The
Rhetorical
Presidency

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LIMITS OF LEADERSHIP

Whatever doubts Americans may entertain about the wisdom of pol-
icies pursued by presidents, they no longer consider it inappropriate
for presidents to attempt to move the public by programmatic
speeches over the heads of Congress. The political successes of Pres-
ident Reagan, considered by many the nation's "great communica-
tor," illustrate the contemporary legitimacy of Wilson's perspective.
Judged by contemporary standards of leadership—Wilson's stand-
ards—Reagan's stewardship has been a model—that is, a "text-
book" presidency. But how sound are the standards? What are the
limits of the rhetorical presidency?

In actual textbooks on the modern presidency, instances of the
successful use of popular appeals are highlighted, while instances of
failure serve to further emphasize the qualities of character and skill
that make the great leader and are apparently absent in the failed
presidencies. Thus, Teddy Roosevelt's "swing" discussed in Chap-
ter 4, Franklin Roosevelt's campaign to secure passage of the So-
cial Security Act, and Eisenhower's television address in support of
the Landrum-Griffin Act are all described, rightly, as models of pop-
ular leadership.[1] To be sure, these examples (and a very few others)

[1] See especially Elmer Cornwell, *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 24–26, 117–35.

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were successes and are instructive as indications of conditions under which popular appeal was essential to the passage of proposed legislation.

Yet there is a danger in analyzing the failed presidential appeals solely in terms of these and like successes. By focusing upon the differences in presidential skill or character, for instance, one never examines the hypothesis that there are limits to popular leadership as an institutional practice or to the system's ability to function well under the auspices of a theory of popular leadership. There may be bounds to what even the most skillful presidents can accomplish under some circumstances—indeed, under "normal" circumstances.

The limits of the rhetorical presidency derive from features of our political system that are peculiarly American. As I suggested in Chapter 1, American political development may be usefully treated as a layered text. Basic structural features of the regime have not been substantially altered. Political reform has proceeded through reinterpretation of the Constitution rather than by replacement, or even significant amendment, of its structural principles. America has not faced the periodic revolutions that Jefferson prescribed nor recurrent changes of regime like those experienced in France. Wilson's reinterpretation of American politics altered elite and public understanding without changing the political logic that informed the original Constitution. Presidents inhabit an office structured by two systemic theories. Presidents are, as it were, caught between two layers of systemic thought, the product of a political hybrid.

The political tensions and contradictions induced by this hybrid are not the productive result of a deliberate act of political planning, like the tensions prescribed by the original theory of separation of powers, for example. Rather, they are the unintended byproducts of an incomplete reformation. The two theories of the constitution do not fit together to form a coherent whole. Instead, elements of the old and new ways frustrate or subvert each other.

Two case studies of presidential appeals over the heads of Congress illustrate the limits of the rhetorical presidency. Woodrow Wil-

son's campaign to found a League of Nations failed because he was compelled to speak in contradictory ways to different sorts of audiences—the Senate and the people at large—and his reponsibilities to speak to them were born of the political hybrid, the old and new ways. By refuting the common view that Wilson's failure was the result of a flawed personality, I can show how it rather reveals a limit of the system. "Credibility gaps," now common to presidential politics, might not be so much the defects of character as unintended consequences of the constitutional hybrid.

If elements of the old way frustrate the promise of the new in cases like Wilson's, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty campaign illustrates the power of the new way to subvert the old. Under some circumstances, the ability of the new way to aid a president in successfully getting what he wants may lead to long-term failure for the polity due to the breakdown of the deliberative process as a whole. The exclusion of Congress from its deliberative role may prevent consideration of the merits of policy. In cases like this one, the rhetorical presidency can be seen as subverter of the routines of governance rather than as a sign of a maturing democracy. '

The Problem of Credibility: Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations Campaign

At the end of the First World War and in the middle of his second term as president, Woodrow Wilson waged a vigorous losing battle to secure a peace treaty that had as its cornerstone a plan for a League of Nations. It is commonly thought among historians now that Wilson's own political activity contributed to (and perhaps was decisive in) preventing achievement of his highest political objectives. Wilson alienated the Senate by excluding it from the negotiating stage of the Treaty of Versailles, by refusing to compromise with Senate leaders who wished to amend the Treaty, and by rhetorically appealing "over the Senate's head" to the public at large. Moreover, Wilson's closest counselors and friends advised him to compromise with the

Senate because it was clear to them that Wilson's Senate support was far short of the two-thirds majority needed to ratify treaties. It was also clear to these advisers and other knowledgeable contemporaries that if Wilson would compromise on the wording of several provisions in the Treaty—which by Wilson's own account would not change the meaning of the Treaty, being only minor emendations—the Treaty would be ratified. Wilson refused to compromise. The Treaty was defeated.

With public sentiment behind the idea for a League of Nations, the Senate reconsidered the issue, reopening hearings and putting the matter to an unprecedented second vote. Again Wilson refused to compromise along the lines suggested by the senators, and the Treaty was defeated a second time. Historians and political analysts generally agree that Wilson's actions were the crucial causes of his own downfall—but for many years they have been perplexed about why Wilson acted as he did.

Any comprehensive explanation of the "why" of Wilson's behavior is bound to traverse several of the common sorts of explanation of strategic success or failure, problems of political or rhetorical skill, organization, or character. Since Wilson had proved extraordinarily successful at getting what he desired earlier in his presidency, scholars have not been content to rest their analyses of this final failure on lack of skill or ability alone. If Wilson had had such ability before the campaign, why did he lose it when it was most needed? Some of the best analyses of the episode have probed Wilson's character as the ultimate source of all of his difficulties. Examination of the most intelligent and influential example of these studies discloses difficulties characteristic of the personality approach.

