," Sargent wrote, "Trump would likely have to improve on Mitt Romney's advantage over Barack Obama among blue collar whites by double digit margins, which is an astronomically high bar — in almost all of these states."³²⁹ In his headline, Sargent

³²⁶ Michael Kramer, "McGovern's Youth Vote--The Numbers Don't Add Up," *New York Magazine*, Aug. 28, 1972.

³²⁷ Greg Sargent, "Donald Trump Will (almost Certainly) Never Be Elected President. Here's Why.," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2016..

³²⁸ Sargent, "Donald Trump Will (almost Certainly) Never Be Elected President. Here's Why."

³²⁹ Sargent, "Donald Trump Will (almost Certainly) Never Be Elected President. Here's Why."

reached a similar conclusion to what Kramer forecast 44 years earlier: “Donald Trump will (almost certainly) never be elected president.”³³⁰

This is where comparisons between 1972 and 2016 seem apropos. The Democratic Party of the twentieth century, founded on the philosophical principles of Wilsonian activist government, empowered by coalition building during the New Deal era, pulled taut by Vietnam and race, and broken by the 1968 convention and civil rights conflict, spread its divisive malaise throughout the whole political system. For all the talk of banishing “special interests” from the political arena in favor of focusing on “the people,” special interest politics have increasingly become the focus of insurgent campaigners in both parties, at the expense of broad coalition-building that used to be the norm in national politics. Democrats learned during the McGovern era that this type of politics tends to work best within the closed system of party nominating contests.

As a result, candidates pursuing this narrow strategy must speciously claim that legions of non-voters within a single demographic group will be driven to turn out for an inspiring candidate speaking directly to them. The claim was not true for McGovern and the youth vote in 1972. For any candidate who sacrifices broad appeal in favor of energizing a single demographic group, the most likely result is even deeper polarization.

³³⁰ Sargent, “Donald Trump Will (almost Certainly) Never Be Elected President. Here’s Why.”

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