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Reimagining the “Lost Men” of the Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Late Nineteenth Century Presidents

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For much of the twentieth century, scholars treated the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era as starkly contrasting phases in the unfolding of the American story: the post-Civil War dark ages followed by the bright light of the early twentieth century. More recently, historians have recognized the oversimplification if not downright wrongheadedness of that dichotomy. The past few decades have witnessed an explosion of studies on a variety of topics with coverage dates roughly from the 1870s to the 1920s. Most of these newer works underscore the continuities between the two periods and the relatively seamless evolution of forces and institutions.

New research has begun to apply this sort of revisionist analysis to the American presidency. Among the hoariest stereotypes in United States history was the notion that the turn of the century somehow marked a great watershed in the development of the office. After a period of leaden inertia in the nation’s chief executives during the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era presidents wrought a profound transformation in the office, making it not only “modern” but also the undeniable and indispensable center of American political life ever after. The underlying premise of this semi-miraculous metamorphosis, of course, was the debility and weakness, if not utter political impotence and ineptitude, of the late nineteenth century presidents.

Although twentieth-century scholars recognized a growing presidential activism in foreign relations during the Gilded Age,¹ in domestic affairs, the principal concern of the present article, they tended to see the chief executives as weak, isolated, and ineffectual. To a

¹See, for example, Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca, 1963); Charles S. Campbell, *The Transformation of American Foreign Relations, 1865-1900* (New York, 1976); Robert L. Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865-1900* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1986).

considerable degree, these views sprang from the negative judgments of contemporary observers in the Gilded Age itself. In 1885 the young political scientist Woodrow Wilson published his first book, *Congressional Government*, which argued that Congress had come to dominate national policymaking and that the presidency was concomitantly feeble. Although the president's business was "occasionally great," it was "usually not much above routine." Compared with the majority-based leadership the British prime minister exercised, Wilson said, the president's "usefulness is measured, not by efficiency, but by calendar months."²

The British observer, James Bryce read Wilson's book before setting forth his own observations in his massive work, *The American Commonwealth*, which he completed in 1888. He, too, thought that the "domestic authority of the President is in time of peace very small." Although challenges in foreign relations or from domestic disorder might tap the president's judgment and courage, Bryce said, in "ordinary times the President may be compared to the senior or managing clerk in a large business establishment, whose chief function is to select his subordinates, the policy of the concern being in the hands of the board of directors." Like Wilson, Bryce thought the American system of checks and balances far inferior to the cabinet government of his native Britain. In the United States, Bryce concluded, the "President can do little, for he does not lead either Congress or the nation."³

Many twentieth-century scholars echoed Wilson and Bryce. Although they ascribed some elements of strength to Grover Cleveland and William McKinley, they viewed the other chief executives of the previous century's last three decades as inconsequential at best, if not regressive in the office's development. Richard Hofstadter dismissed Rutherford B. Hayes and Benjamin Harrison as "famous in American annals chiefly for their obscurity." Of Ulysses S. Grant, James A. Garfield, and Chester A. Arthur, Hofstadter sniffed, "not much need be said" beyond their taint by corruption or spoilsmanship. In his classic study of the period's public life, Morton Keller approvingly quoted Thomas Wolfe's depiction of Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, and Hayes as

²Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (1885, reprint, Gloucester, MA, 1973), 62, 69, 167-68, 170, 187.

³James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1889), 1:50, 63, 177, 219, 224, 288, 295.

“The Four Lost Men,” whose “gravely vacant and bewhiskered faces mixed, melted, swam together.” According to Keller, during the Gilded Age, the presidency “remained small in scale and limited in power, caught up more in the vicissitudes of party politics and patronage than in the formulation and conduct of public policy.” A 1997 synthesis on American politics in the period similarly concluded that “[t]hroughout the Gilded Age, presidents supplied little domestic policy leadership beyond sending Congress an annual report that contained suggestions for legislative action.”⁴

These generalizations have not gone unchallenged. The past few decades have witnessed a number of biographical and administrative studies that portray the Gilded Age presidents as not quite the ciphers traditional opinion held them to be. The first important entry in this revisionist literature came as early as 1963 in H. Wayne Morgan’s *William McKinley and His America*, which cast the twenty-fifth president as an engaged and effective leader not only in foreign affairs but in domestic policy as well. Other presidents’ engagement came across in Morgan’s rehabilitation of the period’s politics generally in *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896* (1969). Harry J. Sievers’ 1968 biography of Benjamin Harrison presented a workmanlike chronicle of Harrison’s White House years, but it was the weakest volume in Sievers’ trilogy and gave short shrift to some of the pivotal characteristics of Harrison’s administration and his work with the Fifty-first Congress. In 1978, Allan Peskin published his biography, *Garfield*, which focused on the Ohioan’s distinguished congressional career and necessarily gave less space to his truncated presidential term. Even so, Peskin demonstrated the president’s triumphant assertiveness in patronage battles and his prospective leadership on policy issues such as the South and education. Garfield’s successor, Chester Arthur, was the subject of Thomas C. Reeves’s sympathetic biography, *Gentleman Boss* (1975), which built on the oft-repeated judgment that Arthur was a better president than anyone expected him to be and portrayed the courtly New Yorker as mildly innovative and a needed calming influence in a time of turmoil.⁵

⁴Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948; reprint, New York, 1973), 170; Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 297, 544; Robert W. Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900* (Wheeling, IL, 1997), 50.

⁵H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Syracuse, 1963) and *From*

The profusion of presidential biographies appearing during the last decade includes several that focus on Gilded Age incumbents. Two recent works offer important revisionist insights on the Grant presidency: Frank J. Scaturro, *President Grant Reconsidered* (1998) and Jean Edward Smith, *Grant* (2001). In contrast with the unsympathetic treatment William McFeely presented in his 1981 biography, both Scaturro and Smith aggressively defend Grant's performance in the White House, portraying him as a capable and engaged leader who played a distinct and directing role in the formulation and implementation of domestic policy. Even so, we still await a thorough reexamination of the Grant presidency grounded in the primary sources.⁶ Grover Cleveland is the subject of two recent popular biographies: H. Paul Jeffers, *An Honest President: The Life and Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (2000) and Alyn Brodsky, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Character* (2000). Brodsky's book rests on solid research, but as both their subtitles suggest, neither of these works takes us much beyond the hagiography of Allan Nevins' 1932 biography.⁷ Among the best of the new presidential biographies is Ari Hoogenboom, *Rutherford B. Hayes: Warrior and President* (1995). Hoogenboom portrays Hayes as a complex man and subtle leader whose undoubted personal rectitude helped restore respectability to his office after the taint and turmoil of the previous decade. Moreover, Hayes asserted executive authority in relations with Congress and took the initiative in policy formulation on such issues as affairs in the South and civil service reform.⁸

Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896 (Syracuse, 1969); Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier President: The White House and After* (Indianapolis, 1968); Allan Peskin, *Garfield: A Biography* (Kent, OH, 1978); Thomas C. Reeves, *Gentleman Boss: The Life of Chester Alan Arthur* (New York, 1975).

⁶Frank J. Scaturro, *President Grant Reconsidered* (Lanham, MD, 1998); Jean Edward Smith, *Grant* (New York, 2001); William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (New York, 1981). Smith's bibliography is much more extensive than Scaturro's and includes numerous manuscript collections and other primary sources, but his footnotes suggest considerable reliance on secondary works. Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President* (New York, 1997), is weak on Grant's presidential years. See also Joan Waugh, "'A Great General Can Be a Baby President': U.S. Grant's Presidential Legacy Reconsidered," Paper presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, January 4, 2002, copy in my possession.

⁷H. Paul Jeffers, *An Honest President: The Life and Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (New York, 2000); Alyn Brodsky, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Character* (New York, 2000); Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York, 1932).

⁸Ari Hoogenboom, *Rutherford B. Hayes: Warrior and President* (Lawrence, KS, 1995).

Hoogenboom's biography built on his earlier administrative history, *The Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes* (1988), a volume in the American Presidency series published by the University Press of Kansas. Nothing has done more than this series to spur a reconsideration of the Gilded Age presidency. All the presidents from Hayes to McKinley are represented by volumes now in print,⁹ and Grant biographer Brooks D. Simpson is preparing the Grant administration volume.¹⁰ As is usually the case with a series, these works vary in quality. Following the series design, all are relatively short and serve primarily to synthesize secondary literature. But in some instances, most notably Hoogenboom's study of Hayes, Richard Welch's book on Cleveland, and Lewis L. Gould's study of the McKinley administration, the volumes represent substantial primary research as well. All of them seek to transcend the stereotypes, and chief executives once dismissed as ciphers at worst or mere office mongers at best now appear as active, hard-working administrators. Moreover, despite the limitations imposed on them by traditional conceptions of the executive-congressional relationship (as reflected in the images cast by Wilson and Bryce), these men had clear notions about public policy and worked through a variety of means to steer Congress toward the ends they pursued.