The most thorough and erudite analysis of Wilson's personality was provided in 1956 by Alexander and Juliette George in *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*.[2] The Georges develop a subtle person-

[2] Alexander George and Juliette George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* (New York: Dover, 1964). See also Arthur S. Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), ch. 5.

ality theory to explain Wilson's political behavior, attempting to show how Wilson's thought, oratory, and actions were responses to deep psychic needs that were formed in his childhood. On first reading, the Georges' study appears to be a model of scholarly objectivity since they do not presuppose psychological explanations to be the only possible ones. Instead of beginning, as weaker analyses of political personality often do, with the assumption that personality is the key to explanation, they begin by attempting to see whether the political actor's own explanation of what he did is plausible. They attempt to think through Wilson's reasoning before rejecting it in favor of subrational or subconscious explanation. Moreover, they reinforce their own assessment of Wilson's activity with the common-sense reasoning of Wilson's contemporaries, most notably that of Colonel House.[3] Upon closer scrutiny, however, one discovers that the Georges fall short of the standards they set for themselves. The source of this difficulty, I shall argue, is their failure to illuminate the rhetorical features of Wilson's campaign, to distinguish the demands of rhetoric from the impulses of the psyche.

The crux of the argument from character is that Wilson's intransigent refusal to compromise with the Senate—that is, his refusal to attach reservations to the Treaty—was irrational and was the decisive cause of the defeat of the Treaty. Wilson's position was irrational because it is apparent to us now, and it was apparent to Wilson's contemporaries, that the suggested Senate reservations were so minor that they would not have altered the functioning of the League. Wilson himself conceded that the Senate reservations merely reiterated the plain meaning of the document. Moreover, while refusing to alter the document in any way, Wilson did agree to submit a set of "interpretations" virtually identical to the Senate "reservations," provided that these interpretations be in the form of a separate accompanying document—not part of the Treaty proper. As the Georges state the issue, "From start to finish, [Wilson] did not deviate one jot from his position. It was on this issue of the *form* of the reservations,

³ See also Alexander George, "Assessing Presidential Character," *World Politics* 26 (January 1974): 10–30.

as well as the content of the final version of the reservation to Article X, that the whole Treaty foundered."[4]

Unless good reasons could be produced for insisting upon the form of the reservations, Wilson's intransigence must be considered irrational, and explained with the aid of psychological analysis. The sources of rhetoric that the Georges canvass are: the transcript of Wilson's famous meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, August 19, 1919; the texts of thirty-nine speeches Wilson delivered defending the Treaty, known as the "Western Tour" speeches; impromptu remarks quoted in contemporary press accounts; and the retrospective accounts of those close to Wilson (e.g., his wife).

From all of these sources, they unearth the following basic defense of the president's intransigence:

> Wilson based his refusal to have amendments or reservations embodied in the resolution of ratification on the grounds that such changes then would have to be approved by every nation—including Germany—which had signed the Treaty. Other nations, too, might follow our lead and start changing the Treaty. The floodgates would be thrown open, and the whole Treaty might have to be renegotiated. On the other hand, a separate statement of interpretations issued along with the resolution of ratification, the President held, would not require positive action on the part of the other signers of the contract.[5]

According to the Georges, this defense was irrational because it flew in the face of overwhelming contemporary evidence that the alleged difficulty was illusory or negligible. Senator Lodge and authorities in international law had argued that the Senate objections were in the form of reservations rather than amendments because only amendments required assent by the other signatories. Reservations would not have to be renegotiated because they could be accepted by silent acquiescence. They point out that these reservations would not have been considered obnoxious by our allies, because representatives of France and Great Britain indicated publicly that

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[4] George and George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*, 284.
[5] Ibid.

they had no objections to the reservations, preferring a Treaty with reservations to no Treaty at all.[6] For these reasons, acceptance of Senate reservations would have had no appreciable effect upon the functioning of the League along the lines designed by Wilson. Why, then, did Wilson continue to insist that the Senate ratify the Treaty his way?

To answer that question, psychological theory is developed and extended. "Men require ways of expressing their aggressions and of protecting their self-esteem. Wilson's ways of doing both, unhappily, involved demanding his way to the letter and hurling himself against his opponents, no matter what the odds, no matter what the cost."[7] The details of the carefully developed theory need not concern us here. However, it is important to note the source and kind of evidence used to support the view that Wilson's problem with self-esteem prevented him from seeing his own enlightened interest. The Georges describe Wilson's Western Tour, in which he took his battle with the Senate directly to the people. In those speeches, Wilson not only repeated his argument to the Senate, he claimed that the Senate leadership was selfish, whereas he was principled; he claimed that he was convinced "that the overwhelming (majority of Senators) demand the treaty," that he was "certain of the outcome of the League fight," and that he was "simply an instrument of the people's will." Moreover, "the facts are marching and God is marching with them. You cannot resist them. You must either welcome them or subsequently, with humiliation, surrender to them. It is welcome or surrender. It is acceptance of great world conditions and great world duties or scuttle now and come back afterwards."

All of these statements, and statements like them, drawn from Wilson's public rhetoric, are taken at face value.[8] In other words, they argue that Wilson consciously believed all of these claims. Subconsciously, they argue, Wilson felt guilty about jeopardizing the Treaty, so he attempted to convince himself and the nation of his

[6] Ibid., 309.
[7] Ibid., 291.
[8] Ibid., especially 293–99.

moral superiority. Ironically, Wilson's technical arguments (e.g., those to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) are treated as insincere, artfully contrived "rationalizations," while his emotional appeals to the public are treated as consciously held beliefs, offered in sick, but nevertheless forthright, sincerity. An alternative view is that the technical arguments represent the core of Wilson's "true beliefs" and the emotional appeals are in many respects conscious exaggerations, designed to persuade and to make his prophecies self-fulfilling. In short, Wilson was trying to do the things that good rhetoricians are skilled at doing.

Let me now re-examine Wilson's position, drawing mainly on his presentation to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but also upon his public speeches. My object is not to demonstrate that Wilson was correct, but to indicate that his argument was weighty enough not to be regarded as irrational.

