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Institute of the Americas

Escaping the Shadow: The Problems of Presidential Succession following a Transformational Predecessor.

Michael Byrne

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Declaration

I, Michael Byrne, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Harry S. Truman succeeded to the presidency on the death of his predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in April 1945. Roosevelt is credited with having established an innovative political regime, the New Deal, which lasted until Ronald Reagan's presidency saw the creation of the Neo-Liberal regime five decades later.

Succeeding such a transformational predecessor made it particularly difficult for Truman to establish his own identity as president. John Adams, Martin Van Buren and George H.W. Bush all faced the same problem in succeeding *their* transformational predecessors – George Washington, Andrew Jackson and Ronald Reagan. Of the four, only Truman was successful in his bid for re-election at the end of his first term, and only Truman is consistently rated by commentators as having emerged from under the shadow of his predecessor to become a consequential president in his own right.

In asking why Truman alone succeeded, this study suggests that his ability to generate *independent presidential authority* played a key role in establishing Truman's distinctive presidential identity. Adams, Van Buren and Bush, by contrast, were unable to establish independent authority during their own presidencies, with fatal consequences for their re-election bids and for most later evaluations of their performance in office.

Each of these four presidents is assessed in terms of the 'opening political capital' which he brought to the presidency, the key decisions which helped him to develop independent presidential authority over the next four years, and the 'closing' level of political capital which he held when seeking re-election at the end of his first term. It concludes that the manner in which each successor faced down (or failed to face down) opponents from within his *own* party who positioned themselves as 'more faithful followers' of the regime's transformational founder was critically important in developing independent presidential authority and allowing him to establish an identity clearly different from that of his predecessor.

Impact Statement

As we prepare for an American presidential election (2024) which is likely to have significant consequences for both the United States and the wider world, this thesis helps to develop a framework for understanding the second Biden-Trump contest within the context of more than two centuries of American presidential history.

Only once before has an ousted president returned for a second term in the White House, although former President Grover Cleveland's campaign of 1892 presented little of the apocalyptic potential of Donald Trump's 2024 challenge. Cleveland, the only Democrat to hold the presidency between 1861 and 1913, took office for a second time when he defeated sitting President Benjamin Harrison by 277 votes to 145 in the electoral college, having won 5.6 million popular votes to Harrison's 5.2 million.

Other than Cleveland, only three former presidents have contested a later election, with each standing for a party other than the one they had represented as president. As the anti-slavery Free Soil Party candidate in 1848, Martin Van Buren took 10% of the popular vote but failed to win any states or electoral college votes. Millard Fillmore was more successful in 1856 as the American Party ('Know Nothing') candidate, taking one state (Maryland) and eight electoral college votes after winning 21% of the popular vote. Running as the Progressive Party ('Bull Moose') candidate in 1912, Theodore Roosevelt finished second behind Democratic challenger Woodrow Wilson, pushing sitting President William Howard Taft into third place. Roosevelt took 27% of the popular vote and 88 electoral college votes that year, having carried six states.

The focus of the current study is slightly different as it considers three presidents whose *immediate* re-election bids failed and one whose bid succeeded. The three unsuccessful candidates – John Adams, Martin Van Buren and George H.W. Bush – join John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Harrison, William Howard Taft, Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Donald Trump in the 'Club of Ten' presidents who failed in their bids for immediate re-election. This study suggests key reasons why Adams, Van Buren and Bush all failed while Truman alone succeeded.

This year's election also presents an opportunity to test whether Stephen Skowronek's idea of cyclical 'political time' has finally lost traction. It may be that Trump will shatter not only Skowronek's thesis but also what remains of the GOP itself, if not the whole American republican experiment. Absent a dramatic development – the death of one or other candidate, perhaps, or possibly even a pre-election presidential resignation – it is impossible to predict whether Joe Biden will upset the odds as clearly as Harry Truman did in 1948. But the consequences of a Biden failure in 2024, with Trump promising to pardon the January 6 insurrectionists and push ahead with 'Project 2025', would be much more serious than a Truman failure in 1948 might have been.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1 – Transformational presidents and their successors

This study analyses the unique challenges faced by four presidents who came to office having previously served as vice president to a transformational predecessor of their own party. It reviews the experience of John Adams, Martin Van Buren, Harry S. Truman and George H. W. Bush, all of whom followed regime-changing predecessors (George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan) and suggests that, of the four, only Truman succeeded in emerging from under the shadow of his predecessor to become a consequential president in his own right.[1]

How Truman achieved this, and why each of the others fell short, is the issue to be addressed here. Succession problems relating to these and other 'heir apparent' presidents have been examined by a number of authors (for example Zinman, 2016), but this comparative study of four vice presidents who 'stepped-up' in the wake of a transformational predecessor proposes a new explanation to account for the success enjoyed by only one of those who came to office in this way.

Succession from the vice presidency

The American presidency is an extraordinarily difficult role for anyone to fill, but succeeding from the vice presidency presents additional problems for those who 'follow on'.[2] Prior service as vice president will have imposed significant constraints on a new president. During that time, he will have had to show unquestioning loyalty to a predecessor in whose

[1] Strictly speaking, John Adams belonged to the Federalist *group* rather than to a defined political *party* as we use the term today.

[2] Fifteen presidents, including the four men considered in this study, have succeeded to the senior role from the vice presidency. Thirteen succeeded directly, with Richard Nixon and Joe Biden following an intervening president from the other party. In the first forty years of the Republic, succession from the position of secretary of state was much more common than succession from the vice presidency.

administration he was nominally (although rarely in any real sense) the 'number two' officer, despite whatever private misgivings he may have had about that predecessor's performance (Witcover, 2014; Baumgartner, 2015).[3]

The longer the period of service as vice president (eight years for Adams and Bush, four for Van Buren, but a mere three months for Truman), the longer he will have had to maintain that silence. Then, on becoming president in his own right, each new chief executive faces the challenge of having to deal with the more problematic aspects of his predecessor's legacy without suggesting any disloyalty to the regime whose leadership he has now assumed. As against this, of course, extended service as vice president will have given the new incumbent some exposure, however cursory, to the inner workings of the executive branch. Truman's brief three months as vice president, with neither Roosevelt nor any administration official briefing him about matters of substance, meant that he lacked any practical understanding of the mechanics of 'being president' when he succeeded to the role in April 1945.

Succeeding twentieth-century transformational predecessors

The problems facing former vice presidents who assume the presidency following 'transformational' predecessors are even more formidable. How to define a president as 'transformational' will be considered in more detail below, but it is suggested that four presidents since 1900 have followed predecessors who might have met that description: William Howard Taft (1909, following Theodore Roosevelt), Harry S. Truman (1945, following Franklin D. Roosevelt), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963, following John F. Kennedy), and George H. W. Bush (1989, following Ronald Reagan).

Taft and Johnson are excluded from this study because to be truly 'transformational' a predecessor needs not only to have brought new energy and vigour to the role, which Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy certainly did, but must also have ushered in a new political 'regime' (to use Stephen Skowronek's term), or a new political 'order' (using Gary Gerstle's term), which repudiated that of his predecessor and created a firm expectation that

[3] The United States has not yet had a woman president. The masculine pronoun is used in this study only for reasons of historical reference.

those who followed would also adhere to the key principles of that new order (Skowronek, 1997; Gerstle, 2022). While both FDR and Reagan did indeed create new regimes of this kind, neither Theodore Roosevelt nor Kennedy completely changed the political direction of their times, despite whatever new personal styles or approaches they brought to the role. Hence the inclusion of Truman and Bush as twentieth-century subjects of this study and the exclusion of Taft and Johnson.

Both of the twentieth-century presidents considered here, Truman and Bush, faced the problem of crafting a presidential identity that could position them as more than just faithful adherents to the regimes created by their predecessors. The 'true believers' within the Roosevelt and Reagan regimes saw both men as little more than pale and inadequate imitations of the founder. Each was blamed for failing to maintain the momentum of the new regime or, even worse, for betraying its core principles. It will be a key claim of this study that their success (Truman) or failure (Bush) owed much to the contrasting ways in which they dealt with senior figures from within their own parties who positioned themselves as 'more faithful followers' of their predecessors.

Succession in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The presidential politics of the pre-1900 period differed significantly from that of the following century. Only in the last hundred years has the presidency assumed such a dominant role in relation to the other centres of power within the American political system. Nonetheless, there were also transformational or regime-changing presidents in that earlier era, including (it is suggested) George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln.

John Adams succeeded Washington in 1797 and Martin Van Buren followed Jackson after the 1836 election: both clearly qualify for consideration here as successors to regime-changing predecessors. James Madison followed Jefferson in 1809 but had served as secretary of state rather than vice president. Andrew Johnson *was* vice president when he succeeded Lincoln in 1865, but his Democratic Party affiliation did not match that of his Republican predecessor

(despite both having temporarily run as candidates of the 'National Union Party' in the 1864 election). Both Madison and Andrew Johnson have therefore been excluded from this study.

Although he succeeded a transformational president, John Adams is in fact a special case in a number of ways. George Washington is rightly credited with having *invented* the presidency because, as the first person elected to the position, he had to decide how the brief account of the responsibilities of the office set out in the Constitution should be implemented in practice (Cronin, 1989; Greenstein, 2009b). Adams inherited the approach to 'being president' established by Washington, but he also had to consider carefully how the first presidential succession should be managed as he replaced the first outgoing president. If Washington invented the presidency, Adams invented the 'follow-on' presidency.

Adams was also unique as the first example of a 'last president' within a (short-lived) political regime. Succeeded by Thomas Jefferson, whose Democratic-Republican grouping was to dominate the political system for the next two decades and more, Adams was both the second and also the last Federalist to serve as president. It therefore also fell to him to 'invent' how presidential transitions between different party groupings should be managed, at least from the side of the outgoing chief executive. Those special circumstances make Adams something of an atypical subject for this study, but he did face many of the same follow-on challenges as those who later found themselves in the same position. Adams's experience is considered in chapter 3 in parallel with that of Van Buren, who took office after the early precedents had bedded down and a more recognisably party-based system had emerged, and Bush, who succeeded to a very different office in very different times.

What remained of the original Jeffersonian regime was displaced by Andrew Jackson in 1829, although the new Jacksonian 'Democracy' built on some – but by no means all – of Jefferson's political principles. The challenges facing *its* first successor president, Martin Van Buren, bore some resemblance to those John Adams had dealt with, and were also remarkably similar to those faced by Truman when he became president over a century later. Roosevelt's successor, it will be argued, had much to learn from Van Buren's experience in succeeding an outstanding and transformational predecessor, and he duly learned those lessons. Bush had just as much to learn from Truman's experience but he failed to do so.

2 - Two key concepts: 'independent presidential authority' and 'political capital'

Independent presidential authority

Two key concepts – 'independent presidential authority' and 'political capital' – are used in this study to contrast Truman's success with the relative failures of Adams, Van Buren and Bush. Both serve as informal but practical instruments to track the course of these four presidencies and compare each incumbent's achievements and shortcomings against those of the other three.

How is presidential *authority* related to presidential *power*? It may be helpful to focus first on the nature of 'power' before considering 'authority'. Although the term has been used very differently by a wide range of scholars, the working definition of power used in this study refers to a decision-maker's ability to act without significant constraint in ways that have compelling consequences for those affected by the actions he takes. At the presidential level, decisions to invade another country, bomb an adversary, or issue an executive order are obvious examples of the exercise of executive power.

How does this broad definition of power compare with political scientist Robert A. Dahl's proposal that "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, 202-3)? One way of contrasting these two definitions of power – the broad one used in this study and Dahl's more specific one – might be to differentiate between two types of power, 'unconstrained' and 'collaborative'. Under this model, *institutional* or 'unconstrained' presidential power is quite different from the kind of *interpersonal* or 'collaborative' power on which (it is suggested) Dahl's definition is focused.

Whenever a president has the constitutional and legal standing to take executive action, as well as the resources needed to take that action even if other political actors disagree with his proposed course of conduct, it can be said that the president possesses 'unconstrained' power. He does not require the concurrence of others to act in this way.

If, however, a president has legal and institutional standing to act but (1) other political actors disagree with his proposed course of action and (2) their concurrence is required (constitutionally, legally, by established precedent, or purely as a matter of political calculation) before he can act, it will then be necessary for him to persuade those other actors to agree with his proposed course of action. Here a president's power is of the 'collaborative' variety because it requires him to *persuade* those others to 'do something that B would not otherwise do' (using Dahl's definition).

Unconstrained power is both *explicit*, in the sense that all parties agree that a president has constitutional, legal or precedential warrant to exercise it, and *unilateral*, in that no concurrence by others is required before he can act. By contrast, collaborative power is more *opaque* (because the president's warrant to act is less clear-cut) and also *multilateral* (because his power cannot be exercised unless he uses his skills to 'convince' opponents to agree with his proposed course of action). Dahl's focus on collaborative power matches that adopted by Richard Neustadt in his famous study of *Presidential Power* (1990), which is considered in more detail below. But the broader definition of 'power' used in this study embraces *both* unconstrained and collaborative power.

Any exercise of unconstrained power by a president will gain him a certain amount of authority among his political peers and the wider public. A decision has been taken to act, and any decision earns a degree of authority for the decision-maker, at least in the short term. If the decision subsequently proves to have been ill-judged, however, any gain in presidential authority is likely to reverse, and the reversal may be catastrophic if the decision was particularly unwise.

Whenever a president exercises collaborative power, however, he will have had to 'persuade' (in the broadest sense of that term) other political actors, who may initially have resisted his proposed course of action, to 'come with him' in his decision. Having given the president their concurrence, those other actors will also have conferred on him a significant degree of authority, much more than the authority that accrues following a presidential exercise of unconstrained power. In both cases a president exercises power, but only in the latter case does he display significant levels of authority.

Two examples may help to illustrate this further. President Nixon certainly had the 'unconstrained' power to bomb Cambodia in 1969, but his decision to do so secretly, without ever attempting to obtain 'collaborative' congressional concurrence in support of that action, meant that his actions never enjoyed any enduring authority as defined here. Quite the opposite, in fact.[4] By contrast, President Truman's decision to appeal to Congress in breaking the national railroad strike of 1946 (considered in more detail below) meant that Truman's exercise of power at that time was collaborative, and his presidential authority grew accordingly.

How does presidential power relate to presidential authority? The long interval between George Washington and Joe Biden saw presidential power increase across almost every administration, modestly during the nineteenth century, then with obvious acceleration in the first thirty years on the twentieth century, before seeing an inflationary boom in the four decades separating FDR and Reagan. But the ability to display presidential *authority* has varied far less predictably from president to president. Presidents in the modern era of enormous presidential power have sometimes lacked authority (Ford, Carter and Trump, for example), while earlier presidents, who held office when presidential power was less consequential, have often displayed significant authority (Jackson and Lincoln). The two concepts are not tightly correlated.

Where does presidential power 'come from'? The basic powers of the executive are outlined in Article II of the Constitution, but the brief account set out there has been vastly extended since 1789 by presidents appropriating powers which had previously been congressional prerogatives, or claiming additional powers to deal with new circumstances which the Founders could never have imagined (Fisher, 2014). The general trend in institutional presidential power since 1789 has been very strongly upwards, and congressional attempts to recover power from the executive after, for example, the Civil War and the Watergate

[4] Nixon's later claim for sweeping presidential power ("when the President does it, that means it's not illegal") has also been widely repudiated (Frost, 1978, 241).

crisis, rarely proved to be more than temporary corrections which were quickly reversed by the executive.[5]

Where does presidential authority 'come from'? The answer here is less clear, and authority is much more variable across incumbents than presidential power is. A strong election victory certainly creates an opening stock of personal authority, at least in the winner's early days as president. Every new incumbent also hopes that if his predecessor enjoyed strong presidential authority, his successor can benefit from that momentum and carry it forward.[6] Inherited authority often proves to be chimerical, however. The office to which Adams, Van Buren, Truman and Bush succeeded carried a strong residual sense of the personal authority created by their predecessors during their eight (or in Roosevelt's case, twelve) years as president. But that inherited authority was so closely bound up with the character, personality and presentational style of the former president that it was bound to disperse rapidly after his departure. The urgent need to be seen as his 'own man' – to establish his own executive identity – was therefore a key priority facing each newcomer as soon as his administration took office, and that required the early creation and display of his own presidential authority.

As this study will show, the ability of a successor to develop this *independent* presidential authority is key. Unless he quickly creates his *own* political authority, a successor can rarely break free from the legacy constraints within which he operates and risks being written-off as a pale imitation of the man he succeeded. A key proposal advanced here is that Truman –

[5] The literature on the origin and nature of specifically presidential power is vast. It is not reviewed here, given this study's particular focus on four individual presidents rather than the whole sweep of the institution's history. Milkis and Nelson (2020) have provided an overview of the history of the presidency, and others have reviewed and reinterpreted that history from differing perspectives (for example Cronin (1989); Corwin (1957); Gormley (2016); and Tatalovich and Schier (2014)). Significant tension exists between those who see valid presidential power as arising from, and only from, the provisions of the Constitution (McConnell, 2020; Bailey, 2019; Heclo, 2009; and Knott, 2019) and those who also locate it, for better or worse, in presidential behaviour, ranging from the rhetorical (Tulis, 2014) to the imperial (Schlesinger, 1973), the new imperial (Rudelavige, 2006), the plebiscitary (Lowi, 1985), the impossible (Suri, 2107), and the unitary (Dodds, 2020). Theodore Lowi's warning of forty years ago that the emerging cult of personality in the White House would find its ultimate expression in an incumbent who operated on the principle of 'L'État, c'est moi' would prove wholly accurate (Lowi, 1985, 174).

[6] The power inherited by a president of either party is considerable, irrespective of the respective political allegiances of predecessor and successor, but inherited authority only transfers from a predecessor to a successor of the *same* party. The inherited authority 'dial' returns to zero when a president from one party succeeds a predecessor from the other.

and Truman alone – managed to maintain the essentials of his predecessor's legacy whilst also re-shaping that legacy to face the very different domestic and international circumstances in which FDR's successor found himself holding office. This helped to endow Truman with a sense of independent presidential authority which the other three men largely failed to develop.

A key feature of any kind of authority – that it is *displayed* whereas power is *exercised* – is particularly relevant to the four presidents considered here, because authority can rarely be displayed in the abstract: it needs to be demonstrated *against* something or, more usually, against some*one* who actively resists. Although he inherited the full power of the presidency on April 12, 1945, Truman came to office with little or no independent presidential authority and was held in contempt by many of Roosevelt's associates. But over the next four years Truman developed remarkable personal authority by taking firm action against both internal and external opponents of his administration.

His resistance to Russian expansionism, and his ability to persuade both Democratic (1945-46) and Republican (1947-48) Congresses to give him the means to enforce that resistance, significantly enhanced Truman's independent presidential authority in foreign affairs. At home, his early ousting of almost every member of FDR's last Cabinet (despite his many pledges of continuity with Roosevelt), his robust action during the nationwide railroad strike of 1946, and his dealings with the GOP-dominated 80th Congress in 1947-48, all further enhanced the sense of independent presidential authority that accrued to him across his first term, despite many setbacks and periods when the general public viewed him with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.[7] It will be suggested in chapter 4, however, that it was Truman's determination to face down and deal with the challenges posed by key same-party opponents, including Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, and conservative Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, that confirmed his clear accumulation of independent presidential authority in ways that Adams, Van Buren and Bush all failed to achieve.

[7] Truman's decision to change his Cabinet involved the exercise of *both* kinds of presidential power (as defined here). His ousting of existing office-holders was an exercise of unconstrained power, while the power to appoint their successors, which required Senate consent to his nominations, was exercised collaboratively.

Political capital

The second concept employed in this study, 'political capital', is more intuitive and requires less explanation. Every new president brings to office a series of personal assets and liabilities which, taken together, constitute his 'opening political capital'. The elements of that capital, the specific assets and liabilities each man brings to the presidency, include his personality, the circumstances in which he comes to office, public perception of his leadership skills, and his standing in relation to Congress. For the four men studied here, a key component of their opening political capital also includes their standing with the regime whose leadership they have now assumed, as well as the general perception of 'how they compare' to their transformational predecessor.

In assessing Adams, Van Buren, Truman and Bush in the following chapters, the specific factors which comprise their opening political capital will be identified, and each incoming president will be assessed in relation to those factors. The same exercise will be carried out at the end of each man's presidency using slightly different criteria. It will be seen that the change in each president's political capital across his presidency shows a correlation with the extent to which he developed independent presidential authority during that time. His re-election prospects at the end of his first term will also be seen to correlate with his closing level of political capital after four years in office.[8]

3 – Stephen Skowronek and Richard Neustadt

Skowronek's 'political time'

One factor which might influence why any president starts his administration with an elevated or suppressed level of political capital has been suggested by Stephen Skowronek, who argues that all presidents, however personally talented, are constrained by their position in what he terms 'political time' (Skowronek, 1997). Unlike narrative time, which proceeds *linearly*, political time proceeds in a regular *cyclical* way, bringing presidents long separated in

[8] 'Correlated with' does not necessarily mean 'caused by'. The causal factors that may explain a president's re-election success or failure range beyond the brief treatment provided here.

narrative time (Van Buren and Truman, for example) much closer together – and therefore more directly comparable – when viewed from within the perspective of political time. Those 'transformational' presidents who come to office at closely adjacent points in political time, when once-dominant regimes have now degenerated, find themselves with the opportunity to establish a new regime and forge a powerful new role for the presidency within that regime.[9] Some caveats about this claim are offered later in this section, and other critics' observations are also reviewed in the following chapter, but it is important to understand the broad outline of Skowronek's case, as the interpretive model he proposed remains valuable and of specific relevance to this study.

According to Skowronek, transformational presidents like Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR and Reagan see (and grasp) the opportunity presented by their common position within political time which allows them to 're-order the political landscape', calling an end to the old order and creating a new replacement regime. These transformational presidents are followed (except in Lincoln's case, when special conditions prevailed) by successors from within their own party who find themselves affiliated to what is now a newly dominant regime. Those successors are compelled to practice the politics of 'orthodox innovation' where they "try to fit the existing parts of the regime together in a new and more relevant way" (Skowronek, 1997, 41).[10]

As linear time progresses and the once-new regime begins to decline, 'wild card' presidents emerge from within the opposition party. By challenging the regime, those presidents practice the 'politics of pre-emption' in which they "[probe] for reconstructive possibilities without clear warrant for breaking cleanly with the past" (Skowronek, 1997, 44). Skowronek lists John Tyler, Woodrow Wilson and Richard Nixon among such pre-emptive presidents. It

[9] As noted earlier, Gary Gerstle prefers to speak of the 'orders' rather than the 'regimes' over which both Roosevelt and Reagan presided because "the concept of political order … broadens our conception of political time and asks us to consider intervals that stretch beyond the election cycles" (Gerstle, 2022, 15). Gerstle's focus is also much less uniquely president-centred than Skowronek's, avoiding the pitfall of what Thomas Cochrane has termed the 'presidential synthesis' (Cochrane, 1948).

[10] This study deals with four 'first generation' orthodox-innovators. Regimes also typically display 'second generation' orthodox-innovators, presidents who come later in the cycle and attempt to reinvigorate a now-ageing regime. If Van Buren was the first-generation successor in the Jackson cycle, James K. Polk was its second-generation successor. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were second-generation successors to FDR, and George W. Bush came similarly late in Reagan's regime, his father George H. W. Bush having served as that regime's 'first generation' orthodox innovator.

should be pointed out, however, that Gary Gerstle has suggested that the first pre-emptive presidents of the FDR and Reagan regimes, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Bill Clinton respectively, not only failed to challenge those regimes but actually affirmed the continuing vitality of the other-party regimes to which they were notionally opposed (Gerstle, 2022). Raymond Tatalovich and Steven E. Schier have made the same point in considering the 'paradigms of presidential power', as has David Crockett in his study of how 'opposition presidents' position themselves to win the White House (Tatalovich and Schier, 2014; Crockett, 2008).

A final point in Skowronek's cycle of political time is reached when resilient regimes have lost their transformative energy and become critically vulnerable to opposition attack. Presidents at this point in political time, still affiliated to the now-decaying regime, find themselves forced to practice the 'politics of disjunction', struggling both to maintain and also to reform the regime as its institutional supports become weaker. Typical 'late regime affiliate' presidents include John Quincy Adams (at the end of the Jeffersonian regime), Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan (the last Jacksonians), Herbert Hoover (following, at some distance, Abraham Lincoln), and Jimmy Carter (the last president of FDR's New Deal regime).

'Political time' is obviously a highly abstract concept, and Skowronek has never suggested that a president's success is wholly determined by his position within the cycle. What he *did* suggest, however, and what this study accepts, is that these outline cyclical patterns are, in fact, clearly observable. The 'paths' from FDR to Carter, and from Reagan to Trump, via a series of orthodox-innovators and pre-emptors, clearly follow the trend that Skowronek identified, and the nineteenth century 'path' from Jackson to Buchanan also traced out the same curve. The path from Washington to Adams was too short to suggest any general conclusion; that from Jefferson to John Quincy Adams was an abbreviated version of the 'standard model; while that from Lincoln to Hoover was an extended version.