Taken altogether, these newer biographical and administrative studies suggest that the central feature of the Gilded Age presidency was the gradual recovery of the office from the blow it had suffered at the hands of Andrew Johnson. During the struggle over the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, press pundits and television's talking heads frequently invoked the image of a beleaguered Johnson defending the presidency from the unwarranted and unconstitutional assaults of his fanatical political opponents. Historians of the period know better – that Johnson's own stubborn behavior and contemptuous refusal to work for accommodation with Congress invited its extreme response.¹¹ Even the

⁹Ari Hoogenboom, *The Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes* (Lawrence, KS, 1988); Justus Doenecke, *The Presidencies of James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur* (Lawrence, KS, 1981); Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence, KS, 1988); Homer E. Socolofsky and Allan B. Spetter, *The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison* (Lawrence, KS, 1987); Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence, KS, 1980).

¹⁰Simpson treats Grant's Reconstruction policies, as well as those of Lincoln, Johnson, and Hayes, in Brooks D. Simpson, *The Reconstruction Presidents* (Lawrence, KS, 1998).

¹¹The best scholarly accounts of the Johnson impeachment are Michael Les Benedict, *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* (New York, 2nd ed., 1999) and Hans L. Trefousse, *Impeachment of a President: Andrew Johnson, the Blacks, and Reconstruction*

usually mild-mannered Bryce observed that Johnson's "foolish and headstrong conduct made his removal desirable," and that "only four years after the power of the executive had reached its highest point in the hands of President Lincoln, it was reduced to its lowest point in those of President Johnson."¹² If Americans had always been somewhat skeptical about presidential power, Johnson's behavior reinforced that skepticism. For subsequent presidents the principal institutional challenge was to rebuild confidence in the office and somehow extend its power to meet the exigencies of a rapidly changing nation and society.

New research and revisiting old stereotypes suggest that it is less instructive simply to dismiss the Gilded Age presidency as the nadir of the office than to examine the ways in which its occupants laid the groundwork for the "modern" presidents of the early twentieth century. Although the rehabilitation of the presidency after the Johnson debacle did not always follow a straight-line course, the Gilded Age witnessed a distinct if gradual transformation in the way presidents related with Congress, positioned themselves in public opinion, and exercised policy leadership over such issues as civil service and administrative structure, race relations, and economic policy. To do justice to their efforts would require far more space than available here, but one may offer some examples of the incremental accretion of power and authority that rendered the office Theodore Roosevelt inherited on September 14, 1901, far more robust than the one Ulysses S. Grant entered on March 4, 1869.

On that 1869 inauguration day, no one seemed better suited to restore dignity and respectability to the White House than the hero of Appomattox. Fewer presidents have entered the presidency with greater reserves of public good will. Massachusetts Senator George F. Hoar noted that Americans "looked to Grant with an almost superstitious hope. They were prepared to expect almost any miracle from the great genius who had subdued the rebellion."¹³ But the age of miracles had long passed, and some Americans were disappointed by Grant's

(1975; reprint, New York, 1999). See also Simpson, *Reconstruction Presidents*, 123-27; Albert Castel, *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (Lawrence, KS, 1979).

¹²Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 1:47, 290.

¹³George F. Hoar, *Autobiography of Seventy Years*, 2 vols. (New York, 1903), 1:246; George Bancroft to Ulysses S. Grant, March 5, 1869, Ulysses S. Grant Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

performance, in part because their expectations had soared to heights impossible for anyone to fulfill. Moreover, the later scholarly view that Grant was a failure as president rested in large measure, though not exclusively, on his administration's many scandals, some of which reflected Grant's tendency to be too credulous of men who betrayed his trust. But the cloud of scandal should not obscure the important achievements of Grant's terms or the contributions he made to the restoration of presidential authority.

If in the wake of the Johnson years, Grant seemed at times to shun a leadership role in policymaking, the impression in part reflected Grant's canny understanding of the circumstances he confronted. Among the most odious images associated with Johnson's recalcitrance was his loud insistence upon "my policy." Eager to demonstrate that the era of confrontation among the branches had ended, Grant pointedly used his inaugural address to assure Congress and the nation that he would have no policy "to enforce against the will of the people," and he promised that "all laws will be faithfully executed, whether they meet my approval or not." But if Grant shunned Johnson's ways, he also put the nation on notice that "I shall on all subjects have a policy to recommend," and "when I think it advisable will exercise the constitutional privilege of interposing a veto to defeat measures which I oppose." From the beginning Grant made it clear that while he would be no tyrant, neither would he be a cipher.¹⁴

Although during his eight years in the White House Grant came in for severe criticism from some individuals within Congress, his relations with the legislature generally were vastly more amicable than Johnson's had been, even after the Democrats gained control of the House of Representatives in the midterm elections during Grant's second term. He initially offended some Republican leaders by neglecting to ask their advice on his inaugural address and cabinet selections. But in the early weeks of his term, although Congress refused an outright repeal of the Tenure-of-Office Act, the president did secure an alteration in the law that left him greater flexibility in appointments.¹⁵ Moreover, Grant soon understood that warm relations with key leaders

¹⁴James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 10 vols. (Washington, 1903), 7:6.

¹⁵William B. Hesseltine, *Ulysses S. Grant: Politician* (New York, 1935), 145-53; Smith, *Grant*, 479-80.

in Congress, built on patronage favors and otherwise, enhanced the chances of securing the policies he favored. As other presidents had done, he used his annual messages to outline his goals, but he also did not hesitate to submit special messages to promote particular policies, even on occasion transmitting draft legislation for Congress to consider. During his two terms he vetoed ninety-three bills, more than all his predecessors combined, although many of them reflected the explosion of private bills in the wake of the war. Congress overrode only four of his vetoes, compared with fifteen, or half, of Johnson's vetoes.¹⁶ Grant was the first president to advocate a line-item veto. In the absence of that prerogative, he became the first to exercise impoundment, adamantly refusing in 1876 to spend a portion of the annual rivers and harbors appropriation for public works he considered local in nature.¹⁷

During Grant's last year in office, the Democratic House of Representatives chastised him for his frequent absences from Washington and demanded to know what duties he had performed at a distance from the legal seat of government. Refusing to provide the information, Grant noted that the rapidity of travel and communication, especially the "instantaneous correspondence" of the telegraph, permitted the president to perform his duties wherever he was, and no act of Congress could "limit, suspend, or confine" him in that performance. In thus repelling this niggling political assault, Grant vindicated the mobility that would become a defining characteristic of the modern presidency.¹⁸

Grant exercised policy leadership on many fronts, but three will serve as examples here: civil service reform, the southern question, and economic policy. Although Grant initially showed little disposition to overturn the entrenched spoils system, he did become the first president to give significant support to civil service reform. Reformers had maintained a steady cry for change since the early Johnson years. After Republicans suffered a setback in the 1870 midterm elections, for which reformers claimed credit, Grant expressed his willingness to try the

¹⁶Richardson, *Messages*, vol. 7, *passim*; Robert J. Spitzer, "Veto, Regular," in *Encyclopedia of the American Presidency*, 4 vols., eds., Leonard W. Levy and Louis Fisher (New York, 1994), 4:1553.

¹⁷Richardson, *Messages*, 7:242, 377; Allan L. Damon, "Impoundment," *American Heritage* 25 (December 1973): 22-23.

¹⁸Edward McPherson, *A Hand-Book of Politics for 1876* (Washington, 1876), 149-52; Richardson, *Messages*, 7:361-66.

experiment of a merit system. “The present system,” he told Congress, “does not secure the best men, and often not even fit men, for public place. The elevation and purification of the civil service of the Government will be hailed with approval by the whole people of the United States.” Congress responded by authorizing the president to appoint a civil service commission to devise a merit system, and Grant chose leading reformer George William Curtis as chairman. In December 1871 he promulgated the commission’s rules and requested an appropriation and “all the strength which Congress can give me to enable me to carry out the reforms.” Privately, the president told a member of the commission that it was his “intention that Civil Service reform shall have a fair trial. . . . A true reform will leave the offices to seek the man.”¹⁹

Grant’s push for reform failed to disarm all his critics. In 1872 Charles Sumner charged that under Grant “the vast appointing power conferred by the Constitution for the general welfare has been employed at his will to promote his schemes, to reward his friends, to punish his opponents, and to advance his election to a second term.” Ironically, such criticism testified to Grant’s skillful deployment of one of the most important weapons in the president’s arsenal, for while advocating reform, Grant used the judicious application of patronage to secure congressional support for his policies. Although Curtis resigned in protest against what he considered the president’s own straying outside the rules, Grant nonetheless continued to press for appropriations for the commission. When Congress finally balked, the experiment came to an end in March 1875.²⁰ Many of Grant’s contemporaries and later historians doubted his sincerity in backing civil service reform, but others close to the president thought otherwise. After the commission had collapsed, Curtis’ successor as chairman, Dorman B. Eaton, praised Grant as “the first President who had the moral courage and the disinterestedness to attempt the overthrow of the spoils system.”²¹

¹⁹Richardson, *Messages*, 7:109, 156-59; Ulysses S. Grant to Joseph Medill, February 1, 1872, in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 24 vols. to date, ed., John Y. Simon (Carbondale, IL, 1967 –), 23:3.