One must bear in mind that a politician may be motivated by selfishness, envy, greed, ambition, etc., and still be rational. Selfish men are often inhibited by the requirement that they create a reasonable defense of their position. As long as making a good argument is regarded as necessary, one's motive is irrelevant. It is only when selfishness (or whatever other motive) so dominates the mind that one does not care about the strength or merit of one's argument that one can be said to be irrational. The Georges adopt this criterion themselves, since they admit the possibility that Wilson's main opponent, Senator Lodge, was motivated by ambition and hatred of Wilson. What was most important, they note, was that Lodge was not blinded by his motives. They put the point in one instance as follows:

> It may be argued that Lodge's reservations were offensively worded. It may be argued that his motives in presenting them were questionable. But the reservations did not nullify the Treaty. They did not even seriously embarrass full participation of the United States in the League of Nations. In practice they would have been of little significance.[9]

[9] Ibid., 301. On the rational constraint of low motives, see *Federalist*, no. , p. 36.

On this view, Wilson was irrational because his motives obfuscated his political judgment. "His ambition, in other words, was compulsive. As a result, he found it difficult to pace his political demands prudently. . . ."[10]

Now consider Wilson's rhetoric to determine whether or not there is a plausible rational account of his position. Wilson met with Lodge's Foreign Relations Committee at the White House on August 19, 1919. We have a verbatim transcript of that meeting, and in it can be found the core of Wilson's defense.[11] Wilson began the meeting with a prepared statement that he said at the time was "entirely unreserved and plain-spoken." Not everything on Wilson's mind was spelled out, of course (nor on Lodge's either), but the impression one immediately gets from reading the record of this proceeding is that the arguments were remarkably candid and forthright. Moreover, very few of the rhetorical adornments that mark Wilson's public speeches can be found here.

After some introductory remarks thanking the committee for accepting his invitation to meet, the president began his plea with the thought that a speedy ratification of the Treaty was necessary. Due to postwar chaos, the United States economy was suffering, and there was growing unrest among some of the peoples of Europe who were uncertain as to their future. Nothing stood in the way of ratification except "certain doubts with regard to the meaning and implication of certain articles of the covenant of the League of Nations." Wilson reviewed the four major objections, or reservations, proffered by the Senate, indicating that each of these objections had been raised earlier by this same Senate committee at a meeting Wilson had had with them after completion of the first draft of the League Covenant. Wilson claimed to have carried those objections back to Paris and to have placed them before the Allies as suggested amendments to the Treaty. The Allies pointed out, and Wilson agreed with them, that

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[10] Ibid., 320; see also George, "Assessing Presidential Character," 257.

[11] "Conference at the White House," April 19, 1919, reprinted as Appendix IV in Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Senate and the League of Nations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 297–379.

there was nothing in the Senate amendments that could not be de-
duced from the first draft of the Covenant itself. Nevertheless, Wil-
son insisted upon, and did get, the Senate amendments adopted.[12]

Wilson does not say here, but it is quite important, that he paid a
great price for the Senate amendments.[13] He does point out to the
Committee during the question period following his prepared re-
marks that the Allies accepted the Senate's interpretation, it being
deducible from the Covenant itself, but they disagreed over the
"wording" of the amendments. We know from records of the Treaty
negotiations that Britain, France, Italy, and Japan all exacted
concessions from Wilson—concessions that contradicted some of
the principles of the League as well as some of Wilson's "Fourteen
Points"—in exchange for their agreement to the Senate amend-
ments. They might employ the same tactic again. For this reason and
others, Wilson wished not to change any of the text of the Treaty. It
is worth quoting his reasoning in full:

> It has several times been suggested, in public debate and in private
> conference, that interpretations of the sense in which the United States
> accepts the engagements of the covenant should be embodied in the in-
> strument of ratification. There can be no reasonable objection to such
> interpretations accompanying the act of ratification provided they do
> not form a part of the formal ratification itself. Most of the interpreta-
> tions which have been suggested to me embody what seems to me the
> plain meaning of the instrument itself. But if such interpretations
> should constitute a part of the formal resolution of ratification, long de-
> lays would be the inevitable consequence, inasmuch as all the many
> governments concerned would have to accept, in effect, the language
> of the treaty before ratification would be complete. The assent of the
> German Assembly at Weimar would have to be obtained, among the
> rest, and I must frankly say that I could only with the greatest reluc-
> tance approach that assembly for permission to read the treaty as we
> understand it and as those who framed it quite certainly understood it.
> If the United States were to qualify the document in any way, more-
> over, I am confident from what I know of many conferences and de-

[12] Ibid., 297–302.
[13] George and George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*, 255 ff. Compare
John Morton Blum, *Woodrow Wilson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1956), 175 ff.

bates which accompanied the formulation of the treaty that our example would immediately be followed in many quarters, in some instances with very serious reservations, and that the meaning and operative force of the treaty would presently be clouded from one end of its clauses to the other.[14]

In the discussion that ensued, Lodge suggested that reservations, unlike amendments, would not legally require explicit confirmations but could be confirmed by silent acquiescence. Wilson responded that there was some difference of opinion among authorities as to the legal issue whether or not explicit confirmation was required. That was not his point, but rather a political judgment that other nations would take advantage of the opportunity to offer their own reservations, which would "very much obscure our confident opinion as to how the Treaty was going to work."[15] Also, delay and uncertainty would result because given the criterion of silent acquiescence, we would not know whether all nations had agreed to the Treaty until their political activity in the League was sufficient to indicate that they did "agree" to the Treaty. (Perhaps affected by this reasoning, many Republican senators subsequently began to call for a requirement that the Treaty not go into effect until the reservations were *explicitly* confirmed by the other major signatories.)[16]

The president was not persuaded by the argument that the British and French had publicly announced their support of the reservations. Not only had many other nations *not* announced their support, but Wilson's experience from prior negotiation indicated to him that agreement to the "idea" was distinguished in the minds of Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau from agreement to the "wording." As he put it, "I can testify that in our discussions in the commission on the League of Nations we did not discuss ideas half as much as we discussed phraseologies."[17]

Wilson's experience had taught him that general agreement on an

[14] "Conference," in Lodge, *Senate and League of Nations*, 302.
[15] Ibid., 311–13.
[16] George and George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*, 284.
[17] "Conference," in Lodge, *Senate and League of Nations*, 311.

interpretation of principle did not preclude haggling over specific formulations, and this had been used as a wedge to open the door for concessions from the United States. Wilson had at least a plausible argument when he contended that renegotiation would result if the Treaty were altered.

But the deepest argument was not the worry over renegotiation, or delay per se. It was rather a concern that equivocal support on the part of the United States would undermine the founding principles of the League. Repeatedly (in his remarks both to senators and to people at large), Wilson worried that the founding of the League proceed with an enthusiasm that did not call attention to "reservations." Known more as an idealist, few historians note that Wilson was preoccupied with the *problematic* character of the League of Nations. The League rested on nothing more than goodwill and the ability of each of its member nations to transcend national interest. "Unless you get the united, concerted purpose and power of the great governments of the world behind this settlement, it will fall down like a house of cards."[18] That power was military power only in the second instance; in the first instance it was the power of concerted opinion. And that opinion was not predicated on national interest, commonly understood, but rather on a concerted Kantian moral opinion that transcended national interest or utility.[19]

This lofty purpose was a fragile one. Wilson wished to avoid a situation in which the political practice of the United States contradicted the principles of the new League. For Wilson, the maxims that a nation should "be wise as serpents" and "guileless as doves" were incompatible, if one's nation was to be the prime mover in establishing a League of Nations.[20] His repeated exhortation that the League must either be accepted as is or be rejected can be seen as at least a

[18] Speech at Pueblo, Colorado, September 25, 1919, in Woodrow Wilson, *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. R. S. Baker and W. E. Dodd, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1927), 2:402.

[19] See, for example, "Conference," in Lodge, *Senate and League of Nations*, 307.

[20] Compare Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1957), 35.

plausible argument when viewed against this background. United States hesitation would endanger the principled functioning of the League, since it would establish a founding precedent that each nation should interpret each responsibility as it saw fit. "We are not dealing with the kind of document which this is represented by some gentlemen to be; and inasmuch as we are dealing with a document simon-pure in respect of the very principles we have professed and lived up to, we have got to do one or other of two things—we have got to adopt it or reject it. There is no middle course. You cannot go in on a special privilege basis of your own. I take it that you are too proud to be exempted from responsibilities which the other members of the League will carry. We go in upon equal terms or we do not go in at all."[21] The contradiction between "special privilege" and the Kantian imperatives of the League is the meaning of Wilson's view that ratification with reservation was equivalent to "nullification."[22]

These reflections do not explore every feature of Wilson's argument, but they should provide sufficient explanation of the president's position on those issues deemed most problematic by the Georges. More importantly, they should be sufficient to establish a reasonable core to Wilson's behavior. This is not to establish that Wilson's position was better than his opposition's, merely that it was weighty enough to be considered rational.

But we are still left with the fact that Wilson failed to accomplish what he set out to do. If personality does not sufficiently account for his failure, what does? The hypothesis offered here is that the role of popular leader limited Wilson's political abilities and hindered his efforts. By focusing upon the role of popular leader I mean not to suggest that Wilson used popular rhetoric poorly, but that he used it well, and that the better he used it, the more difficult his political ef-

[21] Wilson, *Public Papers*, 2:402.

[22] The Georges may have missed this element of the argument by failing to take Wilson's moral claims seriously—those being Wilson's Kantian claims that a particular action is *right*, as distinct from prudential judgments regarding his or the nation's interests. Rather, the Georges put "right" in quotation marks, indicating its dubious status, and then proceed to treat the issue in their own terms. See, for example, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*, 290, 319.

fort became. Wilson faced two rhetorical situations: (1) he needed to persuade senators to vote for the Treaty, and (2) he needed to persuade the citizenry to pressure senators to vote for the Treaty. The requisites of these two rhetorical situations contradicted each other; what was thought necessary to persuade senators would not work to persuade the people and vice versa.

We do not have reliable survey data regarding the state of public opinion towards the League or the Treaty. However, the political actors involved on both sides of the issue repeatedly claimed that public opinion was on "their side," suggesting that public opinion was in a state of uncertainty. There seems to have been a general disposition in favor of the idea of the League (it was endorsed in the campaign platforms of both major parties), but the public appeared to politicians to be uncertain whether they wanted *this* League as negotiated by Wilson. It also appears that the general disposition for some sort of League was not an issue of great intensity for most of the citizenry.[23] This is the kind of political climate that Wilson had long before argued most needs an orator-statesman. This kind of popular leader should be able to "interpret" the general disposition of the people, connect it to the practical proposal on the table, and intensify latent public support.[24]

But such a situation also makes leading senators formidable foes. Short of overwhelming public support for presidential policy, senators are, as constitutionally intended, insulated from the sort of pressure that the orator attempts to bring upon them. Wilson's peculiar difficulty was that he did not remake or refound the constitutional system, but instead reinterpreted it, engrafting a new role onto old institutions—institutions that had been fashioned on the basis of the old doctrine. Unless Wilson could gain the unequivocal support of the masses, his entreaties to them were likely to, and in fact did, alienate the Senate. Second, the sort of argument that was potentially

[23] Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist*, ch. 5.
[24] See especially Woodrow Wilson, *Leaders of Men*, ed. T. H. Vail (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952).

the most persuasive to the people at large contradicted what senators had been told about the Treaty by Wilson.

The first problem, that of alienating the senators by turning the people against them, arose as Wilson strove to find the appeal to passion that would activate popular opinion, intensify it, bring it to expression. He could not leave his defense at a sober difference of opinion and expect the people to act. By the same token, Wilson was keenly sensitive to the need not to appear demogogic through unseemly name-calling or other tactics that might give his opposition an avenue to divert discussion away from the League and their inaction, to him and his character. Thus, Wilson carefully avoided singling out senators by name, except on one occasion toward the end of the tour, when he read from a speech by Lodge praising the idea of a League.[25] There Wilson tried to create a division as unobtrusively as is possible, while still being divisive. And at various other times he charged that those who disagreed with him must "not have read" the Treaty, must be "uninformed," or must have "personal motives," and must constitute a potentially "tyrannical minority."[26]

With respect to the charge of minority tyranny, Wilson often juxtaposed his remarks about the opposition to the Treaty with a discussion of the League's potential to thwart Bolshevism. On one occasion he explicitly disavowed that he was comparing his critics to Bolsheviks, but he did this in a way that reinforced the comparison. "Opposition is the specialty of those who are Bolshevistically inclined—and again, I assure you I am not comparing any of my respected colleagues to Bolshevists. I am merely pointing out that the Bolshevist lacks any spirit of constructiveness." Whether any of Wilson's immediate hearers were moved by the comparison is hard to discern, but senators certainly were. Toward the end of the tour, Wilson suggested another invidious comparison. Defeat of the League, he urged, would aid our enemy Germany. Thus those who urge defeat of the League, whether they intend to be or not, are allies

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[25] Speech at San Diego, California, September 19, 1919, in Wilson, *Public Papers*, 2:283.

[26] Wilson, *Public Papers*, 2:199, 204, 210, 221, 264, 265

of Germany. He noted the increase of pro-German propaganda in recent months.[27]

In addition to the problem of encouraging division, Wilson faced a credibility problem. The tone and direction of his remarks to the Senate differed from those to the people. To the Senate, as indicated above, Wilson's deepest argument was the thought that the League required an enthusiastic founding because it was inherently fragile, based only upon an as-yet-unformed international moral conscience. But to arouse the passionate support of the people, Wilson had to assure the public that an international moral conscience already existed, that one could safely deposit one's confidence in the League of Nations. Said Wilson:

> [At Omaha, Nebraska:] Every great fighting nation in the world is on the list of those who are to constitute the League of Nations. I say every great nation, because America is going to be included among them, and the only choice, my fellow citizens, is whether we will go in now or come in later with Germany, whether we will go in as founders of this covenant of freedom or go in as those who are admitted after they have made a mistake and repented.[28]

> [At Bismarck, North Dakota:] It seems very strange from day to day as I go about that I should be discussing the question of peace. It seems very strange that after six months of conference in Paris where the minds of more than twenty nations were brought together and where after the most profound consideration of every question and of every angle of every question concerned, an extraordinary agreement should have been reached—that while every other country concerned has stopped debating the peace, America is [still] debating it.[29]

> [At Spokane, Washington:] Though the chance be poor is it not worth taking a chance? . . . As a matter of fact, I believe, after having sat in conference with men all over the world and found the attitude of their minds, the character of their purposes, that this [League] is a 99 percent insurance against war.[30]

[27] Ibid., 2:294, 117, 230, 10, 51
[28] Ibid., 34.
[29] Ibid., 90.
[30] Ibid., 151.

It is more difficult to succeed with such rhetoric when popular leadership is legitimate than when it is not, for when it is legitimate it is generally thought (as Wilson had taught) that leaders can and ought to be candid and forthright in popular speech. It is thought that there is no difference between deliberative and popular oratory. On the other hand, when popular leadership is illegitimate, senators may more easily discount popular remarks as designed to move a crowd rather than to express official policy. Like the Georges, senators and other contemporaries of Wilson treated his popular rhetoric as a "true" position. From their vantage point, he had either lied to them, or his views were confused and contradictory.

The character of public opinion at the time, the rhetorical imperatives of different settings, and the special character of the proposed "Kantian" international organization made it perhaps impossible for Woodrow Wilson to speak his mind and found a League of Nations at the same time.

THE BREAKDOWN OF DELIBERATION: LYNDON JOHNSON'S WAR ON POVERTY

Lyndon Johnson's campaign for the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 reversed the rhetorical practice of Woodrow Wilson's League fight. Instead of working out the merits of a technically complex program and then facing the difficult task of explaining it to the public in different, easily comprehended language, Johnson developed his popular rhetoric first. This popular rhetoric, well known as the "War on Poverty," contributed to the structuring of the legislation in the executive branch and served as a surrogate for deliberation at crucial junctures of the congressional process. The content of the poverty program was shaped, in large measure, by the "imperatives" or the "logic" of the War on Poverty rhetoric.

"War on Poverty" was a slogan devised by Kennedy staffers and used in the 1960 presidential campaign. There it did not elicit the supportive responses that were to come four years later when, in the

wake of Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson was able to turn the country's grief into a commitment to a moral crusade.[31]

The intellectual prehistory of the War on Poverty in the 1960–1963 period has been thoroughly explored by such scholars as James Sundquist, Sar Levitan, and Daniel Moynihan.[32] While this prehistory of theories and strategies to ameliorate the poverty problem did create a disposition among some White House staffers to address the issue, its major influence occurred after passage of the legislation, as poverty workers sought to make sense of their mission. For the present purpose of examining the development and enaction of the legislation, it is important to note that while some private groups had begun to implement new theories of social reform, and while some Ford Foundation-sponsored groups "ultimately provided an arsenal of weapons for the war on poverty . . . it is fair to say that the arsenal was not really discovered until *after* the decision to declare war was made."[33]

Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisors had created a study group on poverty, but Kennedy did not encourage the development of draft legislation until about a month before he died. And it was not until November 19 that Kennedy gave Walter Heller, Chairman of the CEA, "a flat 'yes' " to develop a package of anti-poverty measures for the 1964 legislative program. Heller had canvassed the government for specific proposals "to prevent entry into poverty, to promote exits from poverty, and to alleviate the difficulties of persons who cannot escape from poverty." He received fifty-eight proposals

[31] John Bibby and Roger Davidson, *On Capitol Hill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 224. For a particularly insightful legislative history, see Richard Blumenthal, "The Bureaucracy: Anti-Poverty in the Community Action Program," in *American Political Institutions and Public Policy* ed. Allan P. Sindler (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), 128–79.

[32] James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1968), 111–34; Sar A. Levitan, *The Great Society's Poor Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 3–18; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (New York: Free Press, 1970).

[33] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 135. Most of the scholars examining the War on Poverty continue to employ the war metaphor in their analyses!

and was in the midst of reviewing them when "word of the assassination came from Dallas." Two days later Heller reported on the incipient project to Lyndon Johnson, who is reported to have said, "That's my kind of program . . . move full speed ahead."[34]

At this point, the need for a rhetorical campaign supplanted the technical legislative work of the staff of the CEA as the conceptual focus of the project. Distilling thirty-five proposals out of the fifty-eight suggestions, Bureau of the Budget staff " 'floundered,' as one participant put it, in search of a theme and a *rationale* that would distinguish the new legislation, as dramatically as possible, from all that had gone before—the Area Redevelopment Act, MDTA, Appalachia, the Public Welfare Amendments of 1962, the youth employment program, the pending proposal for [a domestic peace corps] and all the rest."[35] The solution found was two-fold: the idea of community action was abstracted from work by the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime. The basic idea was to disperse federal funds to local community "development corporations," who would "plan the programs, expend the funds, and provide the coordinating mechanism." This solution provided a visible new entity to focus attention on the problem of poverty while postponing serious discussion of how the money was to be spent.[36]

The second way in which the poverty program was to be distinguished from previous programs was its package—a massive rhetorical campaign designed to "emphasize a sense of urgency about starting a war on poverty."[37] The key element was that the impoverished would be singled out for attention, rather than being one group among several to directly benefit from a program. A billion dollars was included in the budget, with half designated for programs to be determined by community action groups and the rest for other appropriations to be administered by those same groups. More im-

[34] Ibid., 137; see also Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 71.

[35] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 137.

[36] Levitan, *Great Society*, 18.

[37] Ibid.

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portantly, Johnson made the program the most visible theme of his
first State of the Union message.

> This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war
> on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join
> with me in that effort. . . .
>
> It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy
> will suffice, but we shall not rest until the war is won. . . .
>
> Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organi-
> zation and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organ-
> ized at the State and local level and be supported by State and local
> efforts. . . .
>
> Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure
> it, and above all prevent it. . . .[38]

Although only the vague decision regarding the community action
structure had been made, in his speech Johnson listed eleven possible
programs, such as the Domestic Peace Corps, a broader food stamp
program, altered minimum-wage laws, and the building of more li-
braries, hospitals and nursing homes. At least half of these proposed
efforts did not find their way directly into the War on Poverty pack-
age. The important theme of the message was not the programs them-
selves (none of which were defended there) but the simple declara-
tion of war. The metaphor of war not only structured or provided the
form for that section of the speech, it constituted its meaning as well.
For example, Johnson stated, "Our chief weapons in a more pin-
pointed attack will be better schools and better health, and better
training and better job opportunities to help more Americans. . . ."
There is nothing new or unusual about the desire for "better
health"—all presidents and all Americans are "for" those things;
what would be new was that the specific programs funded to achieve
these objectives (many of which were then pending as individual in-
itiatives before Congress) would now be part of a *war*.

In place of an argument indicating why poverty should be consid-

[38] Lyndon Johnson, "Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union,"
January 8, 1964, in Lyndon B. Johnson, *Public Papers of the President of the United
States 1963–64*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office,
1965), 1:112.

ered a national problem, why it required a coordinated program, why present efforts were insufficient or ill-conceived, and why the kinds of legislation suggested by the president fit together as a single program—instead of this, the president offered a metaphor, whose premise provided the answers. If we were at *war* with poverty, such an effort would require a national mobilization, coordination, extensive executive discretion, and the potential involvement of virtually any social program as vital to the war effort. Wars require these things. Under the Constitution, only Congress can "declare" an actual war, presumably after its need has been deliberated upon and publicly established. The president declared the War on Poverty, and as we shall see, the executive branch and Congress then proceeded as if the need and its rationale had been established.

Before Congress could act and the people enlist, the president had to draft the legislation. For a month and a half after the State of the Union message, the Budget Bureau, CEA, and White House staffs attempted to fashion a program of community action; but they faced the problem that, though there was private program experience with the strategy through several community action programs in Manhattan, New Haven, and elsewhere, the idea had only been seized upon by the president's men in late December under the pressure of a deadline for an "idea" for the State of the Union message. *"They did not know and had no time to find out exactly how community action was in fact working."*[39] Disputes then developed over whether to emphasize working through existing local agencies or creating new ones, whether to emphasize planning or programs, and whether to emphasize programs directed at youth, health, and education or programs directed to problems of "structural unemployment."[40]

Partly to provide a fresh opinion, partly to give a potential director of the program the opportunity to fashion it, partly to further capitalize upon the public attention given the emerging program, Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver as his assistant in charge of poverty programs and gave him the specific responsibility to draft the legisla

[39] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 140.
[40] Ibid., 142.

tion.[41] Once appointed, Shriver canvassed the executive departments again and contacted hundreds of community leaders for their suggestions (on stationery that was emblazoned "Task Force on the War on Poverty"). Many of the community leaders were contacted less for their ideas (for time did not permit reflection upon them) than for their support of the "war."

Shriver put together an extensive six-title legislative package in *six weeks*. Again, the primary conceptual constraints were not those of competing theories of social reform (although inevitably every program reflected such theories), nor was Shriver burdened by the need to resolve tensions between competing theories of executive organization (although such disputes arose). Rather, the primary problem was to fashion a program that fit Johnson's rhetoric while it adhered to his budget ceiling. Given the budget ceiling, one program, the community action idea, could not show enough significant "victories" to constitute a nation seriously at war, but it was thought that an effort with five or six visible programs might indeed appear to be a warlike effort.[42] Moreover, even if a community action program could be funded well, even massively, Johnson had pledged to coordinate all sorts of projects and actually named several in his message. As James Sundquist has stated, "The President and the Press had by this time built up expectations so vast that a one-idea, one-title bill [devoted to community action] would be a serious letdown. The very idea of a massive coordinated attack on poverty suggested mobilizing under that banner all or as many as possible of the weapons that would be used."[43]

The six-week effort produced a greatly expanded bill. The one-title bill now had six, and the Community Action Program was joined by some half dozen other major projects, some of which had been rejected previously by Congress, and others of which were under

[41] Bibby and Davidson, *On Capitol Hill*, 231.

[42] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 141.

[43] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 142; see Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, and J. David Greenstone and Paul Peterson, *Race and Authority in Urban Politics* (New York: Russell Sage, 1976).

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consideration as separate bills pending before the Congress. Among the added programs were: a "Job Corps" to provide training and remedial education to the unskilled urban poor; a Neighborhood Youth Corps; a college work-study program; and Adult Basic Education Program; a rural loan program; a small business loan program; and a "Domestic Peace Corps," which came to be known as VISTA.

The projects and priorities of the Community Action Program were left undefined, and the director of the proposed coordinating agency—the Office of Economic Opportunity—was given discretion to determine which proposals "give promise of progress toward the elimination of poverty through developing employment opportunities, improving human performance, motivation, and productivity, and bettering the conditions under which people live, learn and work." This title also stipulated that the program be administered "with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas." This condition became the subject of tremendous political controversy when the legislation was implemented, and of scholarly controversy after that.[44] The meaning of the phrase was not discussed either by Shriver's people or by congressmen during the "deliberation" on the program. Yet again, it must be noted that the phrase is not as controversial if, like the rest of the bill, it is understood in terms of the rhetorical campaign rather than in terms of the merits of the program. Johnson had called for assistance from all the citizenry in the war effort; wars require "maximum feasible participation."

The bill was accompanied by the President's Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty.[45] As is customary, the message was a written one and was formally addressed "to the Congress of the United States," not to the people at large. Yet the message was written as if it were a popular speech, designed to arouse a general disposition of support (like the State of the Union Message) rather than provide a careful defense of the proposals suggested. It could not draw upon a reasoned defense

[44] See Greenstone and Peterson, *Race and Authority*, and Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*.

[45] Johnson, *Public Papers, 1964–65*, 1:375–80.

for the proposals because as of then (March 16, 1964) there was no clear rationale developed in the executive branch apart from the president's previous rhetoric.

Johnson's message to Congress was written in a style and format that had been developed by speechwriters for popular addresses. That style, adopted by all presidents since Johnson, emphasizes short paragraphs (many a single sentence) to provide easy excerpts for the evening news, which itself is organized around thirty-second or one-minute segments.[46] The structure makes it more likely that the news will report a catchy phrase. Many of these speeches could be rearranged randomly by paragraph without much distortion of their meaning; they are generally not developed arguments.

Rather than provide a reasoned defense of the policies proffered, Johnson's message appears to have had two objectives: to further inspire the populace, and to announce the components of the legislative package in prose more acceptable than the legal form of the bill itself—in other words, to restate the bill. With respect to the first objective consider the following section of the message:

> The path forward has not been an easy one,
> But we have never lost sight of our goal: an America in which every citizen shares all the opportunities of his society, in which every man has a chance to advance his welfare to the limit of his capacities.
> We have come a long way toward this goal.
> We still have a long way to go.
> The distance that remains is the measure of the great unfinished work of our society.
> To finish that work I have called for a national war on poverty. Our objective: total victory.[47]

The message is written as if Johnson was appearing before a teleprompter, but again this was a written message to Congress. After stating the six basic titles of the bill, and indicating his intention to appoint Sargent Shriver as director of the proposed Office of Eco-

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[46] Reagan is a partial exception. Many of his speeches do not manifest this form, although some do. See the discussion of Reagan in Chapter 7 below.

[47] Johnson, *Public Papers, 1964–65*, 1:375–80.

nomic Opportunity ("my personal Chief of Staff for the War against
poverty"), Johnson asks for "immediate action on all these pro-
grams," and concludes with a thousand word development of the
war metaphor.

> What you are being asked to consider is not a simple or an easy pro-
> gram. But poverty is not a simple or easy enemy.
> It cannot be driven from the land by a single attack on a single front.
> Were this so we would have conquered poverty long ago.
> Nor can it be conquered by government alone. . . .
> . . . [This program] will also give us a chance to test our weapons,
> to try our energy and ideas and imagination for the many battles yet to
> come. As conditions change and as our experience illuminates our dif-
> ficulties, we will be prepared to modify our strategy. . . .
> On similar occasions in the past we have been called upon to wage
> war against foreign enemies which threatened our freedom. Today we
> are asked to declare war on a domestic enemy which threatens the
> strength of our nation and the welfare of the nation.[48]

With this message, Johnson launched a sophisticated publicity
campaign that included personal visits to poverty-stricken regions by
the Johnson family and appeals to political, social, and economic or-
ganizations to assist in spreading the message. "Help was asked of
everyone from the Daughters of the American Revolution to the So-
cialist Party. The United Auto Workers called for a 'Citizens' Drive
on Poverty'; the Urban League announced its own 'war on pov-
erty.'. . ."[49]

The public pressure was matched with shrewd parliamentary judg-
ment in presenting the bill to Congress. Johnson's bill was of the
"omnibus" variety, containing programs that individually had been
the proper province of four or five committees of each house. John-
son arranged for the House and Senate Labor Committees to each
create new ad hoc subcommittees for the poverty program. House
Labor Committee chairman Adam Clayton Powell chaired his own
subcommittee, which he named the "Subcommittee on the War on

[48] Ibid.
[49] Elinor Graham, "Poverty and the Legislative Process," in *Poverty as a Public Issue*, ed. Ben B. Seligman (New York: Free Press, 1965).

Poverty Program," thereby inscribing an acceptance of the rhetorical premise of the legislation in the formal purpose of the committee.

The committee began hearings the day after the Special Message with virtually no staff preparation. Those hearings (which were the main focus of the activity of both houses) lasted about a month, with fifty-six witnesses questioned favoring the bill, four of no opinion, and nine against. "The hearings were designed to advertise broad support for the poverty bill."[50] Shriver testified and was followed by seven cabinet secretaries, including the secretary of defense, called ostensibly because proposed Job Corps centers would be housed in surplus military facilities. Throughout these hearings and the very brief Senate hearings that followed (five witnesses, four "for" and one "against"), the questions dealt with material tangential to the basic merits of the program. "At no point did the Republicans attack the bill head on."[51] Efforts were made by Republicans to woo Southern Democrats away from supporting the bill by suggesting that the program would bypass governors, and race prejudice was appealed to by suggesting that the Job Corps centers would have to be integrated. But when fundamental questions regarding the rationale of the poverty program were raised, witnesses provided (and got away with only providing) answers deduced from the war metaphor rather than an articulation of the merits of particular proposals. For example, Congressman Frelinghuysen, the senior Republican member from New Jersey, questioned Secretary Celebreze of HEW:

> [Frelinghuysen:] What is the difference in emphasis between what your Department is responsible for [now] and what the new agency is responsible for? To my mind, this new agency [OEO] is another authority superimposed above the authority of your department with respect to [your Department's] responsibilities.

> [Celebreze:] First let me say that in working up the program there was close coordination between my Department and Sargent Shriver. As a matter of fact, part of my staff was in constant communication with him. . . . Most of our programs, eventually may affect the economic status of many individuals. But these programs, as they now exist, are

[50] Bibby and Davidson, *On Capitol Hill*, 238.
[51] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 145.

aimed at one specific project. They have their limitations. If we are sincere, if our attitude is that we must have a war on poverty, and that is the name used, the war on poverty, then it becomes evident that if we are going to make a concerted attack on all the many elements that go into the poverty program. . . . There ought to be unification under one head if we wanted to have a war on poverty.

If you are going to declare war, you have to have one general of the Army, you cannot have six generals.[52]

Much of the "deliberation" over the bill was of this character: OEO would be given authority to coordinate, because wars require central coordination, close to the president; Shriver would be given discretion to develop criteria for acceptance of community action programs because war requires discretion and flexibility to change strategies; rural farm loan programs and urban Head Start centers would be coordinated by the same chief of staff because the enemy is lurking everywhere and wears different guises. Frelinghuysen was one of a very few congressmen to note and complain of the dominance of the metaphor, but his complaints found no sympathetic hearers, so he too began to reason in terms of the war metaphor. As one Republican lamented during the floor debate, " 'War on Poverty' is a terrific slogan, particularly in an election year. It puts doubters under the suspicion of being in favor of poverty."[53] Moreover, it puts doubters under the suspicion of being unpatriotic, immoral, or both. Faced with this rhetorical problem, some Republicans mounted a rhetorical counteroffensive that further detracted from consideration of the program's merits. If Johnson's program could not be attacked because of its moral and patriotic premises, perhaps Johnson himself could be depicted as hypocritical or immoral in light of his own rhetoric.

Two Republican Congressmen . . . made a well publicized flying tour of Mrs. Lyndon Johnson's Alabama farm—which they described as a "pocket of poverty." They returned to display photographs of the six Negro sharecroppers and tenants living on the Johnson land, and to say

[52] Hearings, Subcommittee on War on Poverty, 88th Cong., 2nd Sess., Pt. I, pp. 138–39; see also p. 190.
[53] Representative Charles B. Hoovar of Iowa, *Congressional Record*, vol. 110 (August 6, 1964), p. 18315, quoted in Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 145.

that, "We saw people living in deplorable poverty, with little evidence of concern by their millionaire landlords."[54]

White House statements rebutted the charge, preventing it from capturing too much attention. While the White House could and did attempt to show that Johnson had been inaccurately characterized, they could not claim the tactic to be improper given the rhetorical war they had begun.

By late summer the bill had passed both Houses of Congress and was signed by the president with only a handful of insignificant amendments added by Congress. The victory was larger than expected in the House (226 to 185) and was as large as expected in the Senate (61 to 34). It was the first of the Great Society programs, and the political "clout" revealed by Lyndon Johnson helped pave the way for more domestic legislation. James Sundquist has written, "Whatever history may judge to have been its legislative merits, the political merits of the war on poverty in 1964 cannot be denied."[55] That is true only if one sees no important connection between the form political tactics take and the quality of the legislation that results. The same popular rhetoric that provided clout for victory substituted passionate appeal and argument by metaphor for deliberation. Johnson's tactic not only produced a hastily packaged program, his clear victory ensured that he and not Congress would be blamed if the program failed. And fail it did. As David Zarefsky shows in his perceptive study of the implementation of the Act, ". . . The very choices of symbolism and argument which had aided the adoption of the program were instrumental in undermining its implementation and in weakening public support for its basic philosophy."[56]

[54] Bibby and Davidson, *On Capitol Hill*, 242. A poor tenant of Mrs. Johnson's showed loyalty to his landlord by refusing an offer by these Congressmen to personally pay to fix his roof. *The New York Times*, May 29, 1964, p. 9.

[55] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, p. 145.

[56] David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1986), xii.