It is not intended to suggest that the constraints imposed on a president by his position within political time will always be more determinative of his success or failure than the political, economic, military and other circumstances while prevail during his time in office. This study makes a smaller claim: that Skowronek's 'political time' is a valuable concept, and that it clearly resonates in the case of the four presidents considered here. Adams, Van Buren,

Truman and Bush all came to office just after a new regime had been established by a transformational predecessor, and each faced the challenge of creating his own identity within that context. Recognising that both he and Truman occupied the same moment in political time, Bush wanted to adopt the same 'leader-as-faithful-son' positioning that Truman had adopted, allowing him to repeat Truman's "come-from-behind vindication of the regime-founder's commitments and priorities" (Skowronek, 1987, 429).[11] A century and a half earlier, Andrew Jackson left office "just as the new order was taking on a political life of its own", leaving Martin Van Buren with the unenviable task of having to "scuttle [Jackson's] failed experiment …. while affirming his basic course" (Skowronek, 1997, 154).

While Skowronek's model offers a helpful point of reference for the four presidents studied here, it is important to say that 'confirming Skowronek' is not the intention of this study. His model is helpful but it is not the 'last word' about the presidency, and this study does not set out to suggest, still less to prove, that it is.[12] A number of objections have been raised against it, some of which are considered in chapter 2, which sets out the key sources used in this study.

The same can be said about a second approach which also provides a useful 'bookend' for this review – Richard Neustadt's proposal that personal action by a president can overcome many of the obstacles he faces during his time in office. Skowronek's 'positioning' model is a helpful point of reference here, as is Neustadt's 'power to persuade' model (outlined below). Their usefulness in helping to construct a comparative analysis of Adams, Van Buren, Truman and Bush will become apparent, but nothing in what follows should be taken as suggesting that Skowronek and Neustadt offer the only – or even the most authoritative – approaches to understanding presidential performance.

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[11] It can be argued that Skowronek's assessment is perhaps not wholly accurate here. As will become clear in chapter 4, Truman achieved his own presidential success only when he was able to *stop* positioning himself as little more than 'Roosevelt's legatee' after the setback of the 1946 mid-term elections.

[12] It should be noted, however, that two prominent commentators have described it as "the most ambitious historicist interpretation" of presidential power (Tatalovich and Schier, 2014, 226); and David Crockett has said, "I accept as a given Skowronek's breakdown of political history" (Crockett, 2008, 8).

Richard Neustadt's 'power to persuade'

The nature of presidential authority was analysed by Richard Neustadt in the late 1950s and subsequently extended across the six presidencies that followed Eisenhower. The focus of Neustadt's analysis was simply stated: "personal power and its politics: what it is, how to get it, how to keep it, how to lose it", and he then famously defined the key to any president's effectiveness as "the power to persuade" (Neustadt, 1990, xx and 11).[13] If Skowronek sees the performance of presidents as constrained by their position within political time, Neustadt suggests that *any* president with strong personal and persuasive skills has the ability to prevail and flourish irrespective of when he comes to office.

Neustadt notes that because the Constitution established a Madisonian arrangement of "separated institutions *sharing* powers", a president needs to act with care at all times because "to share is to limit" (Neustadt, 1990, xvii and ix). To paraphrase the central claim of Neustadt's work, decisions on how to husband presidential power, when to hoard it, when to spend it, and when *not* to spend it, are key judgements because power, once expended, rarely replenishes. In every instance of presidential failure itemised by Neustadt, "the Presidents did not think hard enough, carefully enough, beforehand, about foreseeable, even likely consequences to their own effectiveness in office" (Neustadt, 1990, xviii). It is in fact much better (Neustadt suggests) to use presidential power cunningly, to give the *appearance* of using it without actually doing so: "[the] essence of a President's persuasive task, with congressmen and everybody else, is to induce them to believe that what he wants of them is what their own appraisal of their own responsibilities requires them to do in their interest, not his" (Neustadt, 1990, 40).

Neustadt's approach is a significant departure from the view articulated by authors who hold that presidential power derives entirely from the law and the Constitution (for example Cronin, 1989). As two other commentators have noted more pointedly, Neustadt's focus on

[13] Harry Truman offered the best down-to-earth paraphrase of Neustadt's 'power to persuade' when he wrote to his mother and sister in November 1947: "Well, all the President is, is a glorified public relations man who spends his time flattering, kissing and kicking people to get them to do what they are supposed to be doing anyway" (HSTL, Truman to Martha Ellen Truman and Mary Jane Truman, November 14, 1947).

actual political behaviour rather than formal rules and procedures amounts to a "[rejection of] the Constitution as the most important source for understanding the actual exercise of presidential power" (Bessette and Tulis, 1981, 5). Louis Fisher went much further, charging that Neustadt "spent decades systematically ignoring constitutional limits" (Fisher, 2009, 808), and George C. Edwards, in reviewing how presidents shape political change, concluded forcefully that "[presidential] power is *not* the power to persuade" (Edwards, 2009, 834).[14] Again, this study does not seek to defend Neustadt against all these charges. As with Skowronek, his ideas will prove helpful in tracing the comparative performance of the four presidents studied here, and particularly their efforts to use their own personal and political skills to escape the constraints in which Skowronek's political time might have trapped them.

4 - The approach of this study

The following chapter outlines the key sources used to review the four presidents considered here. Instead of offering a detailed review of the whole range of available literature, chapter 2 focuses on the most important secondary sources that cast light on the emergence of each president's independent authority and the growth or decline of his political capital.

Chapter 3 analyses the success (or otherwise) enjoyed by each of Adams, Van Buren and Bush in developing their own presidential identities. This comparative and thematic analysis of the three who 'fell short' opens with an account of the political capital each held as he entered the White House (a function of personality, early life, prior political experience, and standing in relation to his predecessor and the existing political regime). It then considers how each developed or (largely) failed to develop enough independent presidential authority to end his presidency with a higher stock of political capital as he faced into re-election.

Key aspects of Truman's presidency are considered at greater length in chapter 4, because he alone found a way of emerging from under the shadow cast by his extraordinary predecessor.

[14] Edwards is sceptical about presidential leadership generally, not just about presidents' power to persuade. He sees them, not as *directors* but as *facilitators* of change, concluding that "the essential presidential leadership skills are recognising and exploiting opportunities [i.e. facilitators] rather than changing the minds of voters or legislators to create opportunities for change [i.e. persuaders]" (Edwards, 2009, 834).

A period of research at the Harry S. Truman Library and Archives in Independence, Missouri, allowed access to original records relating to key episodes in which Truman displayed significant independent presidential authority. Archival records were reviewed in relation to the national railroad strike of 1946, Truman's management of key party colleagues and competitors Henry A. Wallace and James F. Byrnes, and his dealings with the Republican-controlled 80th Congress, which came to power following the GOP's sweeping victory at the 1946 mid-terms. Primary records relating to all three episodes were examined through the papers and unpublished diary of Truman's press secretary, Charles G. Ross, and the papers and part-published diary of his deputy press secretary, Eben Ayers. Both sets of records were then used as the starting-point for a wider investigation of the archival material.

Truman's opening political capital was much lower than that of any of the other three presidents. Yet, despite this impediment, his closing political capital was significantly higher than that of the others. His greater success in developing independent presidential authority during his term is (it is suggested) the key factor explaining that difference. A healthy stock of closing political capital provided a strong base for Truman to launch the re-election campaign which, against the expectations of almost every political commentator, saw him returned to the White House for a second term in 1949.

Chapter 2

Key Sources

The bibliography sets out a comprehensive list of sources used to analyse the comparative presidential performance of Adams, Van Buren, Truman and Bush. Given the broad scope of this review, it would have required more space than is available to consider the full range of materials that deal with each man, and more again to analyse the development of the presidency as an institution across the two centuries separating Adams from Bush. In deciding which sources to consider in more detail here, this chapter focuses on a subset of key works which address how each man developed (or failed to develop) his own independent presidential authority, particularly as he faced challenges from same-party opponents who positioned themselves as 'more faithful followers' of the regimes with which their predecessors had been so closely associated. The bibliography lists these sources, along with a select set of primary materials from which further context has been drawn.

Although chapter 3 provides a comparative analysis of Adams, Van Buren and Bush before Truman's experience is reviewed separately in chapter 4, the relevant literature about each of the four men is considered *chronologically* in this chapter, with all four considered sequentially. Each section within this chapter therefore examines the relevant literature beginning with Adams, then Van Buren, then Truman, and finally Bush, rather than segregating Truman into a separate section.

To provide a high-level context for the review, key biographies and summary assessments of each president are identified in section 1 of this chapter. Those sources are not critically assessed here, but the broad themes which they identify will recur in chapters 3 and 4 dealing with each president's time in office. Key accounts of the election campaigns which saw them gaining and then losing (or in Truman's case, retaining) the presidency are then set out in section 2. The accounts provided by those sources will be considered in more detail in the relevant 'election' sections of chapters 3 and 4, which focus on how the election that brought him to office helped each president to begin his administration possessing a stock of 'opening

political capital', with the change in that capital over the next four years having important consequences for his subsequent re-election prospects.[15]

Section 3 then reviews key sources that focus on the main theme of this study – how each president moved to develop his own independent authority across his term in office, paying particular attention to sources that consider how he dealt with, or failed to deal with, internal party opponents. Finally, given the importance of the 'political time' and 'power to persuade' models offered by Stephen Skowronek and Richard Neustadt (as introduced in the previous chapter), some critical reviews of their ideas are outlined in section 4.

1 – Key biographies and presidential assessments

John Adams has been well served by two modern biographers, John Ferling and David McCullough (Ferling, 1992; McCullough, 2011). John Patrick Diggins's shorter biography focuses on Adams's political philosophy, and a close account of the four years of Adams's presidency has been provided by Ralph Adams Brown (Diggins, 2003; Brown, 1975). His career is located within the broader context of his times in various works by Gordon S. Wood and Jospeh J. Ellis (Wood, 2009; Ellis, 1993); and Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein have provided a joint political biography of Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, which links the age of Adams through to the age of Van Buren (Isenberg and Burstein, 2019).

The material on Adams's pre- presidency is extensive but has not been reviewed in detail here as it relates only indirectly to his experience as president. By contrast, the material on Van Buren's pre-presidency *has* been considered in more detail (see below) because his interaction with Andrew Jackson was much more extensive than Adams's had been with George Washington, and much more consequential for Van Buren's own presidential term.[16]

[15] Truman came to office as an unelected president. As will be discussed in chapter 4, his opening political capital was much less than that of the other three men, mainly for this reason.

[16] Extensive material is also available on Adams's *post*-presidency (in retirement, exchanging extensive correspondence with his successor Thomas Jefferson) and on Van Buren's post-presidency (in which he attempted unsuccessfully to win his own party's nomination in 1844 and ran for another party in 1848). These materials remain outside the scope of this study.

Martin Van Buren has also had two meticulous modern biographers – John Niven and Donald B. Cole (Niven, 1983; Cole, 1984). Niven also wrote a biography of Van Buren's close rival, John C. Calhoun (Niven, 1988), and Cole wrote both an account of Andrew Jackson's presidency, in which he paid close attention to Van Buren's role, and an analysis of the 1828 presidential election which brought Jackson to power, and in which Van Buren played a key role (Cole, 1993, 2009). An earlier biographer admired Van Buren as the 'American Tallyrand' (Holmes, 1935), while two later scholars have provided shorter and more critical biographies (Curtis, 1970; Silbey, 2002). Major L. Wilson has produced a substantial account of Van Buren's presidency (Wilson, 1984), while Ted Widmer has written an engaging shorter account of his single term in office (Widmer, 2005).

Harry Truman is the only president studied here to have written his own account of his time as president (Truman, 1955, 1956). (Martin Van Buren *did* write an autobiography, but it stopped short of his time in the White House (Van Buren, 1920)). Truman's two volumes of memoirs provide a detailed account of his presidency, although all of his biographers have noted Truman's tendency to record events as he might have *wished* them to have happened rather than as they actually did. A recent edited version of his memoirs removes less relevant detail and provides a useful commentary on some of the excessive colouring in Truman's own account (Geselbracht, 2019). These edited memoirs nonetheless continue to carry Truman's own voice, complementing the oral history published by Merle Miller shortly after the former president's death in 1972 (Miller, 1974).

Alonzo Hamby and David McCullough have provided extensive modern biographies of Truman (Hamby, 1995; McCullough, 1992). Former FDR press secretary Jonathan Daniels wrote the first comprehensive Truman biography while his subject was still in the White House (Daniels, 1950), and another early account of his presidency was provided by Robert J. Donovan in a two-volume study (Donovan, 1977 and 1982). Shorter accounts have been produced by Robert Dallek and Roy Jenkins, and most recently – and engagingly – by Jeffrey Frank (Dallek, 2008; Jenkins, 1986; Frank, 2022). Truman's presidency has been analysed in some detail by Donald R. McCoy (McCoy, 1984) and in two multi-author thematic reviews (Lacey, 1989; Margolies, 2012).

Only one major study to date has provided a thematic review of George Bush's presidency (Nelson and Perry, 2014), although there are a number of biographies which consider the main issues that he faced across his public career (Parmet, 2002; Greene, 2015; Meacham 2015). An obviously partisan defense of the Bush administration was written by Bush's first chief of staff (Sununu, 2015), and an anecdotal account of working with Bush in his first two years as vice president was supplied by another former aide (Untermeyer, 2013). Insightful glimpses of Bush as vice president and president also emerge from the memoirs of one of the speechwriters he briefly inherited from his predecessor (Noonan, 2010). Like most campaign literature, Bush's own pre-presidential autobiography casts little reliable light on his personality or policy commitments (Bush and Gold, 1987). His own subsequent analysis of international developments during his four-years as president, co-written with former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, is a much more thorough account of his key foreign policy achievements (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998).

2 – Election campaigns

The first presidential contest between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (in 1796) has been reviewed by Jeffrey L. Pasley in his volume in the University Press of Kansas's series on 'American Presidential Elections' (Pasley, 2013). Four years later, the relationship between Adams and Jefferson, already tense, reached a point of political explosion in the 1800 campaign (Larson, 2007). Adams's biographer John Ferling has also provided an account of that 'tumultuous election' (Ferling, 2004), and Pasley, having written about the 1796 election in detail, has also contributed an account of the 1800 election in a later essay (Pasley, 2015). All these accounts provide important context for analysing why Adams lost the presidency that year – as discussed in chapter 3 below.

Four works in the same University Press of Kansas ('UPK') series focus on the 1824, 1828, 1840 and 1848 campaigns, in each of which Martin Van Buren played a key role (Ratcliffe, 2015; Cole, 2009; Ellis 2020; Silbey, 2009).[17] The Democratic Party's success in generating electoral support in 1836 for the relatively uncharismatic Van Buren in succession to the often volcanic

[17] There are as yet no volumes in the UPK series for the elections of 1832 and 1836.

Jackson has been analysed persuasively as the 'routinisation of charisma' (Brown, 1991). The 'log cabin' campaign of 1840, which saw Van Buren ejected from office, has been reviewed by a number of authors (including Gunderson, 1957, and Wilentz, 2015).

As will be discussed in some detail in chapter 4, strategy for the 1948 election was developed in a key planning memorandum prepared by Clark Clifford and James Rowe at the White House the previous year. Given that this election confirmed Harry S. Truman's status as the only successful 'follow-on' president among the four men considered here, that 'Clifford-Rowe memorandum' and the subsequent campaign are analysed in some detail using accounts provided by a number of authors (Busch, 2014, in the UPK elections series; Clifford and Rowe, 1947; Clifford and Holbrooke 1991; Dione, 1991; Donaldson, 1993; Pietruza, 2011; and Baime, 2020). Former vice president Henry A. Wallace contested the 1948 election for his own left-wing Progressive Party, and Truman faced a second threat from the another wing of the Democratic Party in the candidacy of segregationist South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond. Both challengers have been the subject of comprehensive biographies, an admiring one in Wallace's case, an unflattering one in Thurmond's (Culver and Hyde, 2000; Crespino, 2012). Truman's success in dealing with both these internal opponents will be explored in chapter 4 as a key factor confirming the development of his own independent presidential authority.

Detailed analyses of the 1980, 1988 and 1992 presidential election campaigns have been published in the UPK series (Busch, 2005; Pitney, 2019; and Nelson, 2020). George H.W. Bush features as a relatively minor player in the first account, as the enigmatic successor to a charismatic predecessor in the second, and as the hapless victim of his own failure to develop significant domestic presidential authority in the third. If Truman managed to steer a successful path between two third party opponents when he sought a second term, Bush found it much more difficult to cope with the presence of a single one, Ross Perot, in his own re-election campaign.

3 – Developing independent authority in the shadow of a transformational predecessor

Adams

John Adams's relationship with his predecessor George Washington, whilst mutually respectful and often admiring, was never close. In his biography of Washington, Ron Chernow examines "why [Washington] relegated John Adams to a minor role", concluding that there were both structural and personal reasons for Adams's exclusion from any executive responsibility between 1789 and 1797 (Chernow, 2011, 593).

Structurally, the then-understanding of the vice president's role saw him as part of the *legislative* branch, and therefore to be excluded from directly counselling the president or his cabinet. Chernow also argues, however, that Washington had not forgotten Adams's open criticism of his wartime performance despite (as chairman of the Second Continental Congress's Board of War) having effectively appointed Washington to the position of commanding general. After 1789, Adams was perplexed at Washington's preference for drawing on the talents of younger (and, in Adams's view, much less talented) men such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton instead of his more experienced vice president (Chernow, 2011). Adams's disdain for Washington's principal subordinate was returned in kind, and Hamilton was to serve as Adams's chief opponent from within his own Federalist grouping across the four years of his presidency.

One remarkable feature of the 1800 election was the open and vitriolic opposition to Adams expressed by Hamilton in his 'Letter … Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams Esq., President of the United States' (Hamilton, 1800). That document, which marked the high point of Adams's vilification by one of his predecessor's 'more faithful followers', is closely analysed in the following chapter. The wider context of Hamilton's attack on Adams has also been explored in Joanne Freeman's study of how honour and the need for its vindication and preservation drove much of the inter-personal politics of the period (Freeman, 2001).

Every account of Adams's presidency focuses on the opposition he faced from his own secretary of state, Timothy Pickering, and secretary of war, James McHenry, both of whom were taking direction from Hamilton throughout Adams's time in office (Brown, 1975). All of his biographers agree that Adams's decision in 1800 to fire both men came too late to assert authority over his own cabinet; by then Adams had little chance of reversing the fatal damage that Hamilton had already caused him (Ferling, 1992; Brown, 1975). Hamilton's same-party opposition to Adams was to find its strongest echo in that offered against Truman (by Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond) and Bush (by former Nixon speechwriter Patrick Buchanan and House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich). Both Adams and Bush failed to contain that opposition, with fatal consequences for their presidencies.

Van Buren

The letters exchanged between Van Buren and Andrew Jackson cast invaluable light on the twenty-year political relationship between the two men (West, 1910; MacDonald, 1906). Van Buren's 'identity problem' because of his location in Jackson's shadow has been closely identified by a modern Van Buren biographer (Curtis, 1981), and Robert V. Remini has considered Van Buren (without much sympathy) in his many accounts of the Jacksonian Age, paying close attention to his key role in creating the Democratic Party (Remini, 1959). Van Buren also features prominently, but again without much sympathy, in the second and third volumes of Remini's life of Jackson (Remini, 1981, 1984), as well as in the same author's history of the period from the 'era of good feelings' in the late 1810s until the end of Van Buren's White House career in 1841 (Remini and Miles, 1979).

Other studies have considered Van Buren's role within the broader context of the Jacksonian 'revolution' (Schlesinger, 1945; Formisano, 1976; Wilentz, 1984 and 2009) and within the general sweep of American political history in the early nineteenth century (Pessen, 1969; Howe, 1979). Most give him credit for his political skills and his astute if often ineffective counselling of Jackson. But almost without exception, the same commentators also consider him to have been a clear failure as president. Daniel Walker Howe, unyielding in his admiration for John Quincy Adams and an unrelenting critic of Jackson and Jacksonianism, offers nothing but contempt for Van Buren's presidential performance: "Hard times blighted

Van Buren's entire term. Yet the president offered his suffering country nothing by way of relief … By the end of his administration, the president had acquired the nickname 'Martin Van Ruin'" (Howe, 2007, 505).

But if Van Buren's presidency is now largely forgotten, he is nonetheless remembered for his role in bringing together a collection of key voting groups to form the 'Democracy', the forerunner of today's Democratic Party. As such, he features prominently in various studies that deal with the emergence of the 'second party system' in nineteenth-century America (Hofstadter, 1948 and 1969; McCormick, 1966). Again, Howe is less forgiving, seeing Jackson and Van Buren as jointly responsible for unleashing the forces that would eventually lead to civil war: "In shaping the Democratic Party the way they did, Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren forged the instrument that would transform the minority proslavery interest into a majority that would dominate American politics until 1861" (Howe, 2007, 512).

Van Buren's attempts to develop independent authority as president came to little or nothing, and there are no sources that attempt to argue otherwise. He was fortunate in having same-party rivals who either died at a 'convenient' time (his great New York rival DeWitt Clinton passed away in 1828 (Cornog, 1998)) or failed to turn their opposition into viable movements to replace him. His principal Senate opponents from within the Democracy, Nathaniel Tallmadge and William C. Rives, preferred to join the opposition Whigs rather than attempt to unseat Van Buren from within (Rives, 2014). The career of John C. Calhoun, his rival across five presidencies, has been comprehensively reviewed by an author who also wrote an important analysis of Van Buren's presidency (Niven, 1988). If Van Buren was 'luckier' with his same party opponents than Adams had been or than Bush would prove to be, he would nonetheless fail because of the straightened economic circumstances of his presidency, most of which had been caused by the intemperate actions of his predecessor.

Truman

William E. Leuchtenberg's suggestion that Truman's presidency remained permanently overshadowed by the legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt will be examined in chapter 4 of this study (Leuchtenberg, 1983). Particular attention will also be paid to how Truman found

himself on the ticket in 1944 (Ferrell, 1994a), how that wartime presidential campaign unfolded (Davis, 2014), and the extraordinarily slight interaction between the two men during Truman's brief vice presidency (Woolner, 2017). Liberal criticism of Truman showed no abatement following his displacement of Wallace as vice president in 1944, and the author of the most important Truman biography, Alonso Hamby, has vividly traced the contours of that discontent (Hamby, 1973).

As already suggested, a key way in which Truman developed his independent presidential authority was by dealing much more robustly than either Adams or Van Buren had done with significant rivals from within his own party. Having proved indispensable in 1945, Roosevelt's former 'assistant president' James F. Byrnes had become expendable by 1947 and a sworn enemy by 1948. Byrnes's long career from segregationist Democrat in the 1910s to segregationist Republican in the 1950s is reviewed in an admirably unsympathetic biography (Robertson, 1994). Henry A. Wallace, Truman's other main internal challenger, was held by many liberals to embody the true spirit of FDR, an estimation confirmed for his admirers when Truman effectively forced his resignation from the cabinet in 1946 (Culver and Hyde, 2000).

International affairs placed huge demands on Truman's time and energy a transformed world emerged from the ruins of the war (Herring, 2011). The new approach to foreign policy that would distinguish the Truman administration most sharply from that of its predecessor has been considered in an important and persuasive study by Wilson Miscamble, who emphasises the essential continuity in foreign policy that marked Truman's first years as president rather than the sudden 'sharp break' that many of his critics accused him of making (Miscamble, 2007). Miscamble's strongly-stated conclusions have been challenged with equal force by other commentators (for example, Offner (2008)).

The period of primary research at the Truman Library undertaken as part of this study included a review of key papers dealing with the clash of opinion on foreign policy which led to Truman sacking Wallace as secretary of commerce in 1946 and manoeuvring Byrnes out as secretary of state the following year. Both men had positioned themselves in their different ways as more faithful (Wallace) or capable (Byrnes) followers of FDR than Truman was.

Knowing that he needed to exercise his authority in forcing the resignations of both men, Truman acted with admirable political determination to bring about those outcomes.

While Truman's first-term foreign policy achievements were extraordinary, it was his firm focus on domestic policy that gave him victory in 1948. One proposal advanced in this study is that Truman's robust management of relations with the GOP-controlled 80th Congress clearly showed his newly-realised confidence and authority after the disastrous 1946 mid-terms, in which the Democrats lost control of both the House and the Senate. Having an opponent to do battle with brought out Truman's raw political skills and helped him to move from mid-term humiliation in 1946 to re-election as president two years later (Hartmann, 1971; Ritchie, 2011). His courageous policy on civil rights also showed immense independent authority, taking him well beyond any initiative that FDR was prepared to consider in facing the country's endemic problems of racial discrimination and segregation (Gardner, 2002).

Bush

The emergence of the conservative coalition that would drive the 1980s Reagan Revolution (memorably described by Haynes Johnson of the *Washington Post* as "the marriage of the new right with the new rich" (Johnson, 1991, 21)) has been the subject of many analyses, not least an extensive recent study by Rick Perlstein (Perlstein, 2020). George Bush's own highly ambiguous relationship with that coalition has been explored by Hugh Heclo, and the broader development of the Republican Party from Goldwater in 1964 to Trump in 2016 has been traced by journalists E. J. Dione and Dana Milbank (Heclo, 2014; Dione, 2016; Milbank, 2023). Reagan and the 'Reagan movement' formed the fixed political backdrop against which the Bush administration operated. The idea that Reagan's success was a delayed legacy of Barry Goldwater's loss two decades earlier is explored by Jeffrey Tulis and Nicole Mellow in their essays on 'legacies of losing' in American political history (Tulis and Mellow, 2018).