²⁰Charles Sumner, *Republicanism vs. Grantism. . . Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, Delivered in the Senate of the United States, May 31, 1872* (Washington, 1872); Richardson, *Messages*, 7:205, 255, 300-301; Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865-1883* (Urbana, 1968), 106-34; Smith, *Grant*, 587-90.

²¹Marshall Jewell to Elihu Washburne, October 17, 1874, Elihu Washburne Papers,

The struggle over civil service reform was child's play compared to the enormous difficulty of Reconstruction. After four years of wrangling between Johnson and Congress, Republicans rejoiced that Grant's election in 1868 at last meant the triumph of Union principles. Grant encouraged this spirit, using his inaugural address to endorse the pending Fifteenth Amendment and also to promise both firmness and fairness to all interests in the South.²² But the hero of Appomattox soon discovered that despite the Union victory, white conservatives refused to accept the reconfiguration of southern political life as mandated by Congress, and they resolved to wage a desperate guerrilla war to reassert their control. In this new sort of combat, many contemporaries and later historians faulted Grant for doing too much, while others blamed him for doing too little. Although his administration ultimately failed to secure a fundamental reordering of southern race relations or real freedom for the former slaves, Grant's struggle in behalf of change occasioned some of his presidency's finest moments.²³

Grant's rhetorical treatment of the issue illustrated the potential of the "bully pulpit" for moral exhortation. In annual and special messages to Congress and in proclamations, he frequently and sometimes eloquently denounced the "bloody and monstrous" murders and other outrages plaguing "this boasted land of civilization and Christianity."²⁴ In one particularly dramatic episode in 1871 when violence was mounting in the South, Grant wrote House Speaker James G. Blaine that "a deplorable state of affairs existing in some portions of the South demand[ed] the immediate attention of Congress." Two weeks later the president and his cabinet made a rare pilgrimage to the Capitol to confer with congressional leaders and ask for a clarification of executive authority. In a special message written on the spot, the president "urgently recommend[ed]" legislation that would "effectually secure life, liberty, and property and the enforcement of the law." Within a month Congress responded with passage of the Ku Klux Klan Act of April 20, 1871, which authorized the president to suspend the

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Dorman B. Eaton, quoted in Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils*, 134.

²²Edward Atkinson to Hugh McCulloch, November 6, 1868, Hugh McCulloch Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Richardson, *Messages*, 7:6-8.

²³The best modern treatment of Grant's Reconstruction policies is Simpson, *Reconstruction Presidents*, 1-6, 133-96, 231-36.

²⁴Richardson, *Messages*, 7:308 and *passim*.

writ of *habeas corpus*, a provision Grant invoked some months later in a showcase fight against the Klan in several South Carolina counties.²⁵

But despite the suppression of the Klan and the administration's intervention with federal troops on other occasions, the Klan's purposes survived in the southern white breast, and Grant's policy eventually encountered increased opposition in the North as well as the South. The desperate willingness of southern white conservatives to engage in the most egregious violence to achieve their ends, coupled with their confident belief in the finite nature of northern will to back reconstruction, ensured the eventual conservative triumph. The president was mortified that government policy left a great many perpetrators of such violence "unwhipped of justice," yet, as Brooks Simpson observes, Grant "understood that politics was the art of the possible, displaying a fairly good sense of what the northern public would tolerate even when he tried its patience." In his sixth annual message Grant chided his countrymen, "If public opinion could be directed to a correct survey of what is and to rebuking wrong and aiding the proper authorities in punishing it, a better state of feeling would be inculcated, and the sooner we would have that peace which would leave the States free indeed to regulate their own domestic affairs." Ultimately, however, he knew that true reconstruction required a change of hearts and minds that lay beyond the power of government to effect. "Treat the negro," he said, "as a citizen and a voter, as he is and must remain, and soon parties will be divided, not on the color line, but on principle."²⁶ What he could not know was that Americans would not reach that goal for another century.

Grant achieved greater success in one of the era's other pivotal policy areas, the currency question. The Civil War had witnessed a profound change in the nation's financial structure, with the creation of the greenbacks, the national banks, and a huge bonded debt. How to adjust this new structure to peacetime purposes remained a deeply contentious issue when Grant assumed the presidency. Although the new president's previous military career had afforded him no experience in such matters, he emerged as a leading and effective advocate of a

²⁵Grant to James G. Blaine, March 9, 1871, Grant Papers; *New York Times*, March 24, 1871; Hoar, *Autobiography*, 1:204-06; Richardson, *Messages*, 7:127-28, 134-41; Robert J. Kaczorowski, *The Politics of Judicial Interpretation: The Federal Courts, Department of Justice and Civil Rights, 1866-1876* (New York, 1985), 83-96; Simpson, *Reconstruction Presidents*, 155-56.

²⁶Richardson, *Messages*, 7:298-99, 308; Simpson, *Reconstruction Presidents*, 231-32.

“sound currency.” Midway through his tenure, Senate Finance Committee chairman John Sherman, who was sponsoring a piece of financial legislation, told him: “I am quite sure either a short message from you or a statement of opinion to a few Senators will secure a declaration of a *policy* which will be of infinite service to the country and an honor to your administration.”²⁷

Grant devoted half his inaugural address to the financial question, avowing that “every dollar of Government indebtedness should be paid in gold” and calling for an expeditious return to specie payments. Initially, however, his authority in financial affairs was compromised by criticism (much of it motivated by partisanship) leveled against his handling of the notorious gold corner attempt by James Fisk and Jay Gould in September 1869. Although Grant thought a devalued greenback might boost foreign sales of American farm products, he in fact kept the conspirators at arm’s length. When the price of gold spiked at crisis levels, Grant moved swiftly to sell Treasury Department gold and reduce the price. In Grant’s view, the episode demonstrated that vacillation in the paper price of gold injured “the interests of trade” and made “the man of business an involuntary gambler” – all the more reason, he told Congress, to enact legislation that would “insure a gradual return to specie payments and put an immediate stop to fluctuations in the value of currency.”²⁸

Grant also called for a refunding of the national debt, and Congress responded in July 1870 with the first of several refunding acts.²⁹ In the wake of the Panic of 1873 the administration pumped a small amount of Treasury funds into the economy to counteract the contracting money supply.³⁰ But even though Grant called generally for greater “[e]lasticity to our circulating medium” to meet such crises, he warned against “[u]ndue inflation,” which would afford only “temporary

²⁷John Sherman to Grant, February 11, 1873, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁸Richardson, *Messages*, 7:6-8, 29; *Gold Panic Investigation*, House Report No. 31, 41 Cong., 2 Sess., 1870; *New York Times*, September 24, 25, 1869; Smith, *Grant*, 482-90.

²⁹Richardson, *Messages*, 7:30; *Laws of the United States Relating to Loans, Paper Money, Banking, and Coinage, 1790-1895*, Senate Report No. 831, 53 Cong., 3 Sess., 1896, 191-93.

³⁰William A. Richardson to Grant, September 19, 1873 (telegram), Richardson to Thomas Hillhouse, September 19, 1873 (telegram), Grant Papers; *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances for the Year 1873* (Washington, 1873), xv.

relief.” In April 1874 when Congress passed the Inflation Bill for the reissue of \$44 million in greenbacks, the president responded with a forceful veto that struck many observers as “Jackson-like.” Of Grant’s “noble veto message,” future president James A. Garfield wrote, “For twenty years no President has had so fine an opportunity to stay the current of popular delusion and mischief. He has done it manfully and against the remonstrances of many gents who are especially near to him.” Congress sustained the veto.³¹

Jean Edward Smith calls Grant’s inflation veto “a seminal event in American history.” That judgment may be extravagant, but the action did confirm the president as a leader of the sound-currency forces. While Congress still debated financial legislation, he used the vehicle of a published memorandum to a prominent senator to call for specie resumption within two years and for the cancellation of redeemed greenbacks. In addition, he made it clear that he would veto any new bill he found unacceptable. “People who take Gen. Grant for a simpleton don’t quite know the kind of man they have to deal with,” said the *New York Times*. “He is now the only prominent man in the Republican party who is making any headway.” When Congress finally passed a resumption law in January 1875, Grant took the unusual step of sending Congress a message noting his approval but also pressing for further enabling legislation.³²

In his last annual message Grant listed his administration’s successes in its stewardship of the government’s finances, including a reduction in taxes and in the national debt, refunding of the debt with substantial savings in interest payments, and the achievement of a favorable balance of trade, which would ease the resumption of specie payments. Upon his leaving office, the *New York Tribune*, no friend of Grant over the years, said, “He has made a brave fight for financial

³¹Richardson, *Messages*, 7:244, 268-71; Joseph Medill to Elihu Washburne, May 1, 1874, Washburne papers; John A. Logan to Mrs. Logan, May 7, 1874, John A. Logan Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; James A. Garfield, diary entries for April 22, 23, 1874, in *The Diary of James A. Garfield*, 4 vols., eds., Harry James Brown and Frederick D. Williams (East Lansing, MI, 1967-1981), 2:315-16.

³²Smith, *Grant*, 581; *New York Tribune*, June 6, 1874; *New York Times*, June 12, 1874; Richardson, *Messages*, 7:314-16.

honesty, and has perhaps had a greater share than men suspect in holding his party to its obligations and maintaining the credit of the United States in the markets of the world.”³³

These and other achievements Grant posted were obscured by allegations of wrong-doing that beset his administration in its later years and by the splenetic carping of disappointed outsiders such as Henry Adams. But the office of president itself suffered no substantial diminution in prestige or power. One need look no further for evidence of its vitality and importance than the list of leading men in 1876 eager to win the right to exercise its prerogatives, men ranging from the era’s most prominent and engaging political figure, James G. Blaine, to reformers such as Benjamin Bristow and Samuel J. Tilden. In the end, the prize went to Rutherford B. Hayes. In the wake of the months-long election controversy, Hayes entered office under circumstances potentially more debilitating than those confronting any previous president. Yet, within weeks, Hayes’ assertiveness was such that observers both friendly and inimical spoke of the “president’s policy” in two key areas: civil service reform and the South.

Both in his campaign and in his inaugural address, Hayes advocated a reform of the civil service that would be “thorough, radical, and complete.” Like Grant, however, he found the entrenched spoils system inhospitable to such change. Still, he wrote in his diary, “Impressed with the vital importance of good administration in all departments of government, I must do the best I can unaided by public opinion, and opposed in and out of Congress by a large part of the most powerful men in my party.” He posted some success. Within four months of taking office he issued an executive order barring federal employees from taking part in “the management of political organizations, caucuses, conventions, or election campaigns.” In addition, he banned the assessment of political party contributions from federal officers or subordinates.³⁴

This order grew out of an investigation of the New York Custom House, the most important federal installation for the collection of the government’s revenue in tariff duties and the cornerstone of Senator

³³Richardson, *Messages*, 7:400-401; *New York Tribune*, March 3, 1877.

³⁴McPherson, *Hand-Book of Politics for 1876*, 212; Richardson, *Messages*, 7:444, 450-51; Rutherford B. Hayes, diary entry for February 14, 1879, in *Hayes: The Diary of a President, 1875-1881*, ed., T. Harry Williams (New York, 1964), 187.

Roscoe Conkling's Republican organization. When its chief officers, including Collector of Customs Chester A. Arthur, resisted Hayes' civil service order, the president moved to replace them. Hayes met considerable resistance within his own party, but after a protracted fight he succeeded in getting rid of Arthur and installing his own customs officers as well as a merit system for lesser appointees. In this fight Hayes was motivated not only by reform impulses but by factional animosity against Conkling as well. Moreover, during election seasons administration officials interpreted his executive order loosely in order to permit officeholders to campaign and to make voluntary contributions to the party. Ultimately, as a political realist, Hayes achieved some reforms, although they were not "radical and complete."³⁵

Hayes recognized that the thoroughgoing reform he desired required congressional action. In his annual message in December 1879 he devoted twenty-seven paragraphs to the civil service question, but with a presidential election fast approaching, Congress proved unwilling to enact significant change. Even so, Hayes did succeed in chipping away at the resistance within his own party. In 1880 the platform of the Republican national convention echoed Hayes' belief that "reform of the civil service should be thorough, radical, and complete," and further demanded "that Congress shall so legislate that fitness, ascertained by proper practical tests, shall admit to the public service."³⁶

The other area during the Hayes years where the "president's policy" was clearly identified was the South. This is probably the most familiar and at the same time one of the least understood aspects of his presidency. In its grossest form the story states that Hayes abandoned reconstruction of the South and protection of the former slaves in order to secure his seat as president. In reality, of course, the conservative white Democrats had already gained control in all but two states in the South, and Hayes merely ordered small numbers of troops in the state capitals of Louisiana and South Carolina back to their barracks, thereby withdrawing support for two untenable Republican regimes.³⁷

This is not the place to reexamine the complicated maneuvering

³⁵John Sherman to James Pollock, September 20, 1878, Sherman Papers; Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, 127-51.

³⁶Richardson, *Messages*, 7:561-66; 1880. *Proceedings of the Republican National Convention, Held at Chicago, Illinois* (Chicago, 1881), 19.

³⁷The literature on the election of 1876-1877 and Hayes' southern policy is voluminous. The best brief account is Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, chs. 1-3.

during the electoral crisis, but it is important to note here that Hayes had outlined his intentions regarding the South several months earlier in his letter accepting his party's nomination. He said then that he would favor a restoration of "local government" in the South, but that southerners must pledge to uphold the parts of the Constitution "that are new no less than the parts that are old," that is, the civil rights amendments. Through all the post-election negotiations – which Hayes followed closely but kept at arm's length – he never veered from this position. Two weeks before his inauguration he told Frederick Douglass that his policy would "recognize all southern people, without regard to past political conduct," but also include "a firm assertion and maintenance of the rights of the colored people of the South according to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments." He recorded in his diary that Douglass "approved."³⁸

Like Grant, Hayes recognized the political reality that "the people will not now sustain the policy of upholding a State Government against a rival government, by the use of the forces of the United States." The key was to effect the withdrawal on the best terms possible, keeping in mind that the "real thing to be achieved is safety and prosperity for the colored people." Hence, Hayes called Wade Hampton, the presumptive Democratic governor of South Carolina, to the White House and extracted a written, public pledge that his government would protect blacks' rights. In the case of Louisiana Hayes sent a commission, which secured a similar public pledge embodied in a resolution by the Democratic legislature. Only after receiving these guarantees, more than was done in the case of any previously "redeemed" southern state, did Hayes order the troops to their barracks.³⁹

Whether one endorsed Hayes' approach or not, people both in and outside his party knew that he was in charge. Regardless of whether he succeeded in his ultimate objectives, the president was formulating and pursuing a national policy of enormous consequence. He further worked for sectional pacification by granting patronage favors to southern Democrats he considered amenable. By this means Hayes also

³⁸McPherson, *Hand-Book of Politics for 1876*, 213; Rutherford B. Hayes, diary entry for February 18, 1877, in *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes*, 5 vols., ed., Charles Richard Williams (Columbus, OH, 1924), 3:417.

³⁹Hayes, diary entries for March 20, 23, 1877, in Williams, *Diary and Letters*, 3:428, 429; *New York Times*, April 4, 17, 1877; Edward McPherson, *A Hand-Book of Politics for 1878* (Washington, 1878), 69, 81.

hoped to broaden the southern Republican party's base among indigenous whites. Moreover, Hayes waged a public relations blitz for his policy during highly popular speaking tours in New England, Ohio, and especially the South, whose citizens hailed him as an apostle of reconciliation. Before his term ended, Hayes set a record for traveling and carrying the prestige of his office directly to the public. He made 126 speeches while on tour, more than half the number made by all his predecessors combined.⁴⁰

Ultimately, despite all Hayes' vigorous efforts, endemic racism and Democratic intransigence defeated his efforts to recast southern politics and still afford protection to blacks. Substantial numbers of Hayes' fellow Republicans had opposed his policy, but many of his disaffected party colleagues and Americans generally rallied to the president in the spring of 1878 when House Democrats mounted an investigation into allegations of fraud connected with his election. "Like the first shot at Fort Sumter," said the *New York Tribune*, "the first overt act of assault upon the President's title will echo all round the world." Hayes himself was reported to say privately that he would "defend my office and the independence of the Executive against any intruder" and "deliver the executive office in its integrity to my successor." The reaction against the challenge to Hayes' legitimacy was so strong that within a month large numbers of House Democrats joined the Republicans in resolving that neither Congress nor the courts had any power to reverse the 1876 election outcome.⁴¹

The next year the determined but hapless Democrats handed Hayes another opportunity to boldly exert the power of his office. Having carried both houses of Congress at the midterm elections, the Democrats proceeded to repeal Reconstruction-era election laws or to undermine their enforcement by attaching riders to appropriations bills they believed Hayes could not avoid signing. Instead, he issued a series of ringing vetoes that not only defended the civil rights legislation but

⁴⁰Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, 52, 63; Vincent P. De Santis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question – The New Departure Years, 1877-1897* (Baltimore, 1959), 69, 74-78, 91-93; Charles Richard Williams, *The Life of Rutherford Birchard Hayes*, 2 vols. (Columbus, OH, 1928), 2:241-98; Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, 1987), 64.

⁴¹*New York Tribune*, May 22, 1878; *Philadelphia Times*, May 31, 1878, quoted in Williams, *Life of Hayes*, 2:155n; McPherson, *Hand-Book of Politics for 1878*, 192-94; Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, 71-72, 73-74. In the end the investigation backfired against the Democrats when evidence surfaced linking Tilden's nephew with attempts to bribe southern election officials.

powerfully maintained the president's legislative role. Privately, Hayes vowed that he would resist "to the last extremity" the Democrats' scheme to violate "the constitutional provision as to the President's participation in legislation." In the first of a half dozen veto messages, foreshadowing later presidents' resistance to forced government shutdowns, Hayes argued that "[t]o say that a majority of either or both of the Houses of Congress may insist upon the approval of a bill under the penalty of stopping all of the operations of the Government for want of the necessary supplies is to deny to the Executive that share of the legislative power which is plainly conferred" by the Constitution. Congress overrode none of the rider vetoes, and Hayes' victory was complete.⁴²

Hayes also used a veto to block enactment of a popular Chinese immigration restriction bill that he thought violated treaty obligations.⁴³ Congress overrode only one of his vetoes, that of the 1878 Bland-Allison Act mandating a limited coinage of silver. The money issue wrought havoc on the unity of both political parties, and enough Republicans, especially from western states, voted with Democrats to defeat Hayes' will on this bill. Even so, Hayes remained convinced that the legislative influence exemplified by his veto power had "enabled the Republicans in the Senate to improve the Bland Bill," especially by eliminating its provision for free coinage. Moreover, he made it clear that he would brook no legislative interference with the resumption of specie payments, and the Treasury Department successfully resumed in January 1879. After a half decade of depression, Hayes had the good fortune to preside over a return of prosperity, which he understandably claimed as the fruit of his economic policies.⁴⁴

During the rider controversy, Hayes maintained that he had "a firm and conscientious purpose to do what I can to preserve unimpaired the constitutional powers and equal independence" of the presidency. He succeeded and indeed left the office stronger than when he entered it. "Against great odds," Ari Hoogenboom concludes, "he defended the

⁴²Hayes, diary entry for March 18, 1879, in Williams, *Diary and Letters*, 3:529; Richardson, *Messages*, 7:530-31; Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, 75-78, 195-97.

⁴³Richardson, *Messages*, 7:514-20; Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 165-67.

⁴⁴Richardson, *Messages*, 7:461, 486-88, 558-59, 614-17; McPherson, *Hand-Book of Politics for 1878*, 128; Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, 92-98; Hayes, diary entry for April 14, 1878, in Williams, *Diary and Letters*, 3:479.

prerogatives of his office and enhanced its power and prestige. . . . Hayes embraced the politics of reform and took a modest step on the path that would be followed by the great presidential leaders of the twentieth century.”⁴⁵

One may only speculate as to the sort of policy role that Hayes’ successor, James A. Garfield, would have played, had he lived beyond the first few months of his term. Ten days after taking office, inundated with patronage matters, he noted that he “love[d] to deal with doctrines and events,” rather than personal contests over offices. As a congressman he had emerged as a leading spokesman for Republican party principles on the floor of Congress, on the stump, and in the periodical press as well, and it seems unlikely that he would have willingly relinquished that role in the White House.⁴⁶ Moreover, during his seventeen-year career in the House he had come to appreciate the need for cooperation between the legislative and executive branches.

Indeed, on this score Garfield faulted Hayes for being too isolated and not working more closely with Congress to achieve his ends. The trouble, Garfield told an associate, was that Hayes suffered from “that worst infirmity, the fear of being influenced by men of his own party who are larger than he. The result is that he shuts himself up, and does not avail himself of the help which every President needs.” On the civil service question, for instance, Garfield thought that by employing the device of an executive order, Hayes had “made the mistake of merely antagonizing Congress – and trying to effect a reform without legislative aid.” During his own campaign for president in 1880, Garfield said that it would be much better to “harness Congress into the work of making a permanent betterment of the service.” “I would shift the line of battle,” he wrote a friend, “and, by presenting in a message a well considered plan of civil service, urge its adoption by Congress as law. . . . This plan would bring all the reform sentiment of the country to bear upon Congress, and would sooner or later result in a law.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵Richardson, *Messages*, 7:532; Hoogenboom, *Presidency of Hayes*, 224, 226.

⁴⁶Garfield, diary entry for March 14, 1881, in Brown and Williams, *Diary of Garfield*, 4:558. For a convenient compendium of Garfield’s speeches and other writings, see *The Works of James Abram Garfield*, 2 vols., ed., Burke A. Hinsdale (Boston, 1883).

⁴⁷Garfield, diary entry for February 28, 1878, in Brown and Williams, *Diary of Garfield*, 4:30; Garfield to Harmon Austin, March 3, 1878, James A. Garfield Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Garfield to Burke A. Hinsdale, July 25, 1880, in *Garfield-Hinsdale Letters: Correspondence between James Abram Garfield and Burke Aaron Hinsdale*, ed., Mary L. Hinsdale (Ann Arbor, MI, 1949), 454-55.

Garfield had no chance to practice this sort of legislative leadership during his brief term but, ironically, earned whatever reputation he had for strength as president in a dramatic confrontation over patronage. Again the fight centered on the New York Custom House. Although Garfield had honored several of Conkling's recommendations for New York offices, he removed the customs collector and named in his place William H. Robertson, an enemy of the Senator. Clearly, factional considerations influenced Robertson's selection, but Garfield vigorously defended the struggle as a necessary reassertion of presidential authority. He was determined to "settle the question whether the President is the registering clerk of the Senate or the Executive of the Nation." In a farcical attempt to rally home-state support, Conkling and his Senate colleague Thomas C. Platt resigned and sought immediate reelection. The Senate confirmed Robertson, Conkling and Platt failed to return to Washington, and Garfield won a signal victory for executive independence.⁴⁸

Garfield had little time to develop policy initiatives. On the southern question, after Hayes' experience, he doubted that patronage could do much to effect a fundamental alteration in the condition of the region. He recognized the problem as fundamentally cultural and concluded that "the final cure for the 'Solid South' will be found in the education of its youth, and in the development of its business interest, but both of these require time." In his inaugural address, he argued that because the national government had extended the suffrage to blacks, it was "under special obligations to aid in removing the illiteracy which it has added to the voting population."⁴⁹

Garfield's economic policy embraced Republican party orthodoxy regarding a specie-based currency and the prudent management of the national debt. On the latter score, without waiting for enabling legislation from Congress, he ordered the Treasury to begin exchanging more than \$400 million in 6 and 5 percent bonds for 3.5 percent obligations. If bondholders were willing to make the exchange, Garfield thought, the program "would be a very brilliant feat of financiering." He proved right; in less than three months he was able to

⁴⁸Garfield to Hinsdale, April 4, 1881, in Hinsdale, *Garfield-Hinsdale Letters*, 489; Doenecke, *Presidencies of Garfield and Arthur*, 42-45.

⁴⁹Garfield to D. H. Chamberlain, January 15, 1881, in *New York Times*, October 7, 1883; Garfield to Hinsdale, December 30, 1880, in Hinsdale, *Garfield-Hinsdale Letters*, 469-70; Hinsdale, *Works of Garfield*, 2:783, 791-92.

pronounce his refunding plan “a complete success,” and the net result was a saving to the government of more than \$10 million in interest annually. In the end, however, this exertion of presidential economic leadership drew less attention than the simultaneous triumph over Conkling. Of that victory, historian Justus Doenecke concludes, “The president was standing up for the prerogatives of his office and, in the process, curbing the Senate’s power. Future chief executives could only be grateful that a step had been made, even if a small one, to increase their control.”⁵⁰

It was supremely ironic that Conkling’s erstwhile loyal lieutenant, Chester A. Arthur, succeeded Garfield upon his death in September 1881. The circumstances surrounding Arthur’s assumption of the presidential chair seemed less auspicious for strong leadership even than those Hayes had confronted. For one thing, he had little prospect for unifying his party: he could not openly embrace his old Stalwart faction, Blaine and his friends held him in contempt, and reform-minded Republicans could not rid their minds of his past record for spoilsmanship. In addition, alienated from the press generally for its critical treatment of his pre-presidential career, Arthur did not turn to reporters to burnish his image or cultivate favor for his policies. Nor did he have much taste for taking his message directly to the public, speaking on average only ten times per year and only on ceremonial occasions. Moreover, according to Thomas C. Reeves, Arthur suffered from Bright’s disease, which progressively sapped his energy. On top of these handicaps, the new president confronted a Congress where his party held only a narrow majority in the House and tied with the Democrats in the Senate. After the midterm elections, Democrats controlled the House by more than eighty seats.⁵¹

The consensus of his contemporaries and later historians was that Arthur performed as a competent administrator. After his own fashion, Arthur played an important role in policymaking as well. He

⁵⁰Hinsdale, *Works of Garfield*, 2:784, 792-93; Garfield, diary entries for March 19, 26, 29, 30, 31, April 4, 5, 8, 12, 26, May 13, 23, 1881, in Brown and Williams, *Diary of Garfield*, 4:561, 564, 566, 567, 569, 572, 574, 582, 590, 598-99; *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances for the Year 1881* (Washington, 1881), xxiv-xxvi; Doenecke, *Presidencies of Garfield and Arthur*, 45.

⁵¹Reeves, *Gentleman Boss*, 317-18, 422-23; Doenecke, *Presidencies of Garfield and Arthur*, 80; Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 64, 65, 85; Edward McPherson, *A Hand-Book of Politics for 1882* (Washington, 1882), 115-16, and *A Hand-Book of Politics for 1884* (Washington, 1884), 129.

was not a hands-on legislative manager, but he made clear where he stood on pending issues. On most important questions he generally reserved his recommendations for the highly visible annual messages at the opening of each congressional session in December. On these occasions, Arthur advocated legislation covering a broad range of topics: tariff revision, navy construction, aid to education, railroad regulation, forest preservation, internal improvements, civil service reform, subsidies for the merchant marine, currency reform, coastal defense, civil rights, and others.⁵² The record of achievement was mixed. On some questions, such as his call for new civil rights legislation after the Supreme Court overturned the Act of 1875, the nation would have to wait decades for positive congressional action. On other issues, Arthur put the prestige of his office behind legislative efforts that bore fruit in years not long after his term. Denouncing “oppressive” railroad practices, he argued that “Congress should protect the people at large in their interstate traffic against acts of injustice which the State governments are powerless to prevent.” Two years after he left office, Congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act. Citing the “wasteful” destruction of the nation’s woodlands, he called for “legislation to secure the preservation of the valuable forests still remaining on the public domain.” Congress enacted such legislation during Benjamin Harrison’s term in 1891.⁵³

On other fronts the success was more immediate. Less than three months after taking office, the former spoilsman Arthur used his first annual message to offer a mild endorsement of civil service reform. After heavy Republican losses in the 1882 congressional elections, his next annual message invoked the people’s “earnest wish for prompt and definite action.” He endorsed the Pendleton bill, which included a provision for competitive examinations, and he called for a ban on political assessments, which he himself had levied as recently as the 1880 election. Perhaps most important, Arthur cited the need for modernization of the appointments process, arguing that the complex national government with its 100,000 employees “has outgrown the provisions which the Constitution has established for filling the minor offices in the public service.” Six weeks later he signed the Civil Service

⁵²Arthur’s messages are in Richardson, *Messages*, vol. 8.

⁵³Richardson, *Messages*, 8:144-45, 185-86, 188, 253; *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the United States, 1874-1891* (Washington, 1891), 529-33, 947.

Act.⁵⁴ Modernization was again the keynote when Arthur used each of his annual messages to make fervent calls for rehabilitation of the Navy. Congress responded favorably, and his administration initiated a naval construction program that persisted through succeeding administrations.⁵⁵

On one major issue, Arthur took mild exception to the drift of Republican party opinion. While the party generally followed the lead of men such as James G. Blaine in embracing tariff protectionism, Arthur argued that the large surplus in the government's budget called for downward revision of customs duties. Recognizing that logrolling often took over when Congress composed tariff schedules, the president endorsed the novel suggestion of assigning the task to an expert commission. When the commission favored an average decrease of duties of 20 to 25 percent, Arthur renewed his call for reduction, arguing that the "present tariff system is in many respects unjust." In the end, however, Congress passed the so-called Mongrel Tariff, which satisfied neither protectionists nor revisionists and lowered average duties by less than 2 percent.⁵⁶ Reflecting his experience in the New York mercantile community, Arthur favored the expansion of American trade. After the failure of general tariff revision, his administration turned to a piecemeal effort in negotiating reciprocity agreements with several nations (mostly in the western hemisphere) with the central purpose of opening markets for American goods. Near the end of his term Arthur submitted several such treaties to the Senate, but most were withdrawn by his successor, Grover Cleveland, or otherwise thwarted.⁵⁷

Besides his messages to Congress, Arthur used his veto leverage to influence the shape of legislation. In April 1882 he vetoed a measure to bar the immigration of Chinese laborers for twenty years. He argued that the lengthy exclusion period violated existing treaty provisions allowing the United States only to "regulate, limit, or suspend" such immigration. Congress failed to override the veto and passed a new bill with the period shortened to ten years, which Arthur signed. Similarly,

⁵⁴Richardson, *Messages*, 8:60-63, 145-47; *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the United States, 1874-1891*, 392-96.

⁵⁵Richardson, *Messages*, 8:51-52, 140, 179, 181-82, 247, 248; Doenecke, *Presidencies of Garfield and Arthur*, 147-53.

⁵⁶Richardson, *Messages*, 8:49, 135-36; Doenecke, *Presidencies of Garfield and Arthur*, 167-71; Reeves, *Gentleman Boss*, 328-34.

⁵⁷Doenecke, *Presidencies of Garfield and Arthur*, 171-79.

Arthur vetoed a bill prescribing passenger health and safety regulations on oceanic steamboats. He regarded such “humane legislation” as “absolutely needed,” but argued that the poorly drafted bill would eliminate a great many steamers currently engaged in transatlantic carriage and thereby substantially reduce immigration. Congress made the adjustments Arthur suggested, and a revised version became law. In one other noteworthy instance, Arthur braved the wrath of Congress in vetoing the annual rivers and harbors bill in 1882, which he claimed contained too many construction projects that were exclusively local in character. Congress promptly overrode this veto. In all his subsequent annual messages Arthur urged the legislature to pass a constitutional amendment granting the president a line-item veto so that he could, as he put it in his veto message, more effectively fulfill his duty “as a part of the lawmaking power of the Government.”⁵⁸

Although Thomas Reeves argues that Arthur did not desire the Republican nomination in 1884, his supporters nonetheless made an earnest effort in his behalf, especially in the party’s “rotten boroughs” of the South. When the delegates convened, he enjoyed the support of two-thirds of the number required to win, but the stronger James G. Blaine eventually took the nomination. Blaine lost in November, and Arthur became the first Republican president to hand his office over to a Democrat: Grover Cleveland. Like Hayes, Arthur left the White House much more respected than when he had entered. In the post-Andrew Johnson years when Americans looked for dignity in the White House, Arthur met their expectations commendably. As Reeves notes, Arthur exhibited an “abrupt but nonetheless genuine transformation from a spoils-hungry, no-holds-barred Conkling henchmen into a restrained, dignified Chief Executive who commanded the admiration of the American people.” But beyond that remarkable personal transformation, the great lesson of Arthur’s term was that the presidency itself had acquired a powerful institutional strength and resiliency that could withstand and transcend the grave apprehensions that greeted Arthur’s succession. Most significant, a man of Arthur’s antecedents and scant experience in national affairs did not diminish the office; instead the

⁵⁸Charles E. Coon to William E. Chandler, June 24, 1886, William E. Chandler Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, NH; Richardson, *Messages*, 8:112-22, 138-39, 187, 253; *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the United States, 1874-1891*, 363-69; Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 244, 250-53.

existing institutional momentum enabled him to rise to its demands. As Hugh McCulloch, who served briefly in the cabinet, recalled, Arthur entered upon his duties “with great diffidence,” but “[d]ay by day his hold upon his situation became firmer, and in a few weeks he was master of it.” In the end, Arthur handed his successor an office intact and healthy.⁵⁹

In the century after Grover Cleveland served in the White House, scholars have consistently ranked him as one of the strongest presidents of the Gilded Age. Like Arthur, the former mayor of Buffalo and governor of New York had no previous experience in the national government. He had never served in Congress or the cabinet, nor had he shown much evidence of any deep thought regarding national issues. He did, however, embrace strong principles, for he stood firmly rooted in the state-oriented, small-government traditions of the Democratic party. He accepted classical liberalism’s belief that government should avoid interfering with the immutable laws of economics. He opposed Republican policies of high tariffs, subsidies, and other programs to foster economic growth, as corrupt perversions of government in the interest of privileged classes at the expense of the commonweal. In short, Cleveland’s public philosophy closely resembled the one that Jacksonian Democrats had espoused fifty years earlier.

Similarly, Cleveland’s conception of the presidency paralleled that of Andrew Jackson. Cleveland convinced himself that he was tribune of all the people, one who must act forcefully to protect them from corrupt interests. Like the Old Hero, Cleveland could at one and the same time denounce centralization of power at the federal level of government and yet assert the power of the national executive as the chief bulwark of the people’s interests against an overweening Congress. The separation of powers lay at the heart of his constitutional creed, and, like other presidents, Cleveland early tangled with the Senate over appointments. When he fired Republican officeholders to make way for Democrats, the Republican Senate, relying on the Tenure of Office Act, demanded that he submit evidence justifying the removals. In a strongly worded special message Cleveland declared, “[M]y duty to the Chief Magistracy, which I must preserve unimpaired in all its

⁵⁹*Proceedings of the Eighth Republican National Convention. . . 1884* (Chicago, 1884), 138-64; Reeves, *Gentleman Boss*, 420; Hugh McCulloch, *Men and Measures of Half a Century: Sketches and Comments* (New York, 1888), 484.

dignity and vigor, compel[s] me to refuse compliance with these demands.” The Senate responded with a series of resolutions condemning Cleveland’s position, but the confirmation of his appointees nonetheless proceeded, and in early 1887 Congress repealed the Tenure of Office Act.⁶⁰

Similarly, Cleveland often wielded the veto to discipline the legislative branch. During his first term he blocked more than 400 bills, more than twice the number vetoed by all his predecessors combined. Most were individual pension bills, but he also vetoed the more general Dependent Pension Bill. Whereas later historians looked upon the Civil War pension system as a forerunner of twentieth-century welfare programs, Cleveland used what his critics called “an apothecary’s scale” to distinguish virtuous from fraudulent claims and thereby protect the people’s treasury. Among his most notorious vetoes was that of the Texas Seed Bill, which called for \$10,000 in aid for drought-stricken farmers. “Federal aid in such cases,” Cleveland said, “encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character.”⁶¹

But Cleveland’s relations with Congress did not turn solely on his exercise of the veto. In the spring of 1886, a time of great labor unrest, he issued a special message urging the creation of a federal board for the voluntary arbitration of labor-management disputes. That summer, he followed with another message reporting his approval of but also suggesting improvements in a bill taxing oleomargarine disguised as butter, thereby appealing to farmers, an important constituency for the Democratic party. Most important, in a remarkable break with past practice, Cleveland devoted his entire annual message in December 1887 to a fervent recommendation for tariff reduction to reduce the growing budget surplus. Casting the issue in moral terms, Cleveland labeled the nation’s current tariff laws a “vicious, inequitable, and illogical source of unnecessary taxation,” which permitted “unnecessary

⁶⁰Richardson, *Messages*, 8:375-83; Welch, *Presidencies of Cleveland*, 53-56; Louis Fisher, “Grover Cleveland Against the Senate,” *Congressional Studies* 7 (1979): 11-25; John F. Marszalek, Jr., “Grover Cleveland and the Tenure of Office Act,” *Duquesne Review* 15 (1970): 206-19; Grover Cleveland, *Presidential Problems* (New York, 1904), 3-69.

⁶¹Richardson, *Messages*, 8:549-58; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 102-51; Charles Hedges, comp., *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison, Twenty-third President of the United States* (New York, 1892), 71.

and extravagant appropriations.” By boldly swinging the prestige of his office behind this single concern, Cleveland not only set the legislative agenda for the ensuing congressional session; he also identified the central issue for the 1888 election campaign. In that contest, however, he lost to Benjamin Harrison, who proved equally adept at articulating the virtues of the protective system.⁶²

A month after his defeat, in a striking application of presidential rhetoric, Cleveland used his last annual message to warn Americans against “the communism of combined wealth and capital, the outgrowth of overweening cupidity and selfishness, which insidiously undermines the justice and integrity of free institutions.” He saw the nation riven into classes, “one comprising the very rich and powerful, while in another are found the toiling poor.” Yet the solution Cleveland proposed for this calamity was at its heart negative: downward revision of the tariff in order to halt “undue exactions from the masses of our people.” Rejecting any notion of positive government aid, he insisted that “[e]xtravagant appropriations of public money, with all their demoralizing consequences, should not be tolerated.” Indeed, he argued, one of the principal curses flowing from tariff protectionism was “the sentiment largely prevailing among the people that the General Government is the fountain of individual and private aid; that it may be expected to relieve with paternal care the distress of citizens and communities.” He urged Americans to resist the encroachment of “Federal legislation into the domain of State and local jurisdiction upon the plea of subserving the public welfare.”⁶³

If Benjamin Harrison and his fellow Republicans saw some validity in Cleveland’s diagnosis of the nation’s ills, they rejected his prescribed remedy. During the 1888 campaign Harrison advocated protectionism and other elements of his party’s activist economic program. Moreover, Harrison’s campaign style foreshadowed his disposition to give much greater visibility to the presidency. Cleveland did not get on well with reporters, and he made few public speeches. Harrison, by contrast, in 1888 conducted a brilliant front-porch campaign that allowed him to avoid the rigors of a speaking trip while garnering maximum press coverage for his brief addresses to

⁶²Richardson, *Messages*, 8:394-97, 407-409, 580-91; Joanne Reitano, *The Tariff Question in the Gilded Age: The Great Debate of 1888* (University Park, PA, 1994).

⁶³Richardson, *Messages*, 8:774-78.

delegations visiting his home in Indianapolis. After taking office, Harrison continued to appear before public audiences often. He traveled widely, more than doubling Hayes' record for presidential speeches and averaging seventy-four such utterances per year. Harrison used these occasions variously to tout specific elements of the Republican party's program or to espouse ideals such as patriotism, equality, republicanism, and economic development which he believed undergirded that program. In either case, he anticipated Theodore Roosevelt's use of the "bully pulpit" to build support for his party's vision of the good society.⁶⁴

During the first half of Harrison's term Republicans held a majority in both houses of Congress, and for the first time since 1875 the president had the opportunity to exercise legislative leadership by working with Congress rather than against it. Harrison vetoed one-tenth the number of bills that Cleveland had vetoed, none concerning matters of national importance. As a policy leader in the positive sense, he used his inaugural address and first annual message to Congress to outline a program calling for a strengthened protective tariff, navy construction, subsidies for the merchant marine, generous veterans' pensions, protection for the right to vote in the South, safe currency legislation, coastal defenses, internal improvements, laws for railway employee safety, aid to education, and regulation of trusts. He also employed special messages to advocate forest preservation, creation of an international American bank, the granting of steamship subsidies, barring lottery companies from using the mails, and the insertion of a trade reciprocity provision in the pending McKinley Tariff bill. During the long legislative debate over the tariff, Harrison played a central role in framing the reciprocity section and winning its approval by reluctant congressmen. As one Republican party leader recalled, "The President made little dinner parties, in order to bring the leading Republicans together for conference and discussion, with a view of bringing about an agreement between the contending parties and securing tariff legislation." According to Congressman Nelson Dingley, a leader in the tariff fight, Republicans "did not know what they would have done if it had not been for President Harrison."⁶⁵

⁶⁴"Harrison's Speeches in 1888," undated typescript, Louis T. Michener Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*; Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 64; Socolofsky and Spetter, *Presidency of Harrison*, 157-83.

⁶⁵Richardson, *Messages*, 9:5-14, 32-58, 60, 70-71, 74, 76-77, 80-81; Benjamin

The first session of the Fifty-first Congress responded to Harrison's recommendations and enacted an array of landmark laws: the McKinley Tariff Act, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, the Meat Inspection Act, the Dependent Pension Act, and a lottery ban. The McKinley Act included a section on reciprocity that followed Harrison's design, allowing the president to negotiate trade agreements regarding certain commodities without submitting them to Congress for approval, thereby enhancing the executive's prerogative in expanding foreign trade. Soon after the close of the session, not willing to rest with these successes, Harrison ordered his secretary to ask the House clerk for a report on the status of all bills still pending in either house. A few weeks later in his annual message, he hailed the legislative accomplishments but also urged Congress to complete action on bills still in the pipeline. In the short second session, Congress enacted mail subsidies to aid development of the merchant marine, mine safety regulations for the territories, and authorization for the president to create forest reserves. Harrison took particular interest in the forest reserve legislation. Soon after its passage he began setting aside vast sections of the public lands as national forests, thereby laying the groundwork for conservation efforts during the Progressive Era.⁶⁶

Harrison and congressional Republicans had set a record for peacetime legislative accomplishment unequaled until Theodore Roosevelt's second term. But such activism dismayed many Americans. The Democrats buried the Republicans in the midterm congressional elections, and Cleveland defeated Harrison in a rematch in 1892. Despite this rejection, Harrison defended his administration's accomplishments, warning in his last annual message that "[r]etrogression would be a crime."⁶⁷

The Harrison years confirmed Grover Cleveland in his notions of negative government. "The lessons of paternalism ought to be unlearned," he declared in his second inaugural address, "and the better

Harrison to James G. Blaine, July 17, 23, 1890, in *The Correspondence between Benjamin Harrison and James G. Blaine, 1882-1893*, ed., Albert T. Volwiler (Philadelphia, 1940), 109, 112; P. C. Cheney to L. T. Michener, March 23, "1893" [1896], Michener Papers. Dingley's observation is reported in the Cheney letter.

⁶⁶*Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the United States, 1874-1891*, 760-61, 762-64, 774-76, 794-97, 803-804, 812-69, 905-907, 947, 948-50; E. W. Halford to Edward McPherson, October 17, 22, 1890, Edward McPherson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Richardson, *Messages*, 9:124-29; Socolofsky and Spetter, *Presidency of Harrison*, 70-73.

⁶⁷Richardson, *Messages*, 9:332.

lesson taught that while the people should patriotically and cheerfully support their Government its functions do not include the support of the people.”⁶⁸ Cleveland had a Democratic congressional majority at his back, but shortly after he took office the Panic of 1893 devastated the political as well as the economic landscape. His efforts at legislative leadership in trying to deal with the crisis exacted a fearful price for his party.

In response to the Panic-induced depression, Cleveland advocated repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act as a way to restore business confidence. But many members of his own party opposed repeal, and Cleveland expended every ounce of his available leverage, including lavish patronage favors, to push the repeal through Congress. The result did little to heal the depression but left Cleveland’s party grievously divided into gold and silver wings. Similarly, his belated push for tariff reduction proved tactless and clumsy – at one point he accused Democratic opponents of “party perfidy and party dishonor” – resulting in a final bill that was so far removed from his original recommendations that he refused to sign it. Because Cleveland viewed compromise as betrayal of a sacred trust, he tended to shun negotiations with antagonists and relied instead on exhortation to duty as he saw it. More inclined to condemn than conciliate his opponents, he exhibited a self-righteous assertiveness that operated to undermine rather than extend his influence.⁶⁹

Still, Cleveland’s steadfast independence and forcefulness impressed his fellow Democrat, the ambitious Princeton professor, Woodrow Wilson, who praised the president as “a national force, a maker and unmaker of policies,” who “stands at the centre of legislation as well as of administration.” At the close of Cleveland’s term, Wilson concluded that “[p]ower had somehow gone the length of [Pennsylvania] avenue, and seemed lodged in one man.”⁷⁰

Modern scholars, however, question Cleveland’s true effectiveness. Indeed, the most important – and ironic – legacy of his second term for the development of the presidency, at least insofar as

⁶⁸Richardson, *Messages*, 9:390.

⁶⁹Richardson, *Messages*, 9:396, 401-405; Welch, *Presidencies of Cleveland*, 117-19, 122-24, 129-39.

⁷⁰Woodrow Wilson, “Mr. Cleveland as President,” *Atlantic Monthly* 79 (March 1897) in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols., ed., Arthur S. Link (Princeton, 1966-1994), 10: 104, 110, 113.

congressional relations were concerned, was the lesson for his successors of how not to go about it. As Geoffrey Blodgett has observed, Cleveland's "blunt efforts" to shift "policy-making initiative from Congress to the presidency," failed, but his experience did suggest "what presidential virtues would be needed among his successors to assume the initiative successfully. What would be needed for modern times was the knack for expedient compromise, elaborate self-promotion, shrewd timing, smooth persuasion, covert manipulation, and vast personal cunning. These were the very traits and talents which Cleveland manifestly lacked."⁷¹ But it was these very traits and talents that manifestly distinguished Cleveland's immediate successor, William McKinley.

Many scholars now believe that it was McKinley who created the modern presidency and gave it the preeminence in national affairs it has enjoyed ever since. As a congressional leader, McKinley had witnessed Harrison's legislative techniques first-hand. As president, he proved even more successful in applying these techniques, for he did so with a warmer personal sensitivity and greater political skill. Moreover, whereas Cleveland had badgered members of Congress, McKinley petted and cajoled them. A frequent recipient of the president's touch, veteran Illinois Senator Shelby Cullom concluded, "We have never had a President who had more influence with Congress than Mr. McKinley."⁷²

McKinley also recognized the importance of carefully managing the flow of information to the nation. His staff briefed reporters twice daily and provided them with work space in the White House. McKinley himself became an accomplished "leaker" of information to individual reporters to float ideas before the public. These efforts paid off in generally favorable press coverage for the president's policies.⁷³

Building on the examples of predecessors such as Hayes and Harrison, McKinley established the presidency as an independent source

⁷¹Geoffrey Blodgett, "The Political Leadership of Grover Cleveland," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 82 (Summer 1983): 298-99.

⁷²Shelby M. Cullom, *Fifty Years of Public Service: Personal Recollections of Shelby M. Cullom, Senior U.S. Senator from Illinois* (Chicago, 1911), 275; Lewis L. Gould, "William McKinley and the Expansion of Presidential Power," *Ohio History* 87 (Winter 1978): 9-10; Morgan, *McKinley*, 126, 274-75.

⁷³Gould, *Presidency of McKinley*, 38, 241, and "William McKinley and the Expansion of Presidential Power," 10-12; Donald A. Ritchie, *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 202.

of influence by using public appearances and speeches to carry his proposals directly to the people. He traveled extensively, and to ensure that the president's message reached far beyond the immediate audience, his staff took reporters on his trips and provided the technical means to send their stories to their home papers. Thus, effectively exploiting technological developments – the national rail network with telegraph wires paralleling the tracks – McKinley and his staff seized upon the new tools of modernity to modernize the presidency. McKinley demonstrated to his successors that the president's direct access to the public gave him the opportunity to build a power base independent of his constitutionally defined relationship with Congress. As one contemporary observer wrote, with understandable hyperbole, "The pivot upon which we revolve as a nation is no longer the Capitol, where the people's representatives assemble, but the White House, where one man sits in almost supreme power."⁷⁴

In assessing the performance of the presidents in the Gilded Age, one should not lose sight of the broader political context, which profoundly influenced their effectiveness. Nineteenth-century Americans' abiding suspicion of concentrated power persisted and was deepened by the experience of Andrew Johnson. Moreover, for most of the period the two major political parties were locked in an equilibrium in electoral strength that restrained presidents and other party leaders from taking stands so strong that they would offend some indispensable party constituency. The closeness in party strength also deprived most of these presidents of a clear electoral mandate, and it usually resulted in a divided national government, with the legislative and the executive branches at loggerheads on many issues. One of the reasons McKinley was able to lead with the dynamism he showed, besides his inherent talent for conciliation, was the major realignment that had occurred in 1894 and 1896, making the Republicans the nation's undisputed majority party.

Despite these contextual and systemic handicaps, the presidents of the Gilded Age presided over a gradual but undeniable accretion of authority and influence in their office from the depths to which it had

⁷⁴William McKinley, *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley from March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900* (New York, 1900); Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 64, 66, 86; Gould, *Presidency of McKinley*, 127-28, 135-37, and "William McKinley and the Expansion of Presidential Power," 12-14; Henry Litchfield West, "The Growing Powers of the President," *Forum* 31 (March 1901): 23-24.

plunged in the Johnson years. Presidents became more influential in their relations with Congress, and in a variety of ways, including travel and press manipulation, they increasingly attracted public attention and influenced public attitudes. By 1888 even James Bryce saw “reasons for believing that [the presidency] may reach a higher point than it has occupied at any time since the Civil War. The tendency everywhere in America to concentrate power and responsibility in one man is unmistakable.” Because the president was “in some respects better fitted both to represent and to influence public opinion than Congress,” Bryce forecast “still undeveloped possibilities of greatness in store for the Presidents of the future.”⁷⁵ Theodore Roosevelt did not will the modern presidency into being simply by the assertion of his own indomitable personality. Instead, he recognized the potential foreshadowed by the efforts of his late-nineteenth century predecessors. Building on their accomplishments and advances, he moved the presidency to the center of national political and governmental life where it has remained ever since.

⁷⁵Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 2:696-97.