Two other important works review the ultimately fatal challenges that Bush faced from within his own party: from Patrick Buchanan (Stanley, 2012) and Newt Gingrich (Zelizer, 2020). Bush's failure to repel the attacks mounted by these challengers is a key theme to be analysed in chapter 3. But while Zelizer's account of Gingrich is admirably objective, Stanley's

biography of Buchanan suffers from the fawning adoration consistently expressed by the author for his subject.

4 – Skowronek and Neustadt

Stephen Skowronek's idea of 'political time' was introduced in the previous chapter. In a critique of that Skowronek's thesis, Graham Wilson comments that it may not be valid to assume that comparisons can be drawn between presidents located two centuries apart on the assumption that, whatever changes the presidency may have seen over those years, it has remained *essentially* the same throughout American history. In fact, he argues, "[most] political scientists agree with Theodore Lowi that the degree of change that occurred following the New Deal was *so great* [emphasis added] that we entered a different political order, one he terms the second republic" (Wilson, 1994, 354, citing Lowi, 1985). Richard Neustadt (to be discussed below) also made this point, but in criticising Neustadt's earlier model at the beginning of his own work, Skowronek vigorously refutes this objection.

Wilson further argues that Skowronek's suggestion that political time might *now* be waning, having so firmly rejected the idea that it changed when the pre-FDR presidency transitioned into the very different post-FDR version, may point to a contradiction within Skowronek's model.[18] If political time can 'bend', and may indeed be bending now, why might it not have bent very significantly in the 1930s and 40s?

Wilson's final criticism is that in placing "great primacy on the behaviour of political leaders", particularly in his title's suggestion that presidents *make* politics, and in paying no real attention to the larger economic and social forces that have shaped the United States since 1776, Skowronek may have come too close to asserting that 'great men make history'.[19] It might be said in response to this criticism, however, that much of Skowronek's thesis is about

[18] In the most recent (3rd) edition of his book on *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, however, Skowronek drew back from the suggestion he had advanced in the 2nd edition, published in 2008, that political time might now be waning (Skowronek, 2020).

[19] Similarly, as already noted, while Skowronek talks about *regimes* that were directed by Roosevelt and Reagan, Gary Gerstle focuses on broader political *orders* that were associated with both presidents but had been brought into being by forces that extended well beyond presidential leadership (Gerstle, 2022).

the *inability* of otherwise great men to forge their own presidential destinies because they found themselves coming into office at the 'wrong' moment in political time.

Douglas Hoekstra further develops a number of these criticisms (Hoekstra, 1999). He too is concerned at Skowronek's claim that political time may now be waning, meaning that "[George H.W.] Bush could not play Truman to Reagan" (Hoekstra, 1999, 659). This study will suggest that Bush was indeed no Truman, but this owed more to his personal shortcomings than to any waning of political time. Hoekstra also echoes Wilson's criticism that Skowronek's model suffers from "excessive situational determinism." Because it is relatively easy to categorise presidential situations in retrospect, the temptation is to ignore "the flux, uncertainty, and telling details in a president's decision-making environment" in order to 'pin' each president to a situation that reflects rigid theory rather than actual circumstances (Hoekstra, 1999, 660). Furthermore, the concept of 'regime' advanced by Skowronek remains unclear throughout his work (Hoekstra argues); the logic of why the cycle leads inevitably to regime collapse is unexplored; and the idea that cycles might be driven partly by constitutional and ideological tensions in American political thought also remains undeveloped.

Despite these criticisms, this study accepts that Skowronek's key claim remains important: that a president who occupies an unfortunate position within political time may face a significant restriction on his ability to display authority in office. Even the most talented of incumbents have found themselves hampered, often fatally, by this restriction. But another prominent commentator has seen ample scope for effective presidential action by talented political operators even in the face of such constraints.

Richard Neustadt's 'power to persuade' idea has been a key theme in presidential studies since he first articulated it in 1960, but some important criticisms have nonetheless been offered against it by a range of authors. Harvey Mansfield, for example, summarises Neustadt's case as claiming that *formal* presidential power is effectively the power to compel while *real* presidential power is the power to persuade. But Neustadt's claim that the power to compel is of little value is strongly disputed by Mansfield, who sees the president's formal power as primary. Without the power to compel, the power to persuade would be

meaningless: persuasion can only be effective if a president retains the power to compel when persuasion doesn't work (Mansfield, 1981).

Mansfield's critique has itself been criticised by Peter Sperlich, who agrees that presidents retain the formal power to command but also points out that any exercise of that power would prove costly and can only be relied upon as a last resort. He notes the adverse political consequences that arose for Truman when he openly asserted presidential command power by sacking Commander of the Allied Powers in Korea Douglas MacArthur in 1951 and seizing the steel mills in 1952. As such, successful presidents will always prefer to operate in 'bargaining mode' rather than 'command mode' (Sperlich, 1975).

Samuel Kernell accepts that Neustadt may have been correct to suggest that a 'bargaining' presidency had overtaken a 'constitutional' one by the mid-twentieth century, but this once-radical change of perspective has now itself become outdated. With the continuing development since the mid-1960s of the 'rhetorical presidency', direct appeals to the public over the heads of congressional representatives have become much more the presidential norm (Tulis, 2014 and 2016). But 'going public' in this way fundamentally "undermines the legitimacy of other politicians" and is incompatible with the kind of bargaining that Neustadt saw as the key to real presidential power (Kernell, 1981, 4). For Kernell, the modern rhetorical presidency has effectively trumped *both* constitutional *and* persuasion-based models.[20]

Fred Greenstein has commented on the inflexibility of Neustadt's application of the 'presidential bargaining' model, offering an important critique of the contrast between the styles brought by FDR and Truman to their presidencies. It is beyond dispute, Greenstein argues, that FDR "provides the best model for effective presidential leadership" and that Truman lacked FDR's instinctive sense of 'himself as president' (Greenstein, 2009a, 293). Truman also lacked what Neustadt believes was the key quality that allowed FDR to dominate the office – his unerring instinct for "how [his actions] would advance his capacity to put his personal imprint on politics and policy" (Greenstein, 1995, 312).

[20] What chaos the postmodern Twitter presidency may have created remains a matter for more extended debate.

But Greenstein argues – persuasively – that Truman nonetheless brought many compensating qualities to the office, not least a strong belief in the presidency as a constitutional pillar of the political system. Despite knowing how personally unqualified he was, Truman had a firm sense that his duty as president was to act strongly and with despatch. He deplored what he saw as FDR's disorderly management style, and rejected his predecessor's idea that dealing with a pack of squabbling administration insiders could somehow advance the president's capacity to lead. Greenstein characterises Neustadt's work as a product of its time and suggests that the indirect presidential style adopted by Eisenhower proved no less effective than the competitive approach adopted by FDR.

Finally, Skowronek himself addresses Neustadt's thesis in his own major work on presidential leadership. He identifies Neustadt's core claims as asserting that a wholly new political system had arisen in the late 1940s and early 1950s; that the need for 'crisis management' had rendered the nineteenth-century 'mere clerkship' model of the presidency obsolete; and that a radically new type of presidency had arisen from Truman onwards. All these developments sharply separate the pre- and post-1940s presidencies. That transition had been building since Theodore Roosevelt at the start of the twentieth century, but the real 'take-off point' came (Neustadt argues) with FDR and Truman. Skowronek vigorously disagrees with this analysis, complaining that "[such] simple periodisation schemes impose severe limits on the analysis of leadership." To caricature the nineteenth century presidency as a "mere clerkship … is nothing more than a conceit of modern times" (Skowronek, 1997, 5).

In *Presidential Power*, Neustadt spent much time comparing Truman with his immediate successor, Eisenhower, but for Skowronek that comparison was of limited value. A proper appreciation of 'political time' shows that two different presidential pairings yield more striking insights into comparative effectiveness than the Truman-Eisenhower one: Truman should be compared instead to Van Buren, as both men occupied exactly the same position in political time, and Eisenhower (as Truman's successor) should be compared to William Henry Harrison (as Van Buren's). Skowronek suggests that those pre-1900 presidents who were consigned by Neustadt to historical irrelevance actually offer much more scope for understanding constraints on presidential effectiveness than any simple sequential analysis

of predecessor-successor pairings from Truman onwards. In choosing to include both Adams and Van Buren for analysis alongside Truman and Bush, this study agrees with Skowronek's insistence that important lessons can be learned by looking back before 1932 when evaluating presidential performance.

Despite the reservations of Skowronek and others, Neustadt's core argument remains of value. It sems likely that a president with strong persuasive power continues to have every opportunity to establish his own authority, notwithstanding his compromised position within political time. The following chapters explore how Adams, Van Buren and Bush all failed to establish that authority, while Truman, who opened his presidency with far less political capital than any of the others, rose remarkably to the challenge.

Chapter 3

John Adams, Martin Van Buren, and George H. W. Bush

1 - Introduction

This chapter sets out a comparative analysis of the performance of John Adams, Martin Van Buren, and George H.W. Bush during their single presidential terms, identifying the strengths and weaknesses brought by each man to the role and assessing how each dealt with the range of challenges that arose during his four years in office. It then considers their unsuccessful bids for re-election and asks why all three 'fell short' as single-term presidents.[21]

The strengths and weaknesses brought to the presidency by any new incumbent make up his 'opening political capital'. Having analysed each president's opening capital, his performance in office is then evaluated to judge whether he developed or failed to develop a robust stock of 'independent presidential authority' during his four-year term. Each incumbent's opening level of political capital, as modified by the independent authority he generated in office, is then taken to represent the *closing* political capital with which he campaigned for re-election at the end of his first term.

When considering the development of a president's authority during his four years in office, it is important to recall that every new incumbent comes to the presidency with pre-existing authority of two kinds: that which he holds because it inheres constitutionally in the office itself (or has been successfully interpreted by his predecessors as so inhering), and that which he may have inherited from a particularly authoritative predecessor. But gains or losses in

[21] As noted earlier, the two broad factors being used in this study to assess presidential 'success' are (a) re-election at the end of a first term and (b) subsequent evaluation by historians and political commentators of a president's performance in office. The 2021 C-Span historians' survey of presidents ranked Adams at number 15, Van Buren at 34, Truman at 6, and Bush at 21 (www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2021/?page=overall: date accessed, 20 November 2023). A more recent (2023) survey of historians by the Siena College Research Institute had Adams at 16, Van Buren at 29, Truman at 7, and Bush at 20 (combinepdf.pdf (siena.edu): date accessed 20 November 2023).

authority across the following four years are largely driven by a president's own performance, which is quite distinct from any constitutional or inherited authority he may have held at the start of his term.

In assessing these four presidents' opening political capital (three in this chapter and the fourth in the next) it will be suggested that Truman's stock in 1945 was strikingly negative, significantly less than that of Adams in 1797 (positive), Van Buren in 1837 (strongly positive), and Bush in 1989 (also negative, but less so than Truman's). Across his four years in office, however, Truman's gain in independent presidential authority was dramatic, while Adams and Bush both suffered a net loss of authority, and Van Buren's collapsed completely. As chapter 4 will outline in more detail, Truman closed his first four years in office with a level of political capital greatly exceeding that held by the other three men at the end of *their* presidencies. In sporting terms, Truman had come from far behind to finish well out in front, with Adams and Bush finishing side-by-side, and Van Buren trailing badly.

Generalising from these four examples, it is suggested that the prospects of achieving re-election are likely to be greater for a president who closes his first term with a significantly higher level of political capital than that which he held when he came to office. This is not to imply that re-election success owes everything to this single factor: the prevailing social, economic, military and even accidental circumstances, as well as the quality of the opposition, all play key roles in influencing the outcome of any election.[22] But it will nonetheless be suggested that political capital, as strengthened or depleted by an incumbent who develops or fails to develop a robust stock of independent presidential authority during his first term in office, remains a key factor in enhancing the probability of re-election success.

[22] In particular, economic management (or a perceived *lack* of competence in managing the economy) is a key factor affecting the political capital of an incumbent seeking re-election. Political scientist Raymond Duch has pointed to the key role of the 'economic vote' in any electoral contest: he defines this as "the importance that the voter gives to economic performance in their decision to vote for a political party" (Duch, 2007, 805; also Duch 2008). Analogous factors in today's American politics might include the 'green vote' or the 'abortion vote'. The sense that Van Buren lacked the ability to deal with a collapsing economy did him real damage in 1840, and Clinton's victory over Bush in 1992 owed much to his campaign's recognition that the key factor that year was – in the phrase coined by Clinton strategist James Carville – 'the economy, stupid'.

2 - Opening political capital

A president's political capital at the start of his first term can be assessed with reference to eleven key criteria.[23] Debate about what factors should be included in any definition of political capital is inevitably wide-ranging: those chosen here are derived from the analyses provided by key biographers and presidential historians referred to in the key sources set out in chapter 2 above.

Summarised under three aggregate headings, these eleven criteria relate to a president's *personality* (in the broadest sense of that term), his *political situation* as he begins his term in office, and his standing in comparison to the *predecessor* he follows into office. The third heading is particularly relevant for presidents who succeed transformational predecessors as Adams, Van Buren, Truman and Bush all did.

The first broad heading – a president's 'personality' – relates to the public perception of his ability to discharge the role effectively, including:

(1) his *leadership* skills: the sense that he will be able to act with conviction, clarity and firmness, bringing the country with him in any key decisions he has to take as president;

(2) his *managerial* skills: his perceived operational competence, energy and effectiveness;

(3) his past *career experience* and how that may assist him in his new role; and

(4) more specifically, his recent experience (if any) as *vice president*.

[23] The criteria to be used in calculating a president's 'closing' political capital will differ from those outlined here. They are considered in section 7 below.

The second heading – a new president's political situation – refers to his mandate, inheritance, and standing with Congress generally and, more specifically, with his own congressional party, including:

(5) the strength of his electoral *mandate* as president: whether he achieved office in a landslide or by a narrower margin, or perhaps by winning an electoral college majority but losing the popular vote;

(6) his broad circumstantial *inheritance*: whether he comes to office with a booming economy or a looming or actual recession, and with military and other conflicts ongoing or threatening;

(7) whether his party controls both, just one, or neither house of *Congress*; whether the party enjoys strong or less robust majorities in the house or houses it controls; and whether the party, even if it holds a majority, is sufficiently united to respond coherently to presidential legislative leadership; and

(8) whether he was elected with significant presidential '*coattails'* such that members of his own party in Congress feel indebted to him or believe instead that they achieved their own elections without significant assistance from their nominal party leader.

The final heading is particularly important in the case of successor presidents who come to office following a 'transformational' predecessor. Here there are three issues of relevance to a successor's opening political capital:

(9) how the public perceive him in *comparison* to his *predecessor*;

(10) his standing in relation to the political *movement or regime* which was founded, nurtured, or exploited by his predecessor; and

(11) the likelihood that he will face significant *internal opposition* from those within his own party who consider themselves to be 'more faithful followers' of his predecessor or the regime associated with that predecessor.

To establish what personal and political skills each president may have developed before their election, sections 3 and 4 of this chapter provide brief introductions to the early careers and vice presidential experience of Adams, Van Buren and Bush. A key anomaly of Martin Van Buren's career was that his power and influence were in fact much greater during his *pre*-presidential years than during his single, disappointing term as president. As Andrew Jackson's first secretary of state (1829-31) and second vice president (1833-37), he also enjoyed a much closer personal and political relationship with his predecessor than Adams had enjoyed with his, or than Truman or Bush would enjoy with theirs.

Van Buren was also the only one to have a relatively impressive *post*-presidency, narrowly failing to gain his party's nomination in 1844 and running again in 1848 as the Free Soil Party's candidate for president (with John Adams's grandson, Charles Francis Adams, as his running-mate). That post-presidential career falls outside the scope of this study, but Van Buren's time both before and during his vice presidency proved much more politically important than Adams's had been (or than Truman or Bush's would later prove to be). It therefore receives more extended treatment in the following sections.

Section 5 then considers each man's first presidential campaign (1796 for Adams, 1836 for Van Buren, and 1988 for Bush). Based on all these factors, an assessment is made of each man's standing at the start of his presidency under items (1) to (11) listed above. Aggregating all eleven factors then provides an overall assessment of each new incumbent's opening political capital.

After reviewing key episodes in their presidential careers (section 6), the study then assesses the extent to which each man built or failed to build his own 'independent presidential authority' across those four years. A broad assessment of how each man's *closing* political capital had developed from his opening position four years earlier is then provided in section 7, and that closing political capital provides context for analysing their unsuccessful re-election

campaigns (in section 8). Section 9 then sets out a concluding assessment of why these three presidents fell short and sets the scene for considering how Harry Truman alone succeeded in similar circumstances.

3 – Early careers

The early John Adams

John Adams was born in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1735. Like Harry Truman (born in 1884) he came from farming stock, and both men were used to long hours of hard physical labour in the fields around their homesteads. He entered Harvard College in Boston at the age of fifteen and worked as a teacher before studying law. His marriage to Abigail Smith in 1767, and their long separations as Adams pursued his legal, political and diplomatic careers, led to one of the most celebrated exchanges of spousal correspondence in American history.

The war between England and France for control of North America came to an end in 1763. Desperately short of funds, the British Parliament passed the Stamp Tax Act of 1765, which led to widespread disturbances, particularly in Boston. It also led to Adams's first work of political philosophy, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law,* published in 1765. The Stamp Act was repealed in 1767 but replaced by further taxation measures which caused ongoing unrest, culminating in the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and violence at Lexington and Concord in 1775.

Widespread anger at Britain's behaviour was further fuelled by Thomas Paine's *Common Sense,* which swept the colonies and drew attention to the absurdity of a small island running a distant continent. Elected to the First Continental Congress in 1774, Adams quickly became the recognised leader of those who favoured independence. It was Adams who nominated Washington to become commander-in-chief of the patriot army, while the Declaration of Independence of July 1776 was drafted by a five-man committee on which he served alongside Thomas Jefferson.

The resulting war saw Adams outside America for many years. In 1778 he went to Paris as a member of the American commission to the French Court. Returning to America in the summer of 1779, Adams drafted a new constitution for Massachusetts before returning to Europe, living in Holland for two years and arranging vital loans and credit for the colonies. Cornwallis's surrender in 1781 saw Adams, along with fellow commissioners Benjamin Franklin, John Jay and Henry Laurens, negotiating the Treaty of Paris, which brought the war with England to a formal end in 1783. Adams was then briefly in London before returning to France, where he remained until his appointment as first American minister to the Court of St. James from 1785 to 1788. By then he had been away from his home country for ten years, returning only as the states' deliberations about the new constitution were concluding and elections to the new legislative and executive branches were under way.

By the time of his nomination for the vice presidency, Adams had established a career that mixed innovative reflections in political philosophy with outstanding service to his country during the revolutionary wars and as a negotiator in various European capitals. With the possible exception of Franklin, no contemporary American could have brought more experience of diplomacy and dealings with foreign powers to the new national government. He may have been personally irascible and volatile, but there was no doubting John Adams's patriotism, experience and deep intellectual capacity. All these skills would be largely wasted during the eight years he was to spend as vice president to George Washington.

The early Martin Van Buren

Martin Van Buren was born to Dutch-American parents in 1782, at Kinderhook on the Hudson river in upstate New York. Having trained as a lawyer, he was narrowly elected to the state's senate in 1812. Between 1817 and 1821 Van Buren became a key figure in forging a democratic political culture in the United States (Benson, 1966). Having created a powerful New York political machine – the 'Albany Regency' – he was appointed to the U.S. Senate by the Regency-dominated Council of Appointments in 1821. Married fourteen years earlier, his wife Hannah Hoes died in 1821 leaving Van Buren a widower with four young children to support.

Van Buren's first call in Washington was on Secretary of War John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, and a friendship of sorts developed between the two men. General Andrew Jackson joined the Senate in 1823, two years after Van Buren, although he had earlier served in both the House (1796-97) and Senate (1797-98) following Tennessee's admission as the Union's sixteenth state in 1796.

Van Buren actively promoted Treasury Secretary William H. Crawford as his preferred candidate in the 1824 presidential campaign, despite the Georgian having suffered a stroke the previous year. But the election proved a disaster for both men. In a crowded field, Crawford (with 41 electoral votes) came in third behind Jackson (99) and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (84), with Speaker of the House Henry Clay of Kentucky in fourth place (37). With no overall winner, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, and an agreement between Adams and Clay was alleged to lie behind the exchange of Clay's electoral votes for his subsequent appointment as secretary of state. When Adams was sworn in on March 4, 1825, his new vice president, Calhoun, had just been sworn-in by the oldest member of the Senate, Andrew Jackson, who remained furious that a 'corrupt bargain' had deprived him of the presidency.

The only consolation of having Adams in the White House was that Van Buren was now free to consolidate the organised opposition he had already begun to assemble during Monroe's second term. The 'era of good feelings' of the Monroe years (1817-25) had seen (he believed) an unhealthy amalgamation of depleted Jeffersonianism with what remained of a now defunct Federalism. Van Buren viewed both Monroe and Clay as fatally tainted by this development, and he also remained unconvinced about Jackson's faithfulness. His doubts about the Tennessean's commitment to key elements of Jeffersonian orthodoxy, which included firm opposition to protective tariffs, a standing army, and foreign alliances, persisted after the 1824 election, as did his fear that Jackson as president might personalise the office rather than committing himself to the new party-based system being developed by Van Buren (Cole, 1984, 150). Van Buren's early instincts on both fronts would eventually prove to have been wholly accurate.

It was during a visit to Vice President Calhoun in South Carolina over Christmas 1826 that Van Buren finally put aside his concerns about Jackson and settled on him as his preferred candidate for 1828. In a famous letter to Thomas Ritchie, editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, dated January 13, 1827, Van Buren wrote of his ambition to bring together "the planters of the South and the plain Republicans of the North" (Van Buren Papers, online). This was to be the defining mission of the new group that Van Buren was instrumental in creating, and "[for] the next three decades and more, the Democratic party tried desperately to keep this unwieldy alliance alive" (Cole, 1984, 151).

In attempting to consolidate his state's support for Jackson, Van Buren ran for governor of New York in 1828, winning by 30,000 votes. He then immediately resigned the position, having accepted Jackson's invitation to serve as secretary of state in the new administration.

At the end of Jackson's first year in office, Van Buren helped to draft the president's annual message to Congress, particularly the sections on internal improvements, the Bank of the United States, the tariff, and the federal surplus (UCSB-APP, Andrew Jackson First Annual Message to Congress, December 8, 1829).[24] He moderated Jackson's language on all these issues, having invested considerable energy in weaning the president away from his initial attachment to the distinctly non-Jeffersonian idea of internal improvements. The increasingly close relationship between the two men was by now becoming a matter of significant public interest. At around this time, newspaperman and Regency stalwart Mordechai Noah published an editorial nominating Van Buren as Jackson's successor, "the only mention of what instantly became a forbidden topic" (Niven, 1983, 254). Van Buren himself, in his *Autobiography*, denounced Noah as "an editor providentially imprudent" (Van Buren, 1920, 398).

But the question of the succession was very much on Jackson's mind during his first year as president. Having suffered all summer from dropsy and severe leg-swelling, and convinced that his ailments might prove fatal, Jackson sent a letter to close confidante John Overton making it clear that he had lost confidence in Calhoun (who had been re-elected vice

[24] Here and in subsequent references, 'UCSB-APP' refers to the online material of the American Presidency Project hosted by the University of California Santa Barbara. See bibliography for website address.

president in 1828) and that Jackson's allies should see that Van Buren succeeded to the presidency in 1833 in the event of Jackson's death (Jackson to Overton, December 31, 1829, in Bassett and Jameson, IV, 108-110).

With his health much improved by the autumn of the following year, however, Jackson then devised another plan, telling Van Buren that he had decided to run for a second term with the secretary of state as his running mate. "Then, he told Van Buren privately, after their election and inauguration, he would resign the presidency, elevating his friend to the first office. Van Buren rejected the scheme …. as too transparent and likely to undermine the credibility of such a presidency from the start" (Witcover, 2014, 83).[25]

Jackson's relationship with Calhoun had been damaged by the vice president's support for Senator Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina in the famous Webster-Hayne debate of 1830, when Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts had rehearsed the key arguments that Jackson would use against South Carolina in the nullification crisis two years later. The final break between president and vice president came when former treasury secretary William H. Crawford told Jackson (whom he disliked) that Calhoun (whom he loathed) had wanted Jackson court-martialled for insubordination over his behaviour in the Florida campaign during the Monroe Administration, in which Calhoun had served as secretary of war. Jackson severed all relations with the vice president, and Calhoun's publication of his nullificationist 'Fort Hill Address' on February 7, 1831, made the break final.

When Jackson vetoed the bill authorising federal funding for the Maysville Road in 1830, the president and his secretary of state had initially found themselves adopting different approaches on the issue. Van Buren adamantly opposed federal funding for the road on strict Jeffersonian grounds. Jackson was more equivocal, but Van Buren eventually persuaded him to veto the resolution, with the secretary of state himself drafting the veto message (UVA Miller - Speeches, May 27, 1830).[26] On the day after the Maysville Road veto, Congress passed

[25] Unfortunately Witcover's reference is incorrect: it refers back to Van Buren's own *Autobiography* (Fitzpatrick, 1920) where the matter is not discussed on the page cited.

[26] Here and in subsequent references, 'UVA Miller' refers to the online material of the Miller Centre at the University of Virginia. See bibliography for website address.

a bill approving Jackson's policy of relocating Cherokee and Creek tribes west of the Mississippi. Cole notes that "Van Buren took no part in the debates, but he agreed with Jackson's Indian policy … [and] shared the American belief in white supremacy" (Cole, 1984, 213-4). Van Buren's acquiescence in a controversial Jackson decision would return to haunt him during his own presidency as the 'trail of tears' proceeded during the late 1830s.

Van Buren resigned as secretary of state to become minister to England in the summer of 1831. He had suggested the change as part of a broader scheme which he sold to an initially reluctant president on the basis that it would allow Jackson to compel the resignation of his entire cabinet, which would in turn resolve tensions lingering from the infamous 'Eaton affair'.[27] Whatever his motives for resigning, the move worked out hugely to Van Buren's advantage: his 1832 rejection by the Senate as minister to England (on the casting vote of Vice President Calhoun) gained him the public sympathy he had hitherto lacked (Senate Proceedings, January 25, 1832).[28] The path was now clear for Jackson to choose Van Buren as his running-mate in that year's campaign.

Before becoming vice president, John Adams had gained a reputation as a patriot, philosopher, diplomat and statesman. In personal terms, however, he was considered slightly eccentric, and his commitment to the full range of Federalist principles set out by former treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton remained uncertain. As head of the Board of War during the revolutionary war, he had served as General Washington's political superior, but there was little sense of any intimate relationship between the two men when Adams later became Washington's vice president. Before *he* became vice president, Martin Van Buren had gained a reputation as a calculating party politician and key adviser to Andrew Jackson. Like Adams, Van Buren had gained experience in international affairs, in his case through a two-year term as secretary of state and a brief period as minister to London. But even when

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[27] Many members of Jackson's cabinet, and particularly their wives, had refused to have anything to do with Peggy Eaton, new wife of Secretary of War James Eaton. Her dealings with her first husband raised questions as to their propriety, but Van Buren went out of his way to call socially on the Eatons. One of Jackson's most distinguished modern biographers found himself unable to refrain from quoting the suggestion made in James Parton's 1866 biography of Jackson that "the political history of the United States, for the last thirty years, dates from the moment when the soft hand of Mr. Van Buren touched Mrs. Eaton's knocker" (Remini, 1981, 203; Parton, 1866, III, 287).

[28] 'Senate Proceedings' refers here to the Library of Congress's 'American Memory' Project. See bibliography for website address.

based overseas, Van Buren had continued to provide the president with forceful political advice. Unlike Adams, therefore, he was always likely to serve as a keenly political vice president.

The early George H. W. Bush

George Bush was born into a wealthy New England family in 1924. His financier father, Prescott Bush, later served as a moderate Republican senator from Connecticut during the Eisenhower and early Kennedy years, and the younger Bush inherited his father's liberal Republican attitudes and commitment to public service. He enjoyed a privileged upbringing before volunteering for service in the United States Navy during World War II and marrying Barbara Pierce whilst on leave in 1945. Relocating to Texas after the war, he worked in the oil industry before embarking on a political career. After two terms in the House of Representatives, two abortive Senate bids, a term (under Richard Nixon) as ambassador to the United Nations and later as chairman of the Republican National Committee, then appointments (under Gerald R. Ford) as special representative to the People's Republic of China and director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Bush found his career stalled in 1976 just as his party was engaging in one of the most profound transitions in its 120-year history.

Barry Goldwater's radical but premature call for 'true conservatism' in 1964 set the stage for his ideological successor, Ronald Reagan, whose first political campaign saw him defeating Pat Brown for the governorship of California in 1966. Both Reagan and Richard Nixon looked increasingly to the South to energise a new group of white and now-disillusioned former Democratic supporters, and in 1972 Nixon became the first Republican in history to carry every Southern state when he was re-elected in a landslide. Nineteen-seventies Republicans were also in transition on tax policy: having loudly opposed the Kennedy administration's proposed tax cuts because they offered no matching reductions in spending, Republicans now claimed that tax cuts on their own were inherently good because they would (as New York Congressman Jack Kemp and economist Arthur Laffer claimed) generate the revenue that would make matching cuts in spending no longer necessary. Bush would later denounce Reagan's advocacy of this model as 'voodoo economics', a remark that showed his lack of commitment to what was now emerging as a central tenet of Republican ideology.

Republicans were also changing direction on foreign policy during this time. The Nixon-Kissinger policy of détente towards the Soviet Union was increasingly denounced by Reagan and his conservative allies as appeasement. The emerging culture wars of the late 1970s further energised the new Republican movement, and Evangelical Protestants, now in alliance with traditional Catholics (for whom they had previously expressed nothing but contempt), were to add significant additional energy to the movement.

When he decided to mount a campaign for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination, Bush found himself seeking the leadership of a party which had by now become wholly unmoored from the old-school Republican principles with which he was most closely aligned. Nor did he have a public profile of any consequence at this time. Hugh Heclo describes Bush's 1980 bid as "a hopeless move by a politician whose name registered in the public mind as little more than a pollster's asterisk" (Heclo, 2014, 48). The contrast to the much more widely-known Adams and Van Buren as *they* embarked on their bids for the presidency is striking.

When Bush withdrew from the 1980 race after a series of primary defeats, he released his delegates to Reagan "in hopes of retaining goodwill that might be translated into a vice presidential selection" (Busch, 205, 73). The only requirement imposed by the Reagan team was that Bush should publicly reverse his liberal stance on abortion, which he immediately did. As his biographer Herbert Parmet records, "Bush now had little choice but to be subsumed by the Reagan forces" (Parmet, 2001, 247).

Reagan's 51 percent in 1980 was particularly impressive in a three-way race in which sitting president Jimmy Carter scored 43 percent and independent Republican John Anderson 7 percent. In a striking reversal of what Truman had achieved in 1948, "the New Deal coalition, or what was left of it, was exploded on November 4, 1981" when Reagan made remarkable gains among key former elements of that group, particularly blue-collar workers, ethnics, Catholics and Evangelical Protestants (Busch, 2005, 127). Blacks and Hispanics stayed mainly loyal to the Democratic Party, as did women voters, but overall Reagan won "all but the poorest, all but the very youngest, and all but the least-well-educated voters" (Busch, 205, 129).

The result of that year's congressional elections also saw a significant Republican surge: the GOP now held a majority of 53-to-47 in the Senate and, in their biggest gain since 1966, Republicans also won an additional 33 seats in the Democrat-controlled House, which meant that "[no] presidential coattails had been as long since 1964" (Busch, 2005, 153). Eight years later, Bush would be elected to the same office with no coattails at all.

Bush therefore came to the vice presidency with a resumé that was broad-ranging but politically shallow. His period of service in Congress had been brief and unremarkable. Subsequent electoral failures had led to him being appointed (almost as consolation prizes) to a number of senior administrative roles, all of which he discharged competently but which gained him no real public profile. His growing collection of international contacts would later serve as an asset during Bush's own presidential term, but his unfocused political career meant that he became vice president with little of the senior-level diplomatic experience that Adams had brought to the role, or any of the political energy and intimacy with the president that Van Buren had brought. What followed during their vice presidencies would be eight frustrating years for John Adams, four energetic ones for Martin Van Buren, and eight largely inconsequential ones for George Bush.

4 - The Vice Presidency

Vice President John Adams (1789-97)

As the delegates concluded their work on the new constitution in 1787, it was taken for granted that Washington would become president and that Adams would most likely become vice president. But New York delegate Alexander Hamilton worked behind the scenes to convince electors to withhold votes from Adams because he wanted to ensure that the vice president would have no independent standing within the new administration. Washington was elected unanimously with 69 votes but Adams achieved only 34. He was so depressed by the success of Hamilton's scheming (although he would only later discover Hamilton's personal involvement in the plot) that he almost turned down the vice presidency, as he confessed to his friend Benjamin Rush in a letter dated May 17, 1789 (Adams Papers Online).

Adams's failure to confront Hamilton would seriously compromise his authority as president after 1797.

Jefferson was appointed Washington's first secretary of state, Hamilton became treasury secretary, Henry Knox of Maine was appointed secretary of war, and Edmund Randolph of Virginia became attorney general. The vice president did not attend cabinet meetings and had little impact on any of the administration's decisions. It was only after Jefferson's resignation in 1793, Hamilton's departure in 1795, and Washington's loss of confidence in Randolph as Jefferson's successor, that the president began to turn to his vice president for both advice and company. By the start of 1796 Adams understood that he was being groomed by Washington to succeed him, the only time that a vice president rather than a secretary of state would serve as 'heir presumptive' until Martin Van Buren, who was also the first to hold both offices.

As a political philosopher, Adams favoured a strong executive to ensure both the efficiency of government and the preservation of liberty. His biographer John Ferling notes that there was always a "reactionary edge to Adams's views", which "reflected the deeply ingrained, gloomily sullen view of the human character that had always lurked in a corner of his mind" (Ferling, 1992, 308-9). In fact, Ferling suggests, it was only his fear of democracy and anarchy that tied Adams to the Federalists, a group that enthusiastically promoted other initiatives – standing armies and banks, for example – for which he had no enthusiasm at all (Ferling, 1992, 316).

But while Hamilton and Jefferson served as heads of executive departments and were therefore able to give practical expression to their philosophies of government, Vice President Adams, with no responsibilities other than to preside over the Senate, could only theorise and criticise the new developments in his country's politics. And members of the first Senate let the vice president know quite clearly that his role there was to officiate, not to lead.

Adams's calls for the president to be addressed using exalted titles which smacked of monarchy fuelled the accusation that he was seeking to restore the British system which the new nation had just cast off. He regarded Jefferson's welcome for the French Revolution as a deeply dangerous omen for the country. Adams may have been painted by Jefferson and his

supporters as a monarchist and a reactionary, but he was in fact a liberal who worried that events in Paris would soon lead to a bloody and anarchic end. Further disaster would then result if French revolutionary anarchy was to find its way across the Atlantic to the United States

An attempt to displace Adams from the vice presidency in 1792 and replace him by Governor George Clinton of New York came to nothing.[29] During Washington's second term, the widespread esteem attaching to the president meant that opposition to the Federalists was vented instead on the vice president. Adams's failure to support the French Revolution was interpreted to mean that he favoured war with France, but in fact he completely agreed with Washington's declared policy of neutrality. The administration's efforts to find a working arrangement with England in the face of that country's continued harassment of American merchant vessels led to the Jay Treaty of 1794. The perception that this treaty, negotiated by Federalist Chief Justice John Jay, was unduly weighted in England's favour would persist throughout much of Adams's presidency, not least because it was Adams's casting vote in the Senate which saw the treaty adopted.[30]

Adams ended his eight years as vice president frustrated at having been denied any real opportunity to contribute to Washington's administration. Kept out in the cold for so long, he now faced the problem of inheriting an office that Washington had closely shaped in his own image. But Adams's public image was wholly different from that of the outgoing president, and whether he would choose to follow all the precedents established by his predecessor or act as a different kind of president would be tested closely across the next four years.

Vice President Martin Van Buren (1833-37)

Andrew Jackson corresponded extensively with Van Buren as he awaited Senate confirmation of his protégé's appointment as minister to England. Van Buren initially remained coy in

[29] Clinton would later serve as vice president during Jefferson's second term. His nephew DeWitt Clinton would provide early support and later firm opposition to Martin Van Buren's rising career in New York politics.

[30] During his eight years as vice president Adams cast twenty-nine tie-breaking votes in the Senate. During *his* four years in the same role, Jefferson would cast three.

responding to Jackson's proposal that he should replace Calhoun as vice president, but in February 1832, shortly after the Senate had turned down his London appointment, Van Buren wrote to Jackson accepting the offer. His rejection as minister had been coordinated by Calhoun, who organised a tied vote in the Senate in order to use his casting vote to openly deny Van Buren the appointment (Niven, 1983, 295). Despite the fears of some of Jackson's advisers that the South might find Van Buren unacceptable and split the party, Jackson insisted on his adoption, and Van Buren was nominated on the first ballot at the party convention held in Baltimore, Maryland, in May 1832.

Unlike Adams, Truman or Bush, Van Buren showed increasingly open signs during his vice presidency that he disagreed with decisions being taken by Jackson during the key crises of Jackson's second term. Three such episodes in the first year of Van Buren's term as vice president – the bank veto, the nullification crisis, and the deposit removal scheme – make clear Van Buren's increasingly conflicted relationship with the newly re-elected president. But Jackson prevailed in every case, and the legacy of two of those decisions would fatally handicap Van Buren's own presidential term.

The twenty-year charter of the Second Bank of the United States was due to expire in 1836, but Henry Clay, Jackson's most likely challenger in 1832, had persuaded Congress to pass a bill repealing it four years early and issuing a new charter. Clay believed that this would create a dilemma for Jackson, as he would now face having to acquiesce in rechartering an institution that he loathed or take the constitutionally dubious path of vetoing the rechartering bill. Van Buren arrived back in Washington from Europe on July 8, 1832. He found an exhausted Jackson in bed but working on a draft veto message prepared by Amos Kendall, a key member of Jackson's 'kitchen cabinet'. On seeing Van Buren the president famously exclaimed, 'The Bank, Mr Van Buren, is trying to kill me, *but I will kill it*!' (Van Buren, 1920, 625).

The Bank War had significant consequences not only during the Jackson administration but for decades afterwards. It would lead to the first congressional censure of a president (in March 1834), the first Senate rejection of a cabinet nominee (Roger Taney as treasury secretary in June 1834), and the first use of the filibuster in a Senate debate (by the Whigs in 1837, attempting to prevent the expunging of the earlier censure motion). It also marked the

first time that a president had exercised a veto on other than constitutional grounds. Against the suggestion that the Supreme Court's decision in *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819) had settled the question of the Bank's constitutionality, Jackson argued that "[the] authority of the Supreme Court must not ... be permitted to control the Congress or the Executive when acting in their legislative capacities" (Richardson, 1908, 1144-45).[31] His veto also led to a persistent Whig charge that Jackson was now usurping authority which the Constitution had not bestowed on the president.

Van Buren had recommended a more conciliatory approach, but he eventually accepted the president's decision to veto in July 1832, despite suspecting that it might have fateful consequences for his own later presidency. Jackson was easily re-elected four months later, with Van Buren defeating Clay's vice presidential running-mate, John Sergeant, a former congressman from Pennsylvania. But a new crisis was in full bloom even as the results of the election were being confirmed.

Infuriated after a state convention in South Carolina had declared the tariff laws of 1828 and 1832 to be null and void, and with Calhoun still serving as vice president, Jackson issued his Nullification Proclamation (UVA Miller – Speeches, December 10, 1832).[32] The Constitution of the United States, it declared, formed a government, not a league, and no state government could unilaterally abrogate federal laws. In the later Force Bill, enacted by Congress on March 2, 1833, Jackson made clear his belief that as president he had the right to deploy the U.S. Army to South Carolina in order to enforce the collection of outstanding tariffs. With Clay and his supporters abstaining, John Tyler of Virginia was the only dissenting vote when the Senate approved the Force Bill by 32 votes to 1.

Van Buren once again urged Jackson to adopt a more cautious approach throughout the nullification crisis. The strongly centralising vision of the Union set out in the Proclamation was a dramatic departure from Jeffersonian orthodoxy and greatly alarmed Van Buren, not

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[31] Earlier that year Jackson had declined to enforce the Supreme Court's decision in favour of certain Indian tribes in *Worcester v. Georgia* on the same grounds.

[32] With Van Buren now elected to succeed him, Calhoun resigned as vice president on December 28, 1832. He was appointed to the Senate by the Virginia legislature the following day.

least because it was so openly supported by the Senate's last great Federalist icon, Daniel Webster. In fact Van Buren believed that Jackson's own approach was unconstitutional and he blamed Treasury Secretary Louis McLane, another former Federalist, for Jackson's intemperate pronouncement.

Jackson's actions also risked serious injury to the Southern wing of the newly-emerging Democratic Party, and the vice president was particularly alarmed at that turn of events: as one commentator remarks, "[at] no time during their long, eventful relationship did Jackson and Van Buren differ so markedly as during the nullification crisis" (Curtis, 1970, 44). In crude political terms, Jackson saw the crisis from the perspective of a man who had already won his second contest for the White House. Van Buren, looking ahead to 1836, was keen to take a more cautious approach if Southern support was to be retained for his own campaign that year.

Having vetoed the re-chartering of the Bank of the United States during his first term, Jackson then moved on to the next stage of his campaign for financial reform: removing the federal deposits held at the Bank and placing them in a number of state-level 'pet' banks. Amos Kendall was the key architect of this part of Jackson's policy, but Van Buren told Kendall face-to-face that he opposed any removal, believing – correctly, as future events would prove – that "any rash move from the Administration could produce an economic collapse with its inevitable political backlash" (Niven, 1983, 331). Jackson might be able to resist that backlash, but his successor as president might not. In other words, by 1833 Van Buren could already see the outline of his likely inheritance from Jackson and was alarmed at how difficult it would be to manage.

Jackson remained determined to remove the funds and place them with the state banks, however, and by now Van Buren recognised that he was faced with a dilemma which even his extraordinary political skills could not resolve. To succeed to the White House he could not openly disagree with the president's Bank policy, but the consequences of that policy might cause his own presidency to fail completely. Faced with a classic political bind, Van Buren chose to secure his election, hoping, as wise politicians often do, that 'something would turn up' to help him deal with the consequences later. But nothing did.

When Jackson was censured by the Senate on March 28, 1834, for withholding documents relating to his action against the Bank (a huge misjudgement by Clay, as the move only increased Jackson's popularity) the president drafted a written protest which he delivered the following month (UCSB-APP, April 15, 1834). Van Buren was deeply concerned about Jackson's wording in the protest, believing that it claimed far more inherent power for the presidency than had ever been envisaged by Jefferson. Jackson's deviation from key Jeffersonian principles continued to concern Van Buren throughout the rest of Jackson's second term.

The key features of Jacksonian Democracy – which would now serve as the policy platform on which Van Buren was to campaign for the presidency two years later – had been fully established by 1834. Federal funds would be made available for genuinely national improvements but not for local projects. Any remaining influence held by the Bank would be curtailed and the institution itself destroyed. The power of central government would be limited but not to the extent advocated by Calhoun and the nullifiers. Pamphlets written by Northern abolitionists would not be allowed to reach the South through the network of federal postmasters. And despite Jackson's desire for Texas, restraint would be exercised to head off any internal party disputes over the extension of slavery.[33]

Van Buren had served as an energetic vice president, in effect a key (at times *the* key) political adviser to Andrew Jackson. John Adams had enjoyed no such standing during his eight years as vice president, and Washington had rarely consulted him about presidential decisions. By contrast, Jackson and Van Buren had worked closely together across both of Jackson's four-year terms, with Van Buren often attempting (with limited success) to moderate the president's impulsive behaviour and decision-making. Both Adams and Van Buren knew that they were likely to inherit the senior office. Adams's challenge was to succeed a charismatic predecessor, but Van Buren faced not only that issue but also the need to deal with his predecessor's legacy which, in economic matters at least, was always going to prove problematic. In the end, Van Buren's more engaged vice presidency had not allowed him to

[33] Texas had declared independence from Mexico in March 1836, but Mexico refused to recognise its separation.

shape his own inheritance any more fully than Adams's more restrained approach had shaped his. A century-and-a-half later, another incoming president would also find that his years as vice president would hinder rather than help him to escape from the shadow of his transformational predecessor.

Vice President George H. W. Bush (1981-89)

Ronald Reagan's early years in the White House showed a sense of purpose, direction and energy which had rarely been seen in the presidency since his early hero Franklin D. Roosevelt had come to power almost fifty years earlier. Reagan's image radiated 'presidential' in the kind of dignified, restrained, humorous and respectful way that had last been seen with John F. Kennedy. And his agenda was totally focused on three key items: a large income-tax cut, significantly reduced public spending, and funding a major military build-up to challenge the Soviets.

As with Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, so too with Ronald Reagan in the 1980s: it was left to each man's successor to deal with the fallout from some of the more problematic consequences of his predecessor's economic policies. The later admission by Reagan's Office of Management and Budget director David Stockman that "George Bush had been right all along. What they were advocating was 'voodoo economics'" would prove to be accurate (Stockman, 1986, 323). By the time Reagan left office in 1989, the United States was running the largest annual budget deficit in its history, and the national debt had grown from $1 trillion to $3 trillion during his eight years in power. Bush's economic inheritance from Reagan would track Van Buren's from Jackson, although Van Buren's recession (1837-44) would prove longer-lasting than Bush's (1990-91).

In its early years, the Reagan administration succeeded in cutting direct taxes and increasing defence spending, but the inevitable ballooning of the federal deficit would soon cause widespread alarm. In fact, Reagan was forced to raise taxes in disguised and euphemistic ways – through gasoline tax and increases in social security payroll taxes – in order to mitigate the worst effects of the economic instability. Recovery set in during 1983, however, with

gross domestic product growing to 7.3 percent the following year and helping Reagan to sail to re-election in 1984, winning 59 percent of the popular vote and 525 electoral votes.[34]

When the stock market crashed on October 19, 1987, Bush's hopes for a smooth succession were seriously dented. Both Iran-Contra, the administration's secret scheme to sell arms to Iran and use the profits to fund (unlawfully) the Nicaraguan Contras, and the then-record budget deficit, comprised two key problems in Bush's inheritance from Reagan. The latter compromised Bush's own presidency, while the former returned to haunt him in the closing days of his 1992 re-election campaign.

Eight years as vice president had done little to sharpen Bush's public image or allow the country to conclude that he was anything more than Reagan's capable if colourless successor. He had not been excluded from dealing with the president as Adams had been, but neither had he operated as the kind of active presidential adviser that Van Buren had shown himself to be. Like Adams and Van Buren, Bush would succeed to the presidency having to deal with a widespread sense that his predecessor had been a truly transformational figure who was now being followed by a relatively pale understudy.

If Adams's nominal supporters had been divided as to whether the new president really *was* a loyal Federalist (a problem which had not faced Van Buren, given his key role in shaping the new Democratic Party), Bush's own party was also deeply suspicious about his loyalty to the conservative regime which Reagan had brought to power in the 1980s. Never really viewed by the new GOP as 'one of us', Bush would face vigorous internal party challenges that would seriously damage his re-election prospects four years later.

[34] Reagan won 97% of the electoral college vote that year (525-13), a margin exceeded only by Washington in 1789 and 1792 when he was unopposed in both elections, by FDR's 98% in 1936 (525-8), and by James Monroe, who was returned without opposition in 1820.

5 – Election to the presidency

John Adams defeats Thomas Jefferson – 1796

With the impending departure of the charismatic Washington after eight years in office, none of the main contenders to replace him were thought likely to be able to unite the country as capably as the outgoing president had done. Adams, Hamilton, Jay and Jefferson were all interested in assuming the role. With Jay elected governor of New York in 1795 and Hamilton forced to concede that he could not attract the necessary votes, the former treasury secretary then urged his supporters to vote for both Adams and Thomas Pinckney, who had succeeded Adams as minister to England.[35]

Pinckney hailed from South Carolina, one of three key swing states in that year's election. Hamilton's declared intention was to secure the vice presidency for Pinckney over Jefferson, but his more obvious hope was that Pinckney might in fact emerge ahead of Adams. It seems that Adams was aware of the scheming around Pinckney but did not want to widen the schism in his own party and jeopardise his own administration by publicly adverting to it. The Federalists maintained control of both houses that year, and in the presidential election Pinckney received 59 votes, with Adams on 71, only three votes ahead of Jefferson on 68, and Aaron Burr on 30. For a second time the (moderate) Federalist Adams had been damaged by the (High) Federalist Hamilton's manoeuvrings against him. As president of the Senate, it fell to Adams to announce his own election as president.

Adams's opening political capital

Where did this leave newly-elected John Adams in terms of his 'opening political capital' as defined using the eleven criteria outlined earlier in this chapter? Any such judgement must obviously remain subjective, but based on a review of the conclusions of key biographers and other analysts of his political career, the table on page 73 below sets out a high-level

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[35] Until the Twelfth Amendment was ratified in 1804, electoral college members voted for two candidates. The candidate with the highest number of votes was elected president and the candidate with the second highest number of votes, irrespective of his 'party' affiliation, became vice president.

assessment of Adams's opening political capital as he assumed office in 1797, comparing it to that of Van Buren in 1837 and Bush in 1989. A single '+' indicates that there was some positive capital associated with each man under that criterion, with double or triple pluses suggests a stronger stock of capital. A single '-' suggests a sense among biographers and key commentators that his political capital was deficient under that heading, with double or triple dashes suggesting a more obvious lack of capital in those cases. While the estimate of a president's strength or weakness under any *individual* heading remains open to challenge, his aggregate 'score' over all eleven headings seems likely to offer a fair assessment of his standing at the outset of his presidency.

Adams's past career experience receives the strongest rating under this scheme, and he also achieves a reasonably strong rating for his perceived management skills (based on his service in semi-executive roles during the Continental Congress). He accrues moderately positive (but not outstanding) ratings for his leadership skills, his experience gained as vice president, his electoral mandate (not overwhelming), the economic and military 'shape of the country' as he inherited its executive leadership, and his standing in Congress (with the Federalists having held their majority in the Senate and increased their House majority in that year's elections).

Given the narrowness of his win in 1796, however, Adams had no electoral coattails, and his ratings in comparison to the president he succeeded and the regime whose leadership he now assumed were both negative. Given this, there was always a likelihood that he would be challenged from within his own group by a 'more faithful follower' of Washington, a role that Alexander Hamilton had assumed even before the election of 1976. All-in-all, Adams's opening political capital as he assumed the presidency was positive, but weakly so. He would have to develop and display significant independent authority as president if he hoped to boost that capital before facing re-election in 1800.

Martin Van Buren defeats William Henry Harrison – 1836

Van Buren was nominated unopposed at the May 1835 Democratic convention, with Jackson wanting to balance the ticket by appointing a Westerner as Van Buren's running mate. The

leading candidate was Congressman Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, but Johnson's mulatto mistress and their two daughters made him immensely controversial in the South. Van Buren himself wanted William Cabell Rives, a former senator from Virginia and minister to France, but he deferred to Jackson's wishes. Johnson became the nominee by 178 votes to Rives's 87, and a furious Rives broke his friendship of many years with Van Buren. After the election, and following his reappointment to the Senate, Rives was to lead the Conservative Democrats, a group that would cause Van Buren immense difficulty across his four years in office.

Jackson's contempt for the Bank of the United States was part of his larger sense that paper-money not only imperilled the nation's economy but also degraded the moral sturdiness of its citizens as well. This led him in July 1836 to issue the 'Specie Circular', an executive order that required payment for all government land to be made in 'hard money' – silver or gold – rather than using paper money. When Congress voted to repeal the circular, Jackson pocket-vetoed the measure at 11:45pm on his last night as president, March 3, 1837.

The Circular was also intended to neutralise the effects of the Deposit Act of 1836, which required all federal surpluses to be returned to the states. Jackson had doubts as to the wisdom of that Act but signed it because "[such] a vast outpouring of federal money into the coffers of the states was certain to enhance Van Buren's electoral chances" (Remini, 1984, 324). Van Buren supported both measures as a way of tying himself to Jackson before the election, but the hard money policy would eventually drive both Rives and New York Democratic Senator Nathaniel P. Tallmadge to join the Whigs. By then, Calhoun's latest move had also taken him away from the Democrats, leaving Van Buren to preside just as the party, no longer held together by the force of Jackson's personality, was beginning to splinter.

The issue that would define American politics for the next twenty years was also now coming into focus. Throughout the 1836 campaign, Van Buren stayed close to the centre ground, despite determined Whig efforts to link him to Northern anti-slavery sentiment. His supporters insisted that the vice president's position was clear: "Congress should not interfere with slavery in the states; it was 'impolitic' to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia; and agitation on the subject endangered the Union" (Shade, 1998, 471). The

United States had been created by a series of compromises, and only continuing compromise would save it. Van Buren therefore remained opposed to any centrally directed abolition of the South's 'peculiar institution'.

The campaign of 1836 was difficult, tight and unpleasant. Van Buren faced Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, running as a Whig; William Henry Harrison of Ohio, running as both a Whig and an Anti-Mason[36]; Hugh Lawson White of Tennessee, running as the 'Southern candidate'; and Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina, also running as a Whig. Despite a clear win in the electoral college (Van Buren 170, Harrison 73, White 26 and Webster 14) and carrying a majority of the states (14 out of 25), the popular majority for Van Buren was only 28,000. This compared with the majority of 114,000 achieved by Jackson in 1832. Van Buren's 57% of the electoral college vote was also sharply down on Jackson's 77% in 1832.[37] As he came into office, Van Buren was acutely aware that action was needed to repair the damage that Jackson had caused both to the party and to the national economy. Whether the uncharismatic but well-organised Van Buren could manage the transition from his charismatic but aggressive predecessor was an open question in 1836. By 1840 it had been decided in the negative.

Van Buren's opening political capital

As set out in the table on page 73 below, Van Buren enjoyed a significantly higher level of political capital in 1837 than Adams had enjoyed forty years earlier at the start of *his* presidency. Like Adams, Van Buren had gained impressive experience before the vice presidency, but Adams's lacklustre vice presidency was outshone by Van Buren's more energetic one. With his past experience of party management, Van Buren was also assessed as having strong managerial skills and good leadership skills. His healthy margin in the electoral college also gave him a more robust presidential mandate and more extensive

[36] A single-issue party based in the North-East from the 1820s, the Anti-Masons later took positions on other issues and eventually joined with the Whigs in the 1830s.
[37] Van Buren's running-mate, Richard M. Johnson, polled one vote short of a majority, so his election as vice president was decided in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

coattails than Adams, with the Democrats gaining nine Senate seats in 1836 and maintaining their majority in the House, albeit with fewer seats.

Although Van Buren was generally perceived as much less personally impressive than his predecessor, the likelihood of an internal challenge, although present, was much lower that Adams has faced or than Bush (or Truman) would have to deal with. His standing with the Jacksonian regime was generally good, better than Adams's had been with his own Federalist group, and far stronger than Bush's would prove to be with the newly conservative GOP. Van Buren's greatest handicap was his 'general inheritance' from Jackson: the economy was unstable, and a crash was likely even as Van Buren was inaugurated in March 1837. If the economic challenges could be withstood, however, Van Buren had more than sufficient political capital to embark on a relatively successful presidency. But economic difficulties soon overwhelmed the new administration, and Van Buren's presidency would prove to be almost completely doomed from the outset.

George H. W. Bush defeats Michael Dukakis – 1988

By 1988, even after serving eight years as vice president, there was no clear public sense of what George Bush really stood for. He did not appear charged with the same reforming zeal that Reagan and the newly-energised GOP had brought to Washington in 1980. And although there was still a constituency of moderate Republicans in the GOP at that time, Bush had done little to attract them to his candidacy and even less to foster any 'Bush Republicans' who might rally to him during the campaign.

Bush benefited from the wave of affection on which Reagan had left office, but Reagan's greatest misstep, Iran-Contra, also continued to haunt Bush throughout the 1988 campaign. It remained unclear how 'in the loop' Bush had been during that debacle, or even whether he wanted to claim to have been in the loop at all. Bush also suffered on the tax issue in a way that his boss had managed to avoid. Reagan had agreed to some tax increases during his time in office, but conservative supporters seemed mesmerised by the rhetoric he used to denounce tax rises in principle rather than the reality of actually raising them in practice. As such – extraordinarily – they gave Reagan a free pass on the issue. Bush, destined to be

remembered forever for his 1980 'voodoo economics' remark, actually found himself more associated with (and blamed for) the Reagan tax increases than Reagan himself had been.

Winning the 1988 nomination after a distinctly poor early showing, Bush was nominated smoothly at the convention. His exhortation to Americans to become 'a thousand points of light' would prove to be the second-best-remembered line from that speech. The one with the longest life and the most enduring consequences for Bush came just a little later when he boldly exclaimed: 'Read my lips: no new taxes'.

Bush's campaign was run by Treasury Secretary James Baker and political consultant Lee Atwater, who painted Bush's opponent, Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, as a parochial second-rater whose only experience of government was as the hopelessly liberal governor of a hopelessly liberal state.[38] When convicted murderer Willie Horton was released from prison in June 1986 on his tenth furlough, he never returned, and in April 1987 he blinded and tortured a man and raped his fiancée. When Horton was arrested and jailed for life (again), Dukakis reluctantly signed a bill outlawing furloughs for first-degree murderers. A television advert produced by a Political Action Group technically separate from the Bush campaign caused controversy when it showed Horton's face, drawing inescapable attention to the fact that this was "a violent black man who had raped a white woman" (Pitney, 2019, 149).[39] Charges of calculated racism were immediately levelled at the Bush team.

Political scientist John J. Pitney argues that it is both easy and reasonable to criticise the vagueness, even emptiness, of Bush's 1988 campaign. He ran a negative, issueless campaign which won him the election but deprived him of a mandate. It was obvious that he had little interest in domestic policy; his agenda was incoherent and "voters did not associate him with a big initiative such as the tax cut that Reagan had championed eight years earlier" (Pitney, 2019, 172). There was no overarching idea to Bush's campaign and his one big promise ('no new taxes') was a commitment *not* to change course rather than to set out on any bold new direction. The contrast between the hands-on but apparently aimless Bush, and Reagan, who radiated inspirational leadership despite his hands-*off* management style, was stark.

[38] Baker stood down as treasury secretary on August 17, 1988, to direct Bush's campaign full-time.
[39] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZToNflF1z8 (date accessed: May 22, 2024),

Nonetheless, Bush took 53.4 percent of the popular vote in 1988 to Dukakis's 45.7 percent, winning the electoral college by 426 to 111. This was significantly down on Reagan's 1984 landslide, and the *Washington Post's* headline caught the obvious implication: 'Reagan's 1984 Voter Coalition Is Weakened In Bush Victory'. If anything made clear the difficult political position in which Bush now found himself, this headline did.

Bush made history by being the only sitting vice president elected to the White House since Van Buren in 1836, but he also made a kind of 'anti-history' too. He was the first candidate to win a presidential election while his party lost ground in the Senate, the House, the governorships, and the state legislatures. This created a significant problem for Bush in Congress: not only were both houses controlled by the opposition, but his own party members owed him little electoral gratitude. As a result, "Republicans liked and respected Bush, but they did not fear him" (Pitney, 2019, 168).

Reagan's immediate legacy to Bush resembled what Andrew Jackson had bequeathed to Martin Van Buren a century and a half earlier. An enormously charismatic leader was replaced by an 'understudy' who was accepted rather than actively embraced by his party or by the country at large. From Jackson, Van Buren had inherited an economy destabilised by his predecessor's destruction of the Bank of the United States, his transfer of federal deposits to state banks, and his promulgation of the Specie Circular. From Reagan, Bush had inherited an economy more robust than might have been expected following the crash of 1987, but also an annual federal deficit of $100 billion which had been mounting since the tax cuts of 1981.

As one Bush biographer has noted, "[no] incoming president has ever faced a similar budgetary monster, a direct legacy of the Reagan years" (Parmet, 2001, 359). The four chapter titles of Timothy Naftali's book about Bush's presidency capture the main themes of his single term with admirable clarity: 'Cleaning Up Reagan's Mess' leads to 'Unexpected Greatness' and then 'Commander in Chief' before 'The Collapse' (Naftali, 2007). But Bush's main problem was his standing in comparison to the man he had succeeded. If the public

image of the departing Reagan was clear, sharp and appreciative, Americans in early 1989 had only a vague impression of their new president.

Bush's opening political capital

The table on page 73 assesses Bush's opening political capital in 1989, comparing it to that of Adams in 1797 and Van Buren in 1837. Bush's managerial skills were considered to be first-rate and his clear mandate from the electoral college was also a significant advantage. His more moderate scores in relation to perceptions of his leadership skill, past career experience, and vice presidential experience reflected the public's sense of their new president as something of a blur. Nobody quite knew what he stood for.

Given that the Republicans lost two seats in the House and one in the Senate, Bush had no electoral coattails in 1988. The GOP was the minority party in both houses, meaning that there was little prospect of Bush being able to exercise strong legislative leadership in Congress.[40] This would prove a significant disadvantage in dealing with his challenging economic inheritance. Nor was it clear whether Reagan's gamble on trusting Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev would pay off. Bush's real problems, however, were that his standing in comparison to his immediate predecessor was low, his standing with the 'Reagan Republicans' was even lower, and the probability of an internal challenge from 'more faithful followers' of Reagan was high, as the pressure exerted by Newt Gingrich and Patrick Buchanan would soon show. All-in-all, Bush began his presidency with negative political capital, where Adams's opening level had been moderately positive, and Van Buren's had been significantly positive. It would require a sustained and significant display of independent authority across the next four years to generate a closing level of political capital that might position Bush positively for re-election in 1992.

[40] Reagan's Neo-Liberal order took longer to gain a congressional majority than FDR's New Deal had taken.

Table 1

Opening Political Capital

	John Adams (1797)	Martin Van Buren (1837)	George H. W. Bush (1989)
1 - Perceived leadership skills	+	+ +	+
2 - Perceived managerial skills	+ +	+ + +	+ + +
3 - Past career experience	+ + +	+ + +	+
4 - Experience as vice president	+	+ + +	+
5 – Electoral mandate	+	+ +	+ +
6 – General inheritance	+	- - -	- -
7 – Party controls Congress	+	+	- - -
8 – Coattails	-	+	-
9 – Standing v/v predecessor	- -	- -	- -
10 – Standing v/v ‘regime’	- -	+ +	- - -
11 – Likelihood of internal challenge	- - -	-	- - -
Summary of Opening Political Capital	**+ 2**	**+ 11**	**- 6**

6 – The Presidency

A key proposal of this study is that the extent to which a president develops and displays *independent authority* during his term closely tracks the rise or fall in his political capital across those four years. His closing level of political capital then serves as a loose guide to his likely re-election prospects. Key moments when Adams, Van Buren and Bush developed or failed to develop independent presidential authority are considered in this section, and each man's closing capital is then assessed and compared against his opening capital four years earlier. As will be seen, the difference between their opening and closing levels was strikingly different in each case.

The extent to which each president established or failed to establish his own independent authority during his single term is examined here in relation to four specific issues. The first looks at his cabinet appointments, not only because they indicate the extent to which he set out to demonstrate independence from his predecessor, but also because in the case of Adams (and later Truman) they were so closely linked to the likelihood of an internal party challenge to his authority. The second examines key domestic developments across each president's four years, while the third considers the key international and military challenges they faced in office.

The fourth heading, which this study suggests may be the most important of all in tracking a president's net gain or loss of authority, deals with the internal challenges each faced from fellow party leaders who considered themselves to be 'more faithful followers' of the new regime and the former president. Truman's outstanding success in facing down those challengers will be considered in the next chapter. Van Buren faced a more opaque set of internal party opponents, but those who confronted Adams and Bush were far more open and determined, and they contributed directly to the derailing of each man's re-election bid.

1 - Cabinet

John Adams's decision about the composition of the cabinet was his first opportunity to display independent authority as president. But by choosing to retain the members of

Washington's cabinet, Adams missed his chance: his view that continuity was essential to establish public confidence in the new administration was understandable, but in retrospect it is clear that Adams undermined himself from the outset.

Timothy Pickering of Massachusetts remained as secretary of state, Oliver Wolcott of Connecticut as treasury secretary, and James McHenry of Maryland as secretary of war. Appointed by Washington, all three men owed their loyalty wholly to Hamilton. Adams's key ally within the cabinet was a latecomer, Benjamin Stoddert of Maryland, who became the nation's first secretary of the navy in 1798, although Attorney-General Charles Lee also provided strong support for the president across his whole term. Adams made decisions by himself, having first asked cabinet members to provide written opinions before he made up his mind about an issue. He believed that once the president had made a decision, his cabinet members would then execute it faithfully and diligently. This never happened quite as smoothly as he had expected.[41]

One student of Adams's presidency has sought to explain the new president's decision to retain Washington's cabinet (Brown, 1975). There was no precedent in 1797 for changing personnel on the departure of a president. Adams was also aware of the difficulties Washington had faced in recruiting competent men to head government departments, not least because of the low pay and minimal prestige attaching to the roles. He also feared that any cabinet changes might be resisted both by the vice president, Jefferson, and also by those within his own party who held the new president in low regard. But his decision to retain these departmental secretaries was a mistake; not just a lost opportunity for Adams to display authority at the outset of his administration, but also a development that institutionalised among his closest advisers the contempt that many High Federalists felt towards him.

Like John Adams, Martin Van Buren initially retained all of his predecessor's cabinet appointees. The less-than-outstanding John Forsyth of Georgia was secretary of state (having been appointed by Jackson on Van Buren's strong recommendation in 1834), while the more capable Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire remained as treasury secretary. Amos Kendall of

[41] Adams was the only one of the four presidents considered here who, while serving as his predecessor's vice president, had been excluded from cabinet meetings.

Kentucky was postmaster-general and Mahlon Dickerson of New Jersey served as secretary of the navy. Benjamin F. Butler of New York, an old friend of Van Buren's, remained as attorney-general.

To ensure regional balance in Van Buren's cabinet, the position of secretary of war needed to be held by a Southerner. The president first offered the position to the man he had wanted to become vice president, William C. Rives of Virginia, but Rives declined because he wanted to be appointed secretary of state instead. Van Buren recognised the problems that the conservative Rives might cause the administration if he remained in the Senate, but he had no intention of displacing Forsyth to appoint a strong rival in his place. The War Department finally went to Joel Poinsett, who had led the unionists in South Carolina during the Nullification Crisis. Van Buren's cabinet would offer none of the obstructionism that Adams's had displayed.

By the time George Bush became president, the nature of the cabinet had changed completely. No longer close advisers to the president, cabinet members now served as senior managers of government departments and agencies, with political management of the administration now tightly focused on the president's own White House staff. As Theodore Lowi remarks, late twentieth-century cabinet members "are generally newcomers and outsiders; they have little if any party experience; and they have almost nothing in common except their loyalty to or dependence upon the president" (Lowi, 1985, 120).

The late twentieth-century cabinet had also grown in size as its relevance declined: there were seventeen members of Bush's cabinet (compared to Adams's five and Van Buren's six), and Vice President Dan Quayle was now inside the room from which Vice President John Adams had been excluded. Key Bush appointees included Secretary of State James Baker, Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, and Secretary of HUD Jack Kemp, while most of the others reflected the political need to spread senior appointments regionally and by ethnicity. As a body, however, Bush's cabinet was largely irrelevant. His two Republican challengers, Buchanan and Gingrich, both of whom would do immense damage to his presidency, came from outside that group.

Bush suffered a major humiliation and early challenge to his authority when the Senate rejected his first nominee for secretary of defense, former senator John Tower of Texas, because of allegations about Tower's excessive drinking. Tower's rejection marked the first time a cabinet nominee of a newly-elected president had been rejected by the Senate – a huge embarrassment to Bush in his early days as Reagan's successor.

Tower's rejection would prove not only embarrassing for Bush but politically dangerous too. After Tower's nomination failed, Bush appointed Minority House Whip Dick Cheney of Wyoming in his place, and Newt Gingrich of Georgia was chosen to replace Cheney. The new minority whip would emerge as one of two key Republicans whose opposition to Bush – and, in particular, to Bush's alleged betrayal of Reagan's legacy on tax – would do much damage to his 1992 re-election prospects,

John Adams had displayed no authority, independent or otherwise, when he chose to retain a cabinet whose most senior members were fundamentally disloyal to him and would (as discussed later) actively conspire against him in favour of Hamilton. Martin Van Buren had also displayed little authority when he chose to retain (in the main) his predecessor's cabinet, and he similarly fell short in his inability to bring into the cabinet a now disaffected former ally who he suspected might be more dangerous to him outside than within. George Bush's attempt to display authority in forming his cabinet was seriously compromised by the Tower debacle. None of the three had covered themselves in glory in one of their key early presidential decisions.

2 - Key domestic issues

The key issue facing John Adams across his presidency was international – how to prevent a war with France. The key issue facing Martin Van Buren was domestic – how to respond to economic tumult and reshape the government's treasury arrangements. George Bush faced two key issues, one international (the ending of the Cold War and a brief but decisive war in the Middle East), the other domestic (repairing a damaged economy). Each faced these challenges with skill and determination, but Adams's and Van Buren's successes came too late to save their presidencies, while Bush's international achievements were overshadowed by a

domestic *volte-face* which outraged a party just setting out on its long march to the populist right.

The challenge of preventing war with France brought significant domestic consequences for John Adams. With the president back at home at Quincy in 1798 (he habitually returned to his Massachusetts farm over the long summer recess), the cabinet effectively agreed to Hamilton's demand that he should be appointed second-in-command to George Washington in the new army being created in case of war with France. Of the four presidencies considered in this study, this was the only one in which a retired predecessor returned to take up an appointment within his successor's administration. Nor was this a wholly decorative appointment: Washington told Secretary of War McHenry, in remarks intended to be relayed to Adams, that if he was not allowed to select his own officers he would resign (Fitzpatrick, 1931, vol. 3, 312). No other former president was to press a successor in such a forceful way, which one Adams biographer describes as 'unconscionable' (Ferling, 1992, 360). Adams's acquiescence displayed understandable weakness: no other national leader would have dared to oppose such a demand from George Washington.

The summer of 1798 was the high point of the Adams administration. A national hero after the French 'XYZ affair' (considered below), Congress gave the president both a Department of the Navy, which he had repeatedly asked for, as well as a set of Alien and Seditions Acts, which he had not. Encouraged by Federalist 'Ultras', Congress had decided that this legislation was essential at a time when it seemed "quite possible that all-out war with France … would have become either the cause or the excuse for civil war" (Brown, 1975, 121).

Adams's decision to sign this legislation was "a step that would subsequently be seen as the greatest blot on his presidency" (Ferling, 2004, 111). If his determination not to engage in a dangerous war with France marked the moment when Adams finally displayed firm authority as president, his acquiescence in the Alien and Sedition Acts showed an equivalent failure of authority in the face of howling protests from within his own party and a significant section of the country at large. He did (as is discussed below) later exercise firm authority by sacking two members of his cabinet, but that was a desperate measure in the final year of his presidency. His refusal to bend to demands that he should ask Congress for a declaration of

war, and his later decision to send peace envoys to France without consulting his cabinet and in the face of loud protests from within his own party, marked Adams's most significant displays of independent presidential authority.

Rebellion against the federal government's tax programme struck Pennsylvania in 1798-99 under the leadership of John Fries, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. A subsequent uprising in Virginia in 1800 led by an enslaved blacksmith, Gabriel Prosser, fuelled concern that the administration might be unable to control the country's slave population. Democratic-Republicans were determined that Prosser's slave rebellion should be firmly repressed, but they saw in Fries's revolt an opportunity to proclaim that the Federalist party planned to confiscate the possessions of ordinary Americans and reduce the people to the status of European peasantry.

Sentenced to death in May 1800, Fries was pardoned by Adams in a decision that showed courage in the face of the widespread outrage which he knew would follow.[42] Just as Truman would incur the wrath of Southern members of his own party by desegregating the armed forces and federal workforce six months before the election of 1948, Adams incurred the wrath of Northern members of his own party at much the same pre-election moment. But Truman, as will be seen, had done much to develop his own independent authority as president in the previous four years, while Adams had done significantly less to establish his. His decisions to re-open negotiations with France and pardon Fries showed determination and courage, but his inability to generate significant public support meant that few of his actions could ever be considered 'authoritative'.

One commentator has described the situation inherited by Martin Van Buren as by far the worst in the early history of the United States at least until Abraham Lincoln succeeded James Buchanan in 1861 (Hatfield, 1997). As noted earlier, the issues facing the new president on his first days in office made for a formidable list of challenges. They included the continuing controversy over Jackson's Specie Circular; the fallout from the Bank War; the requirement under the Deposit Act for the federal government to pay the huge surplus from extensive

[42] Prosser and twenty-five of his followers were hanged.

sales of federal lands to the states; the ongoing Seminole War in Florida; and mounting pressure for the annexation of Texas.

The Panic of 1837, the key event of Van Buren's presidency, began less than a fortnight after his inauguration when a number of financial firms failed in New York City and the cotton market began to collapse in New Orleans. Daily failures then followed as bankers in the East found themselves unable to meet the demand for hard currency caused by the Specie Circular's requirement for gold and silver to be moved to Western states in order to pay for land acquired there. In London, the Bank of England became alarmed at Britain's large capital outflows to the United States and raised interest rates to check them. With specie reserves depleted and overseas borrowings now expensive, more banks in the East and South began to call in their loans.

Van Buren was plunged into an immediate and deeply serious crisis. After daily meetings with the cabinet throughout May 1837 he decided to call a special session of Congress for September to address the panic. The British minister to Washington, Henry S. Fox, "reported that … Van Buren was likely to be overthrown" (Library of Congress - British Foreign Office Correspondence, 5:314, 208-13). One twentieth-century biographer has remarked that in this crisis "Van Buren never knew what hit him" (Widmer, 2007, 101). But given the reservations he had harboured about many of Jackson's key decisions, all of which Van Buren knew would have serious consequences for his own presidency, it might be argued more accurately that the new president knew *exactly* what was about to hit him.

The split already emerging in the Democratic Party now opened dramatically. Radical Democrats wanted an immediate separation of the federal government from all banks, but Conservative Democrats, with Rives and Tallmadge acting as their leaders in Congress, rushed to the defence of the state banks. Their ideas were publicised through a new newspaper, *The Madisonian*, which raised the status of Conservative Democrats almost to that of a third party. Rives and Tallmadge also wanted to see the Specie Circular repealed and paper money permitted for payments in place of the mandatory hard currency.

Further cabinet discussions led to no consensus and Van Buren opted (reluctantly) not to repeal the Circular. Consternation ensued among New York bankers and merchants. Van Buren eventually proposed four initiatives to deal with the economic crisis, not all of which were to his predecessor's liking. Jackson indicated his support for the new president's proposal for an Independent Treasury – 'independent' in the sense that the treasury would be independent of all banks, state or national. The federal government would "[deposit] its gold and silver coins in federal subtreasury offices throughout the nation rather than in the many 'pet banks' in which government deposits had been housed since Jackson withdrew all federal monies from the national bank in 1833" (Ellis, 2020, 50). Whig calls for a return to a national bank were deflected by blaming the current crisis on the under-regulation of the pet banks.

But Jackson also believed that Van Buren's other actions to meet the crisis were much too moderate, and this criticism from his predecessor was to cause the new president significant problems. Just at the moment when he might have been able to develop his own independent presidential authority, Van Buren was having to invest considerable energy in dealing with criticism from the predecessor who (as Van Buren knew but could never openly admit) had created many of these problems in the first place. He had reluctantly accepted Jackson's various presidential mis-steps in the hope – as noted earlier – that when he himself became president, new circumstances would allow him to correct them. But unfortunately for Van Buren, what emerged as the defining features of his first year in office were financial instability, widespread panic, and economic depression.

Van Buren's Independent Treasury took more than three years to gain congressional approval. He consistently lacked the personal authority to force Congress to act on his proposal, despite enjoying a strong majority in the Senate (35-17) and a more moderate one in the House (128-112). Its eventual passage owed much to the work of two of Van Buren's staunchest advocates – Silas Wright of New York, who chaired the Senate Finance Committee, and Caleb Cambreleng, also of New York, who chaired the House Committee on Ways and Means. It also owed much to James K. Polk of Tennessee, speaker from 1835 to 1839, who robustly excluded Conservative Democrats from all House committees.

A loose coalition of Whigs (Clay and Webster) and Conservative Democrats (Rives and Tallmadge), with Calhoun tacking in and out to support or oppose the administration as opportunity warranted, frustrated Van Buren's scheme until the final year of his presidency. By then the House had passed the Independent Treasury bill three times but the Senate rejected it every time, and the Democrats' congressional paralysis was by now beginning to affect the party's fortunes at state-level as well. As electoral college votes were decided at state level, this boded ill for the president's re-election prospects that year.

By the time Van Buren was finally able to sign the Independent Treasury into law on July 4, 1840, the states had grown indignant that a professedly Jeffersonian president had chosen to ignore them for four years and expend so much of his energy at federal level. By acting in this way, Van Buren found himself following exactly the same path that Jackson had followed in the course of his own presidency and subject to the same complaints from the states. Crucially, however, Jackson's personality, forcefulness and residual public approval had allowed him to weather the storm in ways that Van Buren could not.

George Bush's economic inheritance, though less immediately dramatic than Van Buren's, was no less challenging. Criticising Bush's attempts to deal with the mounting federal deficit would provide an opportunity for the first of the two internal party opponents who would do much to derail Bush's re-election prospects in 1992.

By 1990, the deficit was skyrocketing, forecast to hit $171 billion (or 4% of GDP) in the next fiscal year. Under the provisions of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act of 1985, any failure to lower the deficit to $64 billion by October 1, 1990, would invoke an automatic cut of 40% in all parts of the federal budget, including defence spending. Conservative political advice was that Bush should allow the cuts to happen and blame the Democrats. Over-confident that he could sell a tax rise to his own party, however, and reasoning that going into the 1992 election as the architect of a recession would prove more damaging than running as the architect of a modest tax hike, Bush agreed to a budget deal that contained 'tax revenue increases'. No single decision did as much to damage Bush's authority within his own party.

Conservative reaction to Bush's tax rise 'betrayal' was devastating, inflicting a political wound that would never heal. Minority Whip Gingrich was "already jumping on the Bush 'betrayal' of the 'new right' and pumping up his own ambitions" (Parmet, 2001, 440). Having agreed to the deal in private, Gingrich then refused to be photographed with other Republican leaders in the White House Rose Garden when the deal was announced. It eventually passed the House but with the support of only 32 of the 168 Republican members. Bush's poll numbers tumbled, and at the 1990 midterms the Republicans lost one Senate seat, eight House seats, and one governorship. This was not a particularly bad outcome for a party which was already in the minority in both houses, but the drop in Bush's own poll ratings was ominous.

A kind of cognitive dissonance seemed to afflict Republicans in their recollection of tax increases during the Reagan-Bush era. While unrestrained abuse rained down on Bush when he accepted an increase in the top rate from 28% to 31.5% in 1990, conservatives had already air-brushed out of history any recollection of the Reagan 'reforms' of 1982 which Richard Darman, Bush's director of OMB, characterised as "the largest single tax increase in history" (Darman, 1996, 72-3). Those Reagan tax hikes were needed to address the recession that resulted in 1982 precisely because of Reagan's tax cuts the previous year. The original cuts were long remembered as a spectacular act of dynamic political leadership: the following year's 'correction' was quickly forgotten. Reagan had the personal and political authority to push through a tax increase. Bush had neither.

Even the fact that a Republican president had effectively overseen the end of the Cold War could not neutralise the horror felt by conservatives at the prospect of a fairly modest tax increase (Naftali, 2007, 99). The Gingrich rebellion gained traction because a new norm had now taken hold among conservatives, with "opposing all tax increases the single most important test of philosophical loyalty" (Nelson, 2020, 79). If image is everything in politics, Gingrich was now positioning himself as a 'more faithful follower' of Reagan than Reagan's own successor. As High Federalists had compromised Adams's re-election prospects in 1796, and Conservative Democrats had helped to weaken Van Buren's in 1840, so too would Gingrich's appeal to more faithful followers of Reagan (not to mention Patrick Buchanan's culture wars offensive, considered below) severely damage Bush's own bid for re-election in 1992.

3 – Key international and military issues

The crisis in the new republic's relationship with France was the most significant issue that faced John Adams across his presidency. Forty years later, Van Buren's challenge arose mainly from domestic economic problems, although difficulties also presented themselves in the United States' dealings with Mexico and along the north-eastern Canadian border. Both Truman and Bush also found themselves having to deal with serious problems in the domestic economy, but the bulk of their focus was on overseas and military matters: indeed, the scope of the international problems facing both men was unprecedented as they embarked on (Truman) and then oversaw the end of (Bush) the Cold War. Bush also had his own war in the Gulf to deal with, as Truman had his in Korea. Only Van Buren had had no overseas war, real or threatened, on his watch.

In the early days of his administration, John Adams had asked Vice President Jefferson to go to Paris to negotiate new arrangements with France. Jefferson immediately declined, as did his ally Madison when the same request was made of him. The three Hamiltonian members of Adams's own cabinet also objected to the idea of sending a political opponent to negotiate with the French, so Adams dropped the idea. With the French government refusing to accept the credentials of America's minister to France, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Adams decided to send John Marshall (a staunch Federalist ally) and Elbridge Gerry (who had opposed ratification of the Constitution in 1878, and whose nomination was unanimously resisted by Adams's cabinet) to join Pinckney in Paris.

When French foreign minister Talleyrand demanded a bribe before negotiations could commence – the so-called 'XYZ affair' – war fever gripped the United States. Although he was appalled at Talleyrand's behaviour, Adams recognised that Jefferson's Republicans would resist any call for a declaration of war and, more importantly, that the country itself was quite unprepared to engage in any such fight. But Adams openly denounced the French government's behaviour and opinion rallied behind the president, who became (very briefly)

a national hero in 1798.[43] The issue of relations with France – the so-called 'Quasi War' – was to define his presidency.

Adams's efforts to develop any kind of bipartisan diplomacy against the French with the support of his own Federalists and Vice President Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans came to nothing. Jefferson believed that war with France would drive America into the arms of England, and he opposed militarising the country to prepare for such a conflict. Federalists in both North and South had strong trading and financial ties with England: for them it made sound commercial sense for the United States to position itself closer to its old colonial master than to an unstable France. Hamilton and his supporters continued to press for war with France throughout 1798 and 1799, not least to gain territories in the south and west held by both France and Spain. But in the spring of 1799, in the most courageous decision of his presidency, Adams decided to take action on the French impasse.

He sent a message to the Senate nominating William Vans Murray, a diplomat in The Hague, as minister plenipotentiary of the United States to France with instructions to re-open negotiations. The Federalists were appalled by this development, and Adams modified his proposal to include Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth and William Richardson Davie, former governor of North Carolina, in the proposed delegation. With the president once again in Quincy (for almost six months over the summer of 1799) the delegates' departure was delayed, and they arrived belatedly in Paris in the spring of 1800. News of the resulting peace treaty, the Convention of Mortefontaine, would reach Washington only after Adams had lost the election later that year. He nonetheless considered the keeping of peace with France to have been his finest achievement as president.

It can be argued that Martin Van Buren's finest hour also came after he had lost his bid for re-election forty years after John Adams. Van Buren's resistance to the annexation of Texas lost him the nomination in 1844, a bid that was opposed by former president Andrew Jackson.[44]

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[43] As George H. W. Bush would also become (equally briefly) following the First Gulf War in 1991.

[44] Despite topping the first ballot that year (1844), winning 146 votes out of 266, Van Buren was handicapped by Democratic Party rules which required a candidate to receive two-thirds (178) of the total delegate votes to win the nomination. The eventual nominee, James K. Polk, had received no votes in the first ballot.

As president, Van Buren *had* considered annexing Texas, but he remained deeply concerned that it would strain the Union over slavery. Southerners demanded action on Texas throughout Van Buren's term, but he was well aware that equally forceful anti-slavery movements were growing in the North. He therefore pursued a policy of evasion on Texas throughout his presidency, in sharp contrast to Jackson's spirit of nationalistic expansion. As Widmer remarks, "One of [Van Buren's] most courageous decisions was his refusal to join the stampede for admitting Texas, with all of its slave territory, into the union. It cost him the presidency and he knew it, but he stuck to his guns" (Widmer, 2007, 12). John Adams had also stuck to his guns in sending a peace mission to France, and that decision cost *him* the presidency as well.

When Maine became inflamed by a Canadian incursion across the border from New Brunswick, Van Buren chose prominent Whig General Winfield Scott to restore order. Preoccupied by the Independent Treasury crisis, the president initially left it up to the state to respond. But when British troops attacked an American ship, the *Caroline*, as it lay moored in American waters, the conflict assumed a much greater diplomatic significance. Although an official protest was lodged with the British, Van Buren also dispatched his son John to London with a more conciliatory private note for British foreign secretary Lord Palmerston.

The Indian policy bequeathed to Van Buren by the Jackson administration continued to cause major problems, with the Treaty of New Echota (1835) requiring the government to pay the Cherokees five million dollars for their lands. The endless Seminole War in Florida was relentlessly attacked by the Whigs, and hundreds died along the 'trail of tears' when a number of tribes were forcibly displaced westwards across the Mississippi. General Winfield Scott managed the removal, although he skilfully avoided blame for the many atrocities committed in the process.[45] But "[political] criticism of the Administration's handling of the affair was so widespread that Van Buren was associated in the minds of northern and many southern voters for initiating a policy that actually went back to the Jefferson Administration" (Niven 1983, 465).

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[45] Scott was later nominated as Whig candidate for president in 1852, losing to Franklin Pierce.

By the time George Bush became president a century and a half after Van Buren, the United States had become the world's leading superpower, with vast military capability and an enormous global economic presence. Responsibility for overseeing that presence had helped to change the presidency from anything that either Adams or Van Buren might conceivably have recognised. (Truman's key role in accelerating that transformation will be considered in the following chapter).

From the outset, Bush's energies were absorbed on overseas rather than domestic matters. Foreign policy was both his area of personal experience and interest, as well as the field in which any president can make a powerful and immediate impact. Working with National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, Bush reorientated American foreign policy back to the realism which had characterised the Nixon-Kissinger years. Late Reagan administration openness to the Soviets was replaced (initially at least) by Bush administration wariness. Defense Secretary Cheney's hard-line inclinations were tempered by the more diplomatic approach of Secretary of State Baker.

The inability of the new administration to agree on a strategy towards the Soviets – what Naftali describes, glibly but accurately, as the "one area where Reagan had *not* left a mess for Bush to clean up" – arose from widely differing perspectives among Bush's key advisers. "Baker sought maximum tactical flexibility to work with the Soviet leader whereas Cheney assumed that Gorbachev would fail, wanted him to fail, and hoped to take advantage of Soviet weakness. Scowcroft was always somewhere in the middle" (Naftali, 2007, 77). Unsure as to the Soviet leader's true motives or the strength of his position within the Politburo, Bush was particularly concerned that Gorbachev might fall victim to a coup by Soviet hardliners. But the "pause in managing Gorbachev created a bad first impression about Bush's abilities as president" (Naftali, 2007, 78).

Events in Eastern Europe soon overtook the administration, as did the Chinese crackdown in Tiananmen Square. By the summer of 1989, however, Bush had finally made a decision about the Soviets. Gambling on Gorbachev's sincerity and the lack of alternatives available to the Russian leader, Bush decided that if the Soviets allowed self-determination for their satellites

in Eastern and Central Europe, the United States would end the policy of containment which had guided its foreign policy since 1945.

The sudden and dramatic collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 led to a presidential response that perfectly captured Bush's aura of aloofness. Asked why he wasn't elated at the development, Bush responded, "I'm not an emotional kind of guy" (Bush Public Papers, 1174).[46] But when supporters of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega killed an American marine that December, Bush showed more emotion, ordering an invasion of Panama by 20,000 U.S. troops. Noriega was forced to surrender and flown to Florida to face trial. Success in Panama meant that "Bush had, at last, one-upped Reagan's triumph in Grenada" and "muted some of the crazies on the right" (Parmet, 2001, 420).

In Europe, Bush decided to allow Gorbachev to treat Lithuania's declaration of independence as an internal matter for the USSR, provided the Soviets committed not to use force there. The larger decision to continue trusting the Soviet leader was driven by Bush and Baker, with Cheney and Scowcroft consistently advocating a tougher line. The administration's hands-off approach to Lithuania led conservative critic George Will to suggest that "Bushism is Reaganism minus the passion for freedom" (*Newsweek*, May 7, 1990, 78).

But Bush was soon to achieve a striking foreign policy success in another international trouble-spot. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, his first reaction was guarded and undemonstrative, but there followed an extraordinary series of negotiations directed by the president himself which led to the Soviets agreeing that Iraq must withdraw, Saudi Arabia agreeing to allow U.S. forces to be deployed on its soil, and Israel agreeing not to react aggressively when the expected missile provocation materialised from Iraq. Any one of these agreements would have been a major accomplishment in its own right, but to have negotiated all three at the same time as he was building a multi-national coalition to take on Saddam was truly a formidable achievement.

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[46] Here and in subsequent references, 'Bush Public Papers' refers to the George H. W. Bush material in the 'Public Papers of the Presidents' series. See bibliography for website address. The '1174' item relates to 'Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on the Relaxation of East German Border Controls.'

Four days into the ground war, and after a stunning rebuttal of the Iraqis, Bush decided to bring the conflict to an end, a decision which has prompted continuing debate ever since. Leaving Saddam in place allowed the Iraqi leader to mount a murderous counter-offensive against Iraqi Kurds and other groups deemed to have been disloyal to the regime. But Bush decided that it was not in the U.S.'s interests to have Iraq collapse into the kind of fragmented state represented by Lebanon: Iraq needed to be disciplined, but it also needed to survive in order to balance Iran in the Gulf. Vice President Dan Quayle's public suggestion that they should have gone further into Iraq opened up a new right-wing complaint which would be used against Bush even at the moment of his greatest triumph.

Debate continued within the administration on whether to move away from supporting an obviously declining Gorbachev and switch instead to encouraging the rising separatists and nationalists within the Soviet Union. When Boris Yeltsin was elected president of Russia in June 1991, hardliners in the Kremlin moved against Gorbachev. Although the coup collapsed, Gorbachev was finished. Yeltsin dismantled the Communist party in Russia, many former Soviet republics declared their independence, and the USSR itself ceased to exist in December 1991.

George Bush had presided over the end of the Cold War which Harry Truman had started almost half a century earlier. But despite these extraordinary military and foreign policy achievements, he was soon to be reminded that elections are much more likely to be determined by economic matters rather than 'overseas'. Bush may have defeated Saddam and brought an end to the Cold War, but his apostasy on tax increases and his inability to contain internal Republican Party turmoil would see him voted out of office less than a year after Gorbachev had left the presidency of the now-defunct Soviet Union.

4 - Facing down internal party opposition

Each of the four presidents considered in this study faced persistent and significant opposition from elements within their own party, but the nature of that opposition was very different in each case. Adams's moderate Federalism was opposed by those who favoured a more

advanced programme of the kind advocated by Hamilton, but Federalism was even then a *waning* ideology which would never again hold the presidency after Adams's defeat in 1800. In sharp contrast, the more right-wing Republicanism that fatally undermined George H. W. Bush was a *rising* ideology, which continued its ascent through the presidency of Bush's son and beyond. As Bush was to find, holding out against internal opponents from within a strengthening ideology was much harder than dealing with those who had goaded Adams from within a declining one.

From the moment he assumed the presidency in 1797, John Adams faced persistent opposition from a substantial group of Federalists in Congress. Despite that resistance, he remained determined to abide by the key goals he had set for his presidency: to keep the peace, to remain neutral, to build strong national defences, and to unify the popular will in support of these objectives.

As noted earlier, key members of Adams's own cabinet worked against him throughout his presidency. Not only had they approved Hamilton's appointment to command Washington's army while Adams was away from Philadelphia, they also delayed dispatching peace commissioners to France during a second presidential absence. More treacherously, Secretary of State Pickering had written confidentially to Hamilton in March 1798 enclosing a 'top secret' report sent from France by John Marshall (Brown, 1975, 151). Pickering used Marshall's report to help Hamilton press the case for a formal alliance with Britain, a proposal that Adams was actively resisting.

Finally recognising that they had been taking directions from Hamilton all along, Adams eventually took decisive action. A stormy encounter with McHenry on May 5, 1800, led the secretary of war to send in his resignation the following day. Four days after receiving McHenry's resignation, Adams wrote to Pickering inviting his resignation. When Pickering refused to go, Adams fired him immediately.

Treasury Secretary Oliver Wolcott remained in post despite conspiring to have Adams replaced as the Federalist candidate in that year's election, but Adams knew that he dared not risk losing his own electoral support in Wolcott's home state of Connecticut. Wolcott eventually

resigned in December 1800, but if Adams had by then finally managed to deal with Hamilton's cabinet supporters, the principal himself was soon to cause an even more significant problem.

With peace talks under way in Paris and the immediate military threat abating, the 'Provisional Army of the United States' was dismantled in 1800. A furious Hamilton sent an extraordinary letter to leading Federalists questioning Adams's patriotism and declaring him unfit for re-election to the presidency (Hamilton, 1809). The letter, which was quickly published, attacked the president's errors of administration, maligned his character, and blamed him for creating serious divisions within the Federalist group. Conceding that Adams had patriotism, integrity and "even talent of a certain kind", Hamilton nonetheless charged that "there are great and intrinsic defects in his character, which unfit him for the office of chief magistrate" (Hamilton, 1809, 10).

Stopping short of caricaturing him as wholly incompetent, Hamilton was nonetheless clear that Adams "was far less able in the practice than in the theory of politics." He lacked sound judgment, was unable to persevere in pursuing any course of action, and showed "a vanity without bounds, and a jealousy capable of discolouring every object." He had always been "a man intended for the second [place]" (Hamilton, 1809, 11, 14).

These defects had not (Hamilton claimed) inspired him to resist Adams's assumption of the vice presidency in 1789, in which role his public conduct was "satisfactory …. [though colleagues] were now and then alarmed by appearances of some eccentric tendencies." Nor had Hamilton done anything to prefer Thomas Pinckney over Adams for the presidency in 1796, although "[my] position was, that if chance should decide in favour of Mr Pinckney, it would probably not be a misfortune … [as Pinckney possessed] a temper far more discreet and conciliatory than that of Mr Adams." The first of these claims was completely untrue. As regards the second, Hamilton had left it to far more than mere chance to swing the 1796 election Pinckney's way. By then he had become aware of "the disgusting egotism, the distempered jealousy, and the ungovernable indiscretion of Mr Adams's temper" (Hamilton, 1809, 17-18).

Adams's response to France's behaviour in the XYZ affair forced even Hamilton to concede that the president had shown "a manly and courageous lead", but his later decision to re-open negotiations with France "forms a painful contrast to his commencement …. [when] the mind of Mr Adams underwent a total revolution" (Hamilton, 1809, 27-9). Had he chosen to listen to the advice of his cabinet he would never have fallen into this mistake, but "[when], unhappily, an ordinary man dreams himself to be Frederick, and through vanity refrains from counselling with his constitutional advisers, he is very apt to fall into the hands of miserable intriguers" (Hamilton, 1809, 33).[47] This observation is loaded with irony, given that three members of Adams's five-man cabinet were actively intriguing with Hamilton in opposition to the president throughout his four-year term.

Adams's 'shameful' decision to send commissioners to re-open negotiations with France and his dismissal of Pickering and McHenry (both of whom, Hamilton suggests, were removed in a spasm of anger after Jefferson's Republicans won local elections in New York that almost certainly doomed the president's re-election prospects) were damning enough. But his pardoning of Fries after the Pennsylvania rebellion and refusal to make Hamilton commander-in-chief of the army after Washington's death in 1799 were beneath contempt.

Nonetheless, Hamilton concluded, he would do nothing to deprive Adams of a single vote in the election campaign (of 1800) now under way. "The body of federalists, for want of sufficient knowledge of facts, are not convinced of the expediency of relinquishing him" (Hamilton, 1809, 53). Voters should vote for both Adams and fellow Federalist Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, in whatever order they preferred, in order to ensure that Jefferson would become neither president nor vice president.

Having damned him so completely, Hamilton then undertook "[to] refrain from a decided opposition to Mr Adams's re-election" (Hamilton, 1809, 54). But again, this was not true: as one historian has judged, he was even "ready to accept Jefferson as a means of saving the Federalist party" (Brown, 1975, 178). Although his re-election prospects were already poor,

[47] Hamilton telling Adams in 1800 that he was no Frederick the Great would find an echo in 1949 when – as discussed in the following chapter – former Secretary of State James F. Byrnes told Harry Truman that whatever Truman may have thought about his own leadership abilities, he was no Julius Caesar.

Hamilton's pamphlet effectively doomed Adams to defeat in 1800. His mishandling of opposition from within his own party had proved fatally inept.[48]

Forty years later, opposition to Martin Van Buren from within the ranks of his own party was coordinated by Conservative Democrats led by Nathaniel Tallmadge and William C. Rives in the Senate. It focused on the president's principal policy objective – the establishment of an independent treasury. Triumphant Whigs supported by Democrats loyal to Tallmadge had swept New York state in the 1838 mid-term elections. Tallmadge himself was not re-elected to the Senate that year, although he was returned as a Whig the following year. Rives was not re-elected to the Senate either, although relations with the president had not completely broken down by then. Rives's biographer suggests that a "September 2 [1838] letter to Rives …. may indicate that Van Buren offered Rives the Vice Presidency in exchange for his return to the party fold" (Rives, 2014, 146). If any such offer was actually made, it came to nothing.

By 1840, Andrew Jackson had grown bitter about Van Buren's reluctance to consult him or heed his advice. For the second time he attempted to manoeuvre Van Buren into accepting a running-mate of Jackson's own choosing, insisting that Van Buren should drop Vice President Richard M. Johnson in favour of Tennessee governor (and former speaker) James K. Polk and "[threatening] to desert Van Buren if the states did not nominate Polk" (Cole, 1984, 358). Van Buren announced that he would remain neutral in the choice of a running-mate. Perhaps more than any other episode, this decision showed how little independent authority Van Buren had managed to create across the four years of his presidency. Adams had been embarrassed by Washington's insistence on naming his own military commanders in 1798, but the extent to which Van Buren was compromised by Jackson's threat in 1840 was much more significant. Truman would not face this problem, of course, as his predecessor has died. Nor would Bush, given his predecessor's advancing Alzheimer's Disease and almost complete retirement from public life.[49]

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[48] In 1809, Adams published an eighty-nine-page response to Hamilton's allegations. He had drafted it in 1800 but decided not to publish it at the time lest it harm the career prospects of his son, John Quincy Adams, then still a Federalist.

[49] Despite his illness, Reagan would make a 30-minute address to the Republican convention in 1992.

Van Buren had faced grumbling from his predecessor but managed to avoid the open challenge from same-party opponents which had compromised Adams so badly. George Bush's experience was far closer to Adams's than that of Van Buren. The trajectory of Bush's decline from international achievements in Kuwait, through domestic complaints about his tax hike, to energetic ambushing by a key internal opponent at the 1992 convention, was striking. The record 89% post-Kuwait poll rating enjoyed by Bush in the spring of 1991 quickly declined as Americans switched their focus from overseas to home. Congress again asserted itself against the president, and right-wing commentators amplified their accusations that Bush was not conservative enough. In the middle of an economic downturn, the public at large seemed to attach more blame to him for the financial mess created by Reagan than credit for trying to clear it up.

Conservative opposition to Bush's re-election in 1992 was focused on former Nixon speechwriter and now political commentator Patrick Buchanan, who based his campaign on a number of key themes: anger at Bush for selling-out on 'no new taxes'; exasperation at the decision to launch the Gulf War against a country which was not a threat to the U.S.; and disdain for Bush's signing of the 1991 Civil Rights Act, which was interpreted in conservative circles as a thinly-disguised racial quota bill. Buchanan's rise to prominence marked the point at which a genuinely 'new GOP' began to emerge, characterised by indifference to the kind of principled leadership which had defined every effective presidency until then. Bush found himself more and more out of step with this development.

Buchanan believed that opposing the president would weaken Bush sufficiently for the party to nominate a real conservative or, failing that, force Bush to move to the right. As he said of Bush at the time, "I don't believe he's a conservative ... He campaigns as Ronald Reagan but governs as Jimmy Carter" (Nelson, 2020, 81). Or as conservative activist Richard Viguerie put it more pointedly, "[because] we had no stake in [Bush's] presidency, it was easy to oppose him" (Nelson, 2020, 100).

Buchanan's opposition to Bush was actually more complicated than it might have appeared, as Tim Stanley outlines in his overly sympathetic biography of Buchanan (Stanley, 2012).[50] Although he opposed Bush as both ineffective and a *faux* conservative, Buchanan directed his real fire at the neo-conservatives who, he believed, dominated the White House under Bush. He wanted no part in their plan to establish a new global American hegemony following the end of the Cold War. Stanley characterises Buchanan as leader of the *paleo*-conservatives, "a ragtag army of conservative misfits: eccentric professors, rednecks, militiamen, libertarians, ultra-Orthodox Jews, Tridentine Mass-only Catholics, Teamsters, and Civil War reenactors (always on the Confederate side)" (Stanley, 2012, 141).

The Bush campaign was totally unprepared for Buchanan's challenge. Despite changes in the primary system that made it easier for sitting presidents to be challenged from within their own party, Bush nonetheless expected to be nominated without any difficulty. This led to his first strategic mistake of the 1992 campaign: "[so] unworried was Bush about an intraparty challenge from the right that he moved left in an effort to pre-empt the Democrats, the only opponents he expected to face" (Nelson, 2020, 99).

The same cognitive dissonance that coloured their different perspectives on Reagan-era and Bush-era tax cuts continued to afflict Republicans in 1992. The irony of Buchanan's campaign was how *un*-Reaganite his two key policies really were: favouring protectionism, and limiting the use of force to deter international aggression. Although Bush won New Hampshire by 53 percent to Buchanan's 37 percent, the press reported it as a victory for Buchanan.[51] Deciding relatively soon that he could not come close to winning, Buchanan toned down his attacks on Bush to line up his own candidacy for 1996. But the need to deal with an unexpected challenge from within his own party had delayed Bush from launching any real attack on the Democrats. That party's candidate, Bill Clinton of Arkansas, blunted any suggestion that he was a feckless liberal by maintaining a consistently centrist message throughout the campaign.

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[50] Stanley refers to his subject as 'Pat' throughout the book.

[51] Thereby validating Theodore Lowi's claim that under the 'plebiscitary presidency' which had come to prevail by the second half of the twentieth century, it is more important in presidential primaries to exceed *expectations* than actually to finish above the other candidate(s) (Lowi, 1985, 105).

As Buchanan faded during the later Republican primaries, the protest vote started moving toward third-party candidate Ross Perot, whose focus was on the need to control Reagan's most striking legacy to Bush – the budget deficit. Otherwise Perot took moderate positions on issues including abortion, gay rights, and gun control, and he also tapped into a general revulsion with corruption and political stalemate in Washington. His animus was directed very personally against George Bush, who in turn considered Perot to be unbalanced (Bush Public Papers, Thomas Scully Oral History).[52]

Both Bush and Clinton refrained from launching attacks on Perot. Believing that he would fade and his support would then revert to one of the two main candidates, neither man wanted to alienate Perot's base. Perot dropped out in July and implicitly endorsed Clinton, giving the Democratic nominee an immediate poll lead of 48-40 (Nelson, 2020, 132). After a successful convention, Clinton surged to an extraordinary 56–34 lead over Bush, with Bush coming under even more pressure because of the government's slow response as Hurricane Andrew devastated Florida and Louisiana.

Pressure had mounted on Bush to replace the hapless Dan Quayle as the vice-presidential nominee, but Bush refused to force him off the ticket, hoping instead that Quayle would volunteer to leave. Actually Bush had little choice in the matter because "[conservatives] regarded [Quayle] as one of the few people in the White House who were sincerely committed to their cause" (Nelson, 2020, 112). Dumping the vice president would have re-ignited the anger of the Buchanan campaign, but over-sensitivity to conservative opinion within the party then led to a further – and possibly fatal – strategic error by the Bush team.

Instead of using the convention to unite the party and broaden its appeal to the wider electorate, Bush strategists decided that the focus should be on placating the party's right-wing. In a major mistake, the key slot on the first evening of the convention was given to

[52] Scully served as one of Bush's deputy assistants in the White House. In his Oral History he said that Perot "clearly hated President Bush for some reason. I don't think Bush ever understood …. He'd known Perot for years and I think he thought Perot was just a nut case. Maybe he'll tell you, but he couldn't quite figure it out the Perot thing."

Buchanan, displacing the planned speaker – Reagan himself. Buchanan used his prime time speech to deliver "a full-throated assault against 'abortion on demand ... homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat,' and the 'cultural war' and 'religious war going on in our country for the soul of America'" (Miller, 2012).[53] As Michael Nelson remarks with significant understatement, "[for] the first major address at the Republican convention to portray in such apocalyptic terms a country led for the previous twelve years by Republican presidents was especially jarring to voters" (Nelson, 2020, 114-5). George Will declared that "the crazies are in charge" (*New York Times*, August 16, 1992).

Both Bush and Adams had been fatally weakened by their inability to see off same-party opponents who accused them of being hopelessly second-rate, mere stand-ins for their predecessors, and lacking any real commitment to the regimes fostered by the presidents they had succeeded. Van Buren had avoided the worst of these challenges, not least because he had himself played such a key role in establishing the Jacksonian regime. But both Adams and Bush would suffer fatally for their failure. Neither a philosopher (Adams) nor a diplomat (Bush) had shown the skills that only thoroughbred politicians like Truman and Van Buren brought to the task of facing down such challenges.

7 - Closing political capital

Table 1 suggested what the opening levels of political capital held by Adams, Van Buren and Bush had been as they started their presidencies. Having reviewed the extent to which they managed to generate independent presidential authority across the following four years, it can now be asked whether their first terms had left them with higher or lower levels of political capital than they enjoyed at the outset. Table 2 (below) provides a (highly subjective) assessment of what those closing levels might have been.

The headings used to evaluate 'closing political capital' differ from those used in considering 'opening political capital'. By now, presidential personalities had transitioned from vaguely

[53] Buchanan's 1992 speech is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2olwuAy3_og (date accessed: May 13, 2024).

glimpsed to fully displayed; presidential promise had either been vindicated or left unfulfilled; and each successor had either escaped from the shadow of his predecessor or remained fixed in his shade. The following nine criteria may prove helpful in assessing each president's closing level of political capital:

(1) his *leadership* skills – as actually displayed across the last four years, particularly in responding to serious or unexpected national crises;

(2) his *management* skills – again, as actually displayed during his term;

(3) how he coped with his *practical inheritance* (domestic, economic, international, military) from his predecessor;

(4) the record of his relationship with *Congress* and associated legislative achievements;

(5) his perceived *public standing* compared to that of his *predecessor* at the end of *his* term – had the successor emerged out from under his predecessor's shadow?;

(6) how he managed his relationship with the *wider regime* associated with his predecessor;

(7) how he dealt with *internal opposition* and challengers from within his own party;

(8) the standing of his own party in relation to the *opposition* party as the election campaign began;

(9) his own standing in relation to the *opposition's nominee* for the presidency.

Assessing where each president ended his term in relation to each of these nine criteria helps to assess both his *absolute level* of closing political capital and (reflecting his success or failure in developing independent authority during his time in office) the *change* in his political capital across those four years.

Adams's closing political capital

John Adams achieved some success in dealing with his practical inheritance from Washington, particularly in showing that the presidency could be 'handed on' without the office buckling under the pressure of transitioning from a charismatic predecessor to a more workaday successor. His relationship with Congress (still under Federalist control) was generally productive, and the perception of his standing in relation to his predecessor was reasonable. Although he was obviously not fashioned from the same mould as Washington, there had been no significant or open conflict between the two men other than the army staffing incident of 1798.

But Adams's closing ratings under all other headings were negative: his leadership and management skills were considered generally unimpressive (apart from the heroic moment he enjoyed at the height of the XYZ affair); his standing within his own Federalist regime was conflicted; and his dealings with internal party opposition were poor, leaving it until much too late in his presidency to exercise control over those cabinet members who acted consistently against him. As the election campaign began, Adams's standing in comparison to the leading opposition contender (Jefferson) was also poor, and that of the Federalists against their Democratic-Republican challengers was equally uncertain. From a moderately positive opening level of political capital, Adams's closing level had turned negative across his term. He nonetheless faced into his re-election campaign with a higher stock of closing capital than would be held by Van Buren and Bush at analogous points in their bids for a second term.

Van Buren's closing political capital

Of the three presidents considered here, only Van Buren had started his presidency with a healthy measure of opening political capital, higher than Adams's had been in 1797, and much higher than the negative opening score that would attach to Bush in 1989. But by 1840 Van Buren's political capital had collapsed completely, and he finished with the lowest standing of any of the three presidents considered here.

About the only positive capital remaining to Van Buren at the end of his term was that which had accrued from his management of internal party opponents, who never came close to challenging him for the party's nomination in 1840. But although Congress remained under nominal Democratic control across his term, it had taken almost four years to see his key political initiative, the independent treasury, through both houses. And in every other respect Van Buren's closing capital was also negative, most obviously in terms of his party's standing against the opposition Whigs and his own standing against Whig presidential nominee, William Henry Harrison.

Given the long depression that followed the Panic of 1837, there was little sense that Van Buren possessed leadership or management skills adequate to the presidency; his perceived standing in comparison to his predecessor, always low, remained unimpressive; and his management of his economic inheritance from Jackson must also be rated as poor. The depression that began in 1837 would continue throughout (and beyond) Van Buren's single term. His relationship with the regime that he and Jackson had co-created in the 1820s and early 1830s was also in trouble as his presidency ended: unable to insist that the sitting vice president (Richard M. Johnson) should be re-nominated in 1840, Van Buren was also the only one of these subject presidents who would run against his own party at a future election.

Having begun with significantly positive reserves of political capital, Van Buren finished his single term with the lowest stock of any of the three men considered here. His failure to generate authority during his four years in office had led to a sharp decline in political capital across that term, before ending in a crushing electoral defeat.

Bush's closing political capital

Other than Harry S. Truman (to be considered in the following chapter), George Bush was the only one of the four presidents reviewed in this study to have started his term with negative political capital. His subsequent decline was less marked than Adams's, and very much less than that suffered by Van Buren. But given the negative level from which Bush had started, even a modest loss across four years in office would see him heading into the 1992 re-election campaign with a significant lack of political capital.

Bush dealt well with the trickier parts of his economic and military inheritance from Reagan. He also displayed generally positive management skills (better 'overseas' than at home), but he rated poorly in almost every other respect. His leadership skills were wanting (no 'vision thing'); he had little opportunity for legislative success facing an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress; and his perceived standing in comparison to his immediate predecessor remained poor throughout his term. Bush might have recovered from these handicaps had he not been fatally weakened by his consistently poor relationship with the 'true believers' of the Reagan regime and his inadequate response to two challengers from within his own party, Gingrich and Buchanan.

As re-election loomed, a resurgent centrist Democratic Party was also better positioned after twelve years of Republicans in the White House to appeal to the electorate, and Bush's personal standing with much of the electorate was also poor compared to the attractive-if-not-wholly-trustworthy Democratic nominee. An energetic campaign might have saved him, but In the end it would be Bush's lacklustre bid for re-election (outlined in the following section) rather than his depleted stock of capital that fatally compromised any chance he might have had of re-election in 1992.

Table 2 **Closing Political Capital**			
	John Adams (1800)	Martin Van Buren (1840)	George H. W. Bush (1992)
1 - Perceived leadership skills	-	- -	-
2 - Perceived managerial skills	-	- -	+ +
3 – How coped with his inheritance	+ +	- -	+ +
4 – Relationship with Congress	+ +	-	-
5 – Standing v/v predecessor	+	- -	- - -
6 – How managed regime relationship	- -	-	- - -
7 – How dealt with internal opposition	- - -	+	- - -
8 – Standing of his own party v/v the opposition party	- -	- - -	-
9 – Standing v/v opponent	-	- - -	-
Summary of Closing Political Capital	**- 5**	**- 15**	**- 9**
Opening Political Capital	**+ 2**	**+ 11**	**- 6**
Change over four years	**- 7**	**- 26**	**- 3**

<u>8 – Three failed bids for re-election</u>

Adams defeated by Thomas Jefferson - 1800

What Edward Larson has termed the 'magnificent catastrophe' of 1800 saw John Adams defeated by his Democratic-Republican opponent, although quite *which* opponent (Jefferson or Aaron Burr) would become president took thirty-six ballots in the House of Representatives to become clear (Larson, 2007). Adams had outraged the Jeffersonians by passing the Alien and Seditions Acts and allowing Hamilton to form a national army. But he had also alienated his own Federalist party by sending a peace mission to France and pardoning Fries. Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth (now in Paris) was considered as a possible replacement as Federalist candidate, but Adams's continuing support in New England made it almost impossible to drop him from the ticket.

Electors were popularly elected in five states and selected by legislatures in the other eleven states that year. The outcomes were revealed state-by-state, on different days, and the votes from South Carolina, which sealed Adams's fate, were disclosed on the same day that news reached Baltimore of the treaty ending the Quasi-War with France. The final outcome gave Jefferson 73 electoral votes, Burr 73, Adams 65 and Adams's fellow Federalist Charles Cotesworth Pinckney 63. The loss of New York, with voter turnout manipulated by Burr and Hamilton refusing to support his own party's candidate, was decisive. The final Hamiltonian act of 1800 was his success in persuading the rump Federalist Congress which decided the election that Jefferson would prove less dangerous to the Republic than Burr.

In analysing Adams's presidency, Ralph Brown offers a number of reasons for his defeat in 1800. Fear and dislike of the Alien and Seditions Acts had generated widespread opposition to the Federalists. Adams's determination to achieve peace with France had also alienated some electors, as had the increase in taxation needed to finance preparations for defence should Adams's peace-keeping efforts fail. The first stirrings of party machinery meant that opposition to Adams was fomented across every state outside the North-East. Despite this, with the exception of New York, Adams ran far better in 1800 that he had done in 1796, perhaps indicating some lingering electoral respect for a president who was willing to stand

his ground and take unpopular decisions with courage and consistency. In comparing the two main candidates' performance against that of their parties, "John Adams ran well ahead of his party, and Jefferson significantly behind his" (Brown, 1975, 193). John Ferling adds another important reason for Adams's defeat – the three-fifths clause in the Constitution. "Had slaves not been counted in the apportionment of state representation in the electoral college, Adams would have edged Jefferson by two votes, sixty-three to sixty-one" (Ferling, 2004, 168).

The treaty ending the Quasi-War was presented to the Senate in January 1801 but failed (by a vote of 16-14) to achieve the two-thirds necessary for ratification. Adams persisted, and after some minor changes were accepted by Napoleon, the treaty was re-submitted to the Senate. This time it was approved by 22 to 9, and Adams considered "peace with France the greatest achievement of a long and eventful life" (Brown, 1975, 174).

A series of disputed 'midnight appointments' to the judiciary – including Secretary of State John Marshall becoming chief justice – somewhat tarnished Adams's final days in the new, unfinished White House. Deciding that the most appropriate way to transition from 'defeated candidate' to 'former president' was to fade unobtrusively away, Adams left Washington by scheduled stagecoach in the early hours of March 4, 1801.[54] He lived, as Jefferson would, for another twenty-five years, and the two former presidents resumed a previously close relationship through a celebrated exchange of letters from 1812 until their deaths on the same day, July 4, 1826.

Van Buren defeated by William Henry Harrison - 1840

The emerging Whig Party had failed to prevent Van Buren's election in 1836, but over the next four years it greatly improved its effectiveness and organisational cohesion. At the party's Harrisburg convention in December 1838, William Henry Harrison was chosen as presidential candidate over Henry Clay and Winfield Scott. Harrison promised to serve only one term as president, to limit his use of the veto, and generally to restrain executive

[54] Former President Donald Trump, having lost the 2020 election, departed Washington D.C. on Air Force One on January 20, 2021. The public address system blared out Frank Sinatra singing 'I did it my way' as the huge 747 powered down the runway at Andrews Air Force Base and headed for Florida.

involvement in the legislative process. Contrary to Jackson's assertion that the president represented the people, the Whigs claimed that the will of the people found expression in congressional elections, not presidential contests. Charging that both Jackson and Van Buren had practiced extensive executive usurpation, the Whigs deliberately drafted no platform for the coming presidential contest.

Meeting at Baltimore in May 1840, the Democratic convention declined (as noted earlier) to select a vice presidential nominee, leaving the decision to the states. Van Buren therefore ran for re-election alone, with both James K. Polk and Richard M. Johnson running against the Whigs' vice presidential nominee, renegade Democrat John Tyler. The convention had also drafted a "traditional, backward-looking party platform calling for strict construction of the Constitution" (Cole, 1984, 258). A campaign letter published in July 1840 went no further, repeating traditional opposition to targets such as the Bank, the tariff, and internal improvements. But by now a new issue had arisen, one on which Van Buren had attempted to hold a middle ground throughout his political career.

In August 1839 the Spanish ship *Amistad* had docked in New York City after its cargo of African slaves overcame the crew and set sail (as they thought, mistakenly) for the West Indies. Northern Democrats charged them with mutiny and murder, but Whigs and Abolitionists rushed to their defence. The following year, the Supreme Court found that the men were not slaves and ordered their return to Africa. They had been represented in the Supreme Court by John Quincy Adams who accused Van Buren – like Jackson – of exceeding his executive authority in the matter.

The Whig campaign for 'Tippecanoe and Tyler too' was a boisterous affair of slogans, parades, songs and gimmicks. There were no similar jingles in support of Van Buren, who remained calm, *too* calm, as the campaign unfolded. Democrats' hopes "of making the election a referendum on the party's principles and policy positions rather than a contest of personalities" went wholly unrealised (Ellis, 2020, 205).

The electoral college landslide in favour of Harrison disguised a closer outcome in the popular vote, with Van Buren polling 46.8% to Harrison's 52.9%. This was "the best result by a losing

presidential candidate since President John Adams lost to Jefferson in 1800 by 5.8 percentage points, a testament to how evenly balanced the two parties had become" (Ellis, 2020, 242). The Whigs also took control of both the House and Senate.

Van Buren lost every Northern state except New Hampshire and Illinois. He did better in the South, carrying Alabama, Arkansas, Missouri and Virginia, although the loss of Tennessee was particularly galling for Jackson. The Democrats blamed fraud, voter hallucination, excessive democracy and even the Mormon Church for their loss. But the real reasons for Van Buren's defeat were more obvious, including the financial panic and depression, which had battered his presidency from the outset, as well as the increased alienation of the North from his allegedly proslavery sentiments. The candidate himself had little charisma or popular appeal, and the great political skills which he displayed before coming to the White House seemed to have deserted him during his time there.

Preoccupied with the Independent Treasury and the need to keep North and South together, Van Buren also failed to use patronage effectively or devise a coherent unifying message for his campaign. In short, whether due to being marooned in Jackson's shadow, his own temperament, poor economic circumstances, or some other factors, Van Buren had failed to develop any recognisable sense of independent presidential authority during his four years as president. With little to show that he was anything more than his predecessor's rather colourless successor, he was beaten by another party exercising the same organisational skills that he himself had perfected earlier in his career.

Bush defeated by Bill Clinton - 1992

The post-GOP-convention polls of 1992 showed Bush on 40% with Clinton on 49%, "[but] because the convention had done so little to broaden the president's appeal, the 40 per cent was a ceiling rather than a floor. Bush never was able to raise it in the months that followed" (Nelson, 2020, 116). Nor did the campaign ever gain any real traction, with former Bush chief of staff John Sununu characterising it as "the worst-run presidential campaign in history" (Greene, 2015, 230; Sununu personal interview) and political scientist Hugh Heclo calling it "languid, bordering on the comatose" (Heclo, 2012, 72). Bush had the weakest-ever election-

year approval rating, eventually falling to 30%. Having held on to all the Perot voters who came to him when their candidate dropped out in July, Clinton's lead at the start of September was 15%.

Bush was widely perceived as having lost the three-way debate (Perot having re-entered the race that autumn) to Clinton on October 11, and he performed even less impressively at the second debate on October 15. But although Perot's support had boomed on his re-entry into the race, it collapsed just as quickly when his public comments were interpreted as "reinforcing existing doubts about his temperament and his hold on reality" (Nelson, 2020, 151). This time, however, Perot's collapsing support flowed Bush's way, with a poll on October 27 showing Clinton on 41%, Bush on 40%, and Perot down to 9%

Any resurgent optimism in the Bush camp was short-lived, however. On October 30, Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh indicted Reagan's former secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger, for his involvement in Iran-Contra. Weinberger's own notes were found to say that the 'VP favoured' the plan, a total contradiction of Bush's claim to have been out of the loop on the arms-for-hostages scandal.

Clinton won by 370 electoral college votes to Bush's 168 although his victory – as with Bush's in 1988 – had relatively short coattails. He gained 43% of the popular vote to Bush's 37.5% and Perot's 18.9%. Both Baker and Sununu have argued that had Perot not been on the ballot, two-thirds of his supporters would have supported Bush, giving him 51% (Sununu, 2015, 379). But other analysts suggest that between one-fifth and one-third of Perot supporters would not have voted at all had it been a straight Bush-Clinton race, and the remaining Perot voters would have divided 50:50, giving victory to Clinton (Wattenberg, 1995, 247).

The key reason why Bush lost was because he had alienated the right-wing of his own party. A searing post-mortem by right-wing tax activist Grover Norquist concluded that "Bush lost because he had reversed Reagan's economic policies, and because he abused the successful coalition Reagan had built". He should never (Norquist argued) have agreed to the tax hike: he should instead have allowed the sequester provisions of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings to kick in and then blamed the Democrats for the confusion. Norquist also blasted Bush for returning

to an age of over-regulation with the amendments to the Clean Air Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, the firing of Reaganites when he came into office, his failure to give credit to Reagan for playing such an important role in winning the Cold War, and his alienation of the religious right (Norquist, 1993).

John Robert Greene agrees with Norquist's assessment, adding that "in 1988 Bush won because he paid attention to his conservative base, and he lost in 1992 because he ignored it" (Greene, 2015, 233-4). In return, "[the] Buchanan and Gingrich wings deserted the president in the 1992 election, mostly by not showing up at the polling stations" (Heclo, 2012, 75). One again, a failure to deal with internal party opponents had fatally compromised a sitting president's bid for re-election.

9 - Conclusion

John Adams

In his detailed account of the 1796 election, Jeffrey Pasley captures some of the enigmatic personality of John Adams as a "strange compound of political insight and myopia …… a leader for the cognoscenti, a statesman whose greatest deeds were known chiefly by his peers and superiors, not the public at large", and a man who was "perpetually torn between taking credit for the American Revolution and lecturing it for its mistakes" (Pasley, 2023, 120 and 275-6). If the Adams portrayed in David McCullough's celebrated biography is accurate, he was both a courageous and far-sighted statesman and also an obstinate and even unpleasant old curmudgeon, who loved three of his children but treated his alcoholic son John with appalling detachment, and who might have gone completely off the rails as president without the constant support of his wife Abigail (McCullough, 2001).

Adams's failure to develop an enduring stock of political authority across his term contributed to a decline in his political capital and defeat in 1796. Later historians have seen greatness in Adams which many of his contemporaries failed to discern. How might he have persuaded his contemporaries to judge him less harshly?

It is easy to say, with hindsight, what Adams 'ought to have done'. He should have replaced Washington's cabinet with more men who would prove loyal to him even as they offered advice that he might not have cared to hear (but which he should, at least occasionally, have heeded). He should have broken openly with the vice president. He should have refused to sign the Alien and Sedition Acts. He should not have pardoned Fries. He should have faced down those congressional critics who objected to sending Murray as single commissioner to France in 1799. He should have fired Pickering and McHenry, and probably Wolcott too, much sooner than he did. He should have resisted Washington's insistence on being able to choose his own officers for the new army. He should have refused to appoint Hamilton to any leadership position within that army, and he should have responded vigorously when Hamilton published his notorious pamphlet in the spring of 1800.

But Adams lacked the network of political allies and personal supporters needed to enforce any of these decisions, and it is also doubtful whether he could have withstood the immense levels of personal vitriol that would have been pitched upon him had he taken any of them. Instead he decided to wield authority in two different ways. First, by holding to the course that he determined would be the absolute priority for his presidency: peace with France, and no quarter given to the war-mongers on either side of the political divide. Second, and requiring much more determination and restraint on his part, by acting in ways that would not see him venting his spleen against internal and external opponents, but would show that the new system of government could survive *despite* the stresses to which it and its chief executive were subjected. In both of these aims Adams succeeded admirably. Losing the election was not the worst thing that could have happened: had he allowed himself to be pushed to one extreme or the other by either Hamilton or Jefferson, the country might well have disintegrated completely. That it did not is greatly to Adams's credit.

Martin Van Buren

Martin Van Buren never managed to accumulate any noticeable level of independent presidential authority during his single term in office. He embarked on his campaign for re-election facing a widespread perception that he was merely Jackson's hand-picked successor serving out (in effect) Jackson's third term, desperately trying to manage the consequences

of Jackson's worst decisions, and, because he lacked Jackson's distinctive personality, failing to show that he was anything other than a poor stand-in for the real thing. Van Buren then became, in his biographer Ted Widmer's evocative phrase, "a lost president, floating in purgatory between Jackson and the Civil War" (Widmer, 2005, 5).

Van Buren's best days came *before* his election to the presidency, when he helped to create the Democratic Party. His second best days came *after* his defeat in 1840, when he stopped applying hard electoral calculus to every decision and provided important national leadership (albeit from the sidelines) when the full shape of the existential threat facing the union began to emerge.

Van Buren's pre-1836 political identity was inevitably tied to Jackson despite his significant concern about some of the president's more erratic policies. But not only did Van Buren refrain from challenging Jackson when he served as his vice president, he was also incapable of breaking with him and displaying his own independent authority even *after* becoming president himself. It is remarkable that as late as 1840 Van Buren was still trying to placate his predecessor on the question of the vice presidency. Having failed to develop any independent authority as president, Van Buren's political capital sank dramatically during that time, and defeat followed almost inevitably in 1840. Few historians have attempted to rehabilitate him and 'upgrade' his reputation in the way that many have done for Adams.

George H. W. Bush

It seems extraordinary to have to judge a president who achieved so much on the international stage as George Bush did as having 'fallen short'. The fragile economy, the professionalism of Bill Clinton's campaigning skills, and Ross Perot's spoiler tactics all contributed to Bush's defeat in 1992, but the key reason for his failure was because a significant section of Bush's own party remained resolutely unenthusiastic about him. Throughout his four years in office, the wider American public also seemed unable to make up its mind about Bush as president, with his polling numbers dropping by an extraordinary 60% between February 1991 and July 1992. In short, any gain in his presidential authority

from his conduct of international affairs was more than offset by a loss of authority in domestic matters.

As expert politicians like Harry Truman and Bill Clinton understood, it is *domestic* presidential performance that wins or loses elections, with *foreign* presidential authority counting for little at re-election time unless it can complement or boost a president's domestic standing. That said, the Clinton campaign was apparently amazed that Bush never tried to make more of his foreign policy successes during the 1992 campaign. It might not have been enough to repair the damage done by his tax apostasy, but to refrain from using a key asset during a tight election campaign was surely political negligence of the highest order.

Bush's presidency offers a clear lesson in how unflattering contrasts between the perceived personality of a successor president when compared to that of his predecessor can fatally weaken a successor's ability to carve out his own independent authority. Following Reagan would probably have been impossible for *any* Republican in 1988, but the sense of enthusiasm and optimism that attached to the outgoing president found no echo in his successor. Bush lacked both clarity and vision, and he was characteristically downbeat even as – of all things – the Berlin Wall was falling. Can one imagine Reagan responding to the events of that November evening by saying he "wasn't an emotional kind of guy"?

If the Republican Party was in denial about the reality of Reagan's tax increases, a similar sense of denial also afflicted Bush as he attempted to straddle the declining version of Republicanism in which he had been nurtured and the newly ascendant one. He was the last GOP leader from an older school, a moderate Republican who was forced to deny that increasingly shameful orientation during most of his public life. But it remained obvious throughout his presidency that Bush had no enthusiasm for the new direction in which his party was now heading. Lack of credibility with the new emerging Republican base led to lack of authority in his domestic presidential performance. In the end, the true believers in the GOP shed few tears when he was ousted in 1992.

The following chapter assesses Harry Truman's first term using the same methodology applied here to Adams, Van Buren and Bush. As an avid reader of presidential biographies,

Truman learned important lessons from Adams's and Van Buren's earlier failures, but forty years later George Bush would fail to replicate Truman's success in creating a powerful stock of independent presidential authority across his first term. Robust management of opposition from within his own party was key to Truman's unexpected electoral success in 1948. Of the four men considered here, only Truman would prove capable of resisting the personal political forces that had damaged Adams, frustrated Van Buren, and would later prove fatal for Bush.

Chapter 4

Harry Truman

1 - Introduction

Harry Truman stands apart from the other presidents considered in this study in two important respects. Unlike Adams, Buren and Bush, he had no relationship of any real consequence with his presidential predecessor. And he alone managed to come 'out from under the shadow' of that predecessor or (using the model suggested in this study) to accumulate enough *independent presidential authority* to succeed in his bid for re-election and earn a reputation that ranks him as a 'near-great' American president.[55] By examining key episodes in which Truman demonstrated authority and increased his political capital between 1945 and 1948, this chapter analyses how he alone managed to achieve this.

In the first volume of his memoirs, Truman referred to 1945 as his 'year of decisions' (Truman, 1955). In fact, the whole of Truman's first term required him to make an almost endless series of decisions, some of which were vastly more far-reaching than any of his predecessors had faced. From authorising the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to establishing the policy of containment, rescuing Europe from complete post-war devastation through the Marshall Plan, setting limits on Soviet expansion in the Truman Doctrine, establishing a structure for the West's collective defense through NATO, rehabilitating West Germany as a key ally, recognising the State of Israel in 1948, and seeing Berlin through the airlift crisis that same year, Truman's foreign policy initiatives were of almost unprecedented global consequence.

These high-level decisions all showed Truman developing his own presidential authority quite independent of the authority he had inherited from his predecessor, but they are not the

[55] A review of how Truman's post-presidential reputation improved after he left the White House and was significantly boosted from the 1970s onwards by Americans' nostalgia for simpler times has been provided by Sean Savage in his essay on 'Truman: The Everyman' (Savage, 2020).

immediate focus of this chapter. Each decision has already been discussed extensively by almost every commentator on his presidency. Instead, this chapter focuses on five *other* decisions taken by Truman which also showed him displaying independent presidential authority. Each of these decisions clearly demonstrated that, even as he faced great global responsibilities, Truman remained fully aware of the need to do both the 'wise' thing as president and also the 'smart' thing as a political operator.

Truman therefore gained authority during his first term, not only from the extraordinary decisions he had to take, but also because he remained keenly attuned to the political realities that would determine his own future. John Adams lacked that sense of political instinct, or perhaps he considered it unworthy of a statesman to pay too much attention to it. Martin Van Buren possessed exceptional political instincts before 1836 but seemed to lose them when he entered the White House. George Bush (arguably) never really had them at all. This is a key factor in understanding the subsequent electoral fate of all four men.

Each of these presidents occupied the unique position in 'political time' identified by Skowronek as presenting a very specific dilemma: how to follow a same-party predecessor who had transformed the political landscape and forged a demonstrably stronger role for the presidency within a new political regime (Skowronek, 1997). Each successor had to demonstrate faithful continuity with his predecessor, consolidating and, if possible, extending the regime, whilst also (as discreetly as possible) correcting the mistakes that arose from his predecessor's more hubristic decisions (Zinman, 2016).

But the regime which Truman inherited dated from the early years of the previous decade and was therefore much 'further along' when he took office than the regimes inherited by Adams or Van Buren had been, or than the regime which Bush would inherit forty years later would be. In effect, Truman had to manage a regime which, while its core principles would continue to define American politics for decades to come, now showed signs that its initial energies were depleted. By 1945, the United States had once again identified itself as an innately conservative country, with little appetite for further federal government initiatives. This was to present Truman with both a challenge (finding a way of managing a liberal regime

in conservative times) and an opportunity (to craft his own distinctive identity by moving away from some of the more outdated priorities of his predecessor).

All four successor presidents also had to use their 'power to persuade' in bargaining with other political participants and coaxing them into accepting their leadership. Neustadt, who worked in the Truman White House, would later judge that Truman's administrative efficiency compensated for the lack of bureaucratic 'feel' which left him "decidedly less sensitive than FDR to stakes of personal power" (Neustadt, 1990, 146). In effect, Neustadt argued, Truman constructed an image of the president as the man-in-charge and then challenged himself daily to live up to that image. But in April 1945, very few would have judged Truman as having the ability to persuade *anyone* to follow his leadership.

As analysed in section 2 below, Truman's political capital in his early days as president was overwhelmingly negative. It remained low as late as November 1948, when his party lost both the House and the Senate in that year's mid-term elections. Despite his extraordinary accomplishments 'overseas' in the previous two years, "most of the criticism [of Truman in his first two years as president] …. focused on his efforts to convert the US economy to a peace-time footing …. [and] this issue more than any other contributed to a decline in Truman's approval ratings and a Republican victory in the 1946 congressional elections" (Savage, 2020, 82).

Both Truman, who opened the Cold War, and Bush, who oversaw its conclusion forty-five years later, had a 'successful' first two years dealing with international affairs and a correspondingly difficult first two years managing domestic matters. But it was Truman's great good fortune to lose the 1946 mid-terms, allowing him to re-position his presidency over the last two years of his first term.[56] George Bush's Congress was in opposition hands from the very beginning of his presidency so no such political re-positioning was possible for him when his party suffered a modest decline in the 1990 mid-terms. Adams had suffered no congressional reversal at his mid-terms, while Van Buren's mid-term losses still left his party in control of both houses. Of the four, only Truman 'lost big' at his first mid-terms.

[56] As Bill Clinton was later to do when his party lost the 1994 mid-terms.

Truman began to gain a grudging respect after the mid-term disaster, both for his continuing overseas accomplishments as well as his successful caricaturing of the 48th Congress as obstructionist, controlled by the privileged, and determined to undo the key achievements of the New Deal. No longer expected to *extend* the New Deal, Truman could now position himself as the capable guardian of its core principles. Ultimately, Truman's 1946 loss liberated him as a politician and allowed him to ride two horses simultaneously: responsible international statesman and canny domestic political operator. He displayed consistent authority on both fronts, and his stock of political capital rose accordingly.

The turnaround between 1945 and 1948 was extraordinary. To understand how it happened, it is important to recognise just how low a base Truman had started from. A brief review of his early life (in many ways a study in failure), his ten-year career in the Senate (a study in slog), and his three months as vice president (a study in waiting) will help to develop a clear perspective on the strikingly negative political capital that he held when he inherited the presidency on April 12, 1945.

2 Truman's opening political capital

Early life, the Senate (1933-45), and the vice presidency (1945)

There had been little or nothing in Truman's early life to suggest that he might ever have to face extraordinary challenges, let alone prove capable of surmounting them. He was born in 1884 into a Democratic family which honoured the memory of Confederate relatives killed in the still recent Civil War.[57] His life until middle age was mainly a record of frustration and mediocrity. Living with his family until well into his thirties, Truman was effectively an ageing adolescent with minimal privacy and no real chance to establish his own identity. He embarked on a series of commercial and farming ventures, all of which failed. In 1917 Truman joined the army and served in France. On returning from active service he married Bess Wallace in June 1919. Now aged 35, he set up a haberdashery in Kansas City, Missouri, with

[57] On a later visit to the White House, his mother would refuse to sleep in the 'Lincoln' bedroom.

a former army pal, Eddie Jacobson. In time, as with all his other business ventures, Truman's clothing store failed as well.

When local Democratic Party boss Mike Pendergast visited the store in 1922, he asked Truman to run for eastern judge (effectively administrator) of the Jackson County court. Elected that year but defeated for re-election in 1924, Truman was successful again in 1926, this time becoming presiding judge. In 1934, Pendergast chose Truman to run for the Senate from Missouri on behalf of the local Kansas City regime.

A mediocre public speaker at best, he "was fortunate to be campaigning in a state and at a time when retail face-to-face politics could compensate for a poor platform presence" (Hamby, 1995, 191-2). He may have remembered this experience when he embarked on his last campaign, the famous 'whistle-stop' train tour of 1948, which was about as 'retail' a campaign as was still possible in the dawning years of the television age. Winning election in 1934, Truman's biggest problem in his early years in the Senate was the widespread perception that he was merely the stooge of 'Boss Tom', with the *New York Times* lampooning him as "a rube from Pendergast land" (December 19, 1934).

Throughout his early years in Washington, the Roosevelt administration and its congressional allies treated Truman with something approaching serial contempt. Despite the fact that Truman admired Roosevelt's man in the Senate, "Senator James F. Byrnes ... looked down his long nose at Truman and ignored him" (Ferrell, 1983, 28). Notwithstanding the White House's disdain, however, Truman's standing in the Senate improved throughout his first term. By 1938 he was investigating the defence programme and was generally "establishing himself as one of the leading Democrats in Washington" (Hamby, 1995, 206). But he continued to be routinely ignored by the administration, even after he supported the president's controversial 1937 plan to add six new justices to the Supreme Court.

Truman's political future was in doubt when he faced re-election in 1940. Lloyd C. Stark had become governor of Missouri in 1937, and Missouri reformers saw Stark as providing them with an opportunity to break the Pendergast machine by ditching the most senior national politician associated with it – Harry Truman. The White House pointedly offered no assistance

to Truman in his bid for re-election, but with Roosevelt defeating Wendell Willkie by 52% to 48%, Truman defeated his own Republican opponent by 51% to 49%.

Back in Washington, Truman met Roosevelt in February 1941 to plead the case of small businesses. He left the meeting doubting that he had received anything more substantial than FDR's usual cordial treatment. A member of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, Truman was appointed chairman of the sub-committee set up to investigate the national preparedness programme. FDR and Byrnes had agreed to support Truman's sub-committee but provided minimal funding for it in what one Truman biographer characterises as "another sign that the veteran senator from South Carolina did not think much of the Missouri senator" (Ferrell, 1983, 33).

Truman was chosen as vice presidential candidate in 1944, not because he had any significant standing with the president, but because he was considered by Roosevelt as the candidate least likely to damage FDR's own re-election prospects. After a tortuous process of eliminating all other possible candidates, Truman was, in effect, the last man standing. His confirmation as nominee in the summer of 1944 established not only a new (but still distant) relationship with FDR, but also a tangled triangular relationship with 'Assistant President' James F. Byrnes and sitting Vice President Henry A. Wallace that would continue to play out dramatically in the early years of Truman's own presidency.

Knowing that Roosevelt was unlikely to survive until 1949, the first order of business for party leaders in 1944 was to remove the wildly unsuitable (in their view) sitting vice president, whose increasingly left-wing views and erratic behaviour had made him unacceptable to party bosses as a successor to FDR. Roosevelt himself recognised that the country had grown more conservative since he had insisted on bringing Wallace onto the ticket in 1940 and that a change was needed. But Wallace was determined to remain on the ticket. His principal opponent for the nomination was Byrnes, a former senator, former associate justice of the Supreme Court (having resigned in 1942, some fifteen months after joining the court) and now a close adviser to the president as director of war mobilisation.

Truman's candidacy emerged at a White House meeting in July 1944 attended by the president and other party leaders. Every candidate they considered would have brought both advantages and disadvantages to the ticket. In Truman's case the advantages included moderate Southern connections arising from his upbringing in Missouri; ten years of service in the Senate without antagonising colleagues in the way that Wallace had done as vice president; and the Truman Committee's solid record of investigating the national defence programme without actually hampering the work of the administration. Another reason for choosing Truman was the opportunity it might offer for restoring the relationship between Roosevelt and Congress. There were no obvious disadvantages, but the personal history between the two men continued to be lacklustre, with Roosevelt remarking, "I hardly know Truman. He has been over here a few times, but he made no particular impression on me" (Ferrell, 1984a, 7).[58]

Roosevelt's subsequent inability to be straight with either Wallace or Byrnes led to rampant confusion which lasted well into the convention itself. Various intermediaries were deputed to plead with both men to step back gracefully, but when each made his case directly to Roosevelt, FDR was unwilling or unable to deliver the killer blow. The whole shambolic arrangement has been characterised by one author as "FDR at his duplicitous worst" (Ferrell, 1984, 33).

Byrnes's presidential aspirations ended when party leaders re-iterated to Roosevelt that the 'assistant president' was unacceptable to both labour and northern black voters, but Byrnes forever afterwards blamed Roosevelt himself for inspiring the opposition to his candidacy. With Byrnes eliminated and Wallace unlikely to achieve a majority at the convention, Roosevelt finally told Postmaster General Frank Walker to go all out for Truman. By now even Truman – who had consistently told all enquirers that he was not in the race and was already pledged to nominate Byrnes – began to understand that his own name had come to the top of the list.

[58] Ferrell offers no source for this quote. But James F. Byrnes recalled Roosevelt saying to him in the middle of the confusion over the nomination, "you [Jimmy] are close to me personally and Henry is close to me. I hardly know Truman" (Byrnes, 1958, 224-5).

Truman was called to a meeting with party leaders in the hotel suite of Robert E. Hannegan, an old associate from St Louis and now chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Hannegan called the president and held out the receiver so that Truman could hear the conversation. Asked by FDR if he had got "that fellow" lined up yet, Hannegan said no: Truman was "acting like a damned Missouri mule". "'Well', came the response, 'tell him if he wants to break up the Democratic party in the middle of a war that's his responsibility.' With that, the president banged down the receiver. 'Now what do you say?' asked Hannegan. As Truman later remembered it, he said 'Jesus Christ', followed by 'Why the hell didn't he tell me in the first place?'" (Ferrell, 1984, 61). Wallace's biographers report that instead of a pious injunction Truman actually exclaimed "Oh shit" (Culver and Hyde, 2000, 359).

Truman's first post-convention meeting with FDR took place at the White House in August 1944. He told reporters afterwards that "'[the] President looked fine and ate a bigger lunch than I did' ... Privately, however, Truman was more candid, noting that '[FDR's] hands were shaking and he talks with considerable difficulty ... It doesn't seem to be any mental lapse of any kind, but physically he's just going to pieces'" (HSTL, Harry Vaughan Oral History).[59] As Ferrell remarks, "[the] president's health was rapidly declining and ... Truman knew he was running for the presidency" (Ferrell, 1984, 40).

The campaign was nasty, with Republican attacks directed against Truman as a stand-in for FDR, but the result was never in doubt. Roosevelt won 53% of the popular vote (432 electoral votes) to New York Governor Thomas Dewey's 47% (99 votes). Running with Governor John W. Bricker of Ohio, Dewey carried twelve states to FDR's thirty-six, losing his home state of New York – which was also, of course, the president's home state.

During his brief fourth term in office, from January 20 until April 12, 1945, Roosevelt was in Washington for only thirty days and saw Truman privately only twice. The working relationship between the two men was charitably described as "distantly superficial" (Hamby, 1995, 289). Much of February and March saw Roosevelt at the Yalta conference, where his

[59] Harry Vaughan served as an aide to Truman during his presidency. An old friend from Missouri, Vaughan later caused huge embarrassment when he admitted receiving expensive gifts in return for arranging access to the president during his second term.

serious illness was obvious to all. His death on April 12, 1945, was both shocking and, at least to those who had worked most closely with him, not at all unexpected.

Opening political capital

Truman came to the presidency in the worst possible circumstances. He was only vaguely known to the country at large, almost completely unknown overseas, held in low regard by Roosevelt's closest followers, and forced to lead a nation not only bogged down in a global conflict but now also paralysed by grief at the loss of its wartime leader. It was difficult for many Americans in April 1945 to imagine anyone other than Franklin Roosevelt as president. It was particularly difficult to accept the diminutive Harry Truman in that role. Although he pledged to carry on Roosevelt's policies, Truman had none of the late president's presence or standing, and his oratory alone was a sad decline on FDR's. Roosevelt's associates hesitated to address Truman as 'Mr President', and when he entered the East Room after FDR's coffin was returned to the White House on April 16, 1945, nobody stood up.

Table 3 below sets out a suggested sense of Truman's opening political capital in April 1945. When compared to that held by Adams, Van Buren and Bush at the opening of *their* presidencies, both the low level of Truman's standing and his unflattering comparison against the other three men is striking. There was no sense as he assumed the presidency that Truman had any leadership skills of note, certainly none to compare with his predecessor. Those who were aware of his Senate sub-committee work (and could remember having seen him on the March 9, 1943, front cover of *Time* magazine in that regard) will have credited him with some management skills, but those had been exercised in a legislative capacity, never in the executive branch at national or state level. Apart from his failed haberdashery, the most that Harry Truman had ever managed before April 1945 was the Jackson County road system in Missouri.

He brought a record of some useful past experience in the Senate but none from his brief three months as vice president. He had no direct electoral mandate, having come to the presidency on the death of his predecessor, and therefore no political coattails which might have given him some political credits to call in. His party controlled both houses of Congress,

but the conservative Democratic group, hailing mainly from the South, was by now closely allied with the Republicans in opposing any further extension of Roosevelt's New Deal, as Truman would quickly discover in September 1945.

But it was his overwhelmingly negative personal standing in comparison to his predecessor that presented Truman with his greatest handicap. He wasn't Roosevelt; he was nothing like him. Significant sections of his own party remained unreconciled to having this obvious second-rater in the White House, particularly when, for strong liberals at least, a much more acceptable Roosevelt substitute remained available in the person of now-Secretary of Commerce, Henry Wallace.[60] Truman will have known from the outset that after a period of calm to mourn his predecessor's death, significant challenges were likely to arise from within his own party, a far more dangerous source of discontent than the opposition GOP. How Truman dealt with those challenges is considered in section 4 below, and it remains a key claim of this study that the adroitness with which he saw off Wallace, then Byrnes, and finally Strom Thurmond, provided a clear demonstration of significantly strengthening authority during his first term.

[60] Roosevelt had tasked his new vice president with seeing Wallace's nomination as Secretary of Commerce through a reluctant Senate. This involved some adroit political manoeuvring by Truman, which included casting two tie-breaking votes, before Wallace was approved on March 1, 1945.

Table 3

Opening Political Capital

Truman compared to Adams, Van Buren and Bush

	John Adams (1797)	Martin Van Buren (1837)	Harry S Truman (1945)	George H. W. Bush (1989)
1 - Perceived leadership skills	+	+ +	- - -	+
2 - Perceived managerial skills	+ +	+ + +	- -	+ + +
3 - Past career experience	+ + +	+ + +	+	+
4 - Experience as vice president	+	+ + +	- - -	+
5 – Electoral mandate	+	+ +	- - -	+ +
6 – General inheritance	+	- - -	- - -	- -
7 – Party controls Congress	+	+	+	- - -
8 – Coattails	-	+	- - -	-
9 – Standing v/v predecessor	- -	- -	- - -	- -
10 – Standing v/v 'regime'	- -	+ +	- -	- - -
11 – Likelihood of internal challenge	- - -	-	- - -	- - -
Summary of Opening Political Capital	**+ 2**	**+ 11**	**- 23**	**- 6**

4 - How Truman established independent presidential authority during his first term

William E. Leuchtenberg has outlined how Truman initially understood his duty as requiring him to behave as the "executor of Roosevelt's estate" (Leuchtenberg, 1983, 8). In his early days as president, he repeatedly pledged to Cabinet officers, White House staff and members of Congress that his mission was to continue to implement FDR's policies, both domestic and international. The difficulty presented by that pledge in terms of foreign policy will be considered below; it arose because, with the war in Europe drawing to a close, it was not at all clear what Roosevelt's plans actually were for dealing with a shattered Europe, a bankrupt Britain, and a Soviet Union bent on accumulating spoils of war and protecting itself against future aggression. Truman also came to office wholly unaware of the $2 billion Manhattan Project which would terminate the war in the Far East far more quickly than anyone expected.

At home, his efforts to act as any kind of energetic Roosevelt legatee came to an early end. The wildly ambitious twenty-one-point domestic programme which he sent to Congress on September 6, 1945, was intended "to identify himself with Roosevelt's aspirations for a post-war New Deal" (Leuchtenberg, 1983, 9; Truman Public Papers, 'Special Message to the Congress, September 6, 1945').[61] Consisting largely of FDR's unfinished agenda, "Republican conservatives treated Truman's twenty-one-point message as a twenty-one-gun salute to their ancient enemy, Franklin Roosevelt". With Roosevelt dead, the Republican opposition now fully intended to kill what remained of his New Deal as well. There was little sign that his successor would be able to resist.

Leuchtenberg suggests that the eight years of Truman's presidency were conducted largely in the shadow of his distinguished predecessor (Leuchtenberg, 1983). This study takes a slightly different view. Certainly Roosevelt's shadow hung over every action that Truman took in his 'year of decision', but what is surprising is how quickly Truman moved out from under that shadow and established himself as a very different kind of consequential president in his own

[61] Here and in subsequent references, 'Truman Public Papers' refers to the Harry S. Truman material in the 'Public Papers of the Presidents' series. See bibliography for website address. '

right. Domestic and, in particular, economic matters remained difficult throughout 1945 and 1946, but Truman's international initiatives during his first term were hugely significant.

Those overseas achievements are not the primary focus of this study, however, despite the authority that accrued to Truman as he implemented them. Instead, the focus here is on five other episodes where, it is suggested, Truman demonstrated clear authority of a kind that reversed the deficit on his political capital account as it stood in April 1945. These episodes complement the authority he developed as he ended the war in the Far East and implemented the policy of containment, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift, and his many other first term initiatives. They focus on his actions in (1) restructuring his Cabinet, avoiding the missteps of both Adams and Van Buren; (2) resisting a significant threat to presidential authority in the nationwide rail strike of 1946; (3) setting a new direction for the nation's foreign policy and, in so doing, facing down the challenges mounted to his leadership by party colleagues Henry A. Wallace and James F. Byrnes; (4) dealing with the GOP-controlled 48th Congress and, in particular, showing significant political skill in resisting Republican demands for income tax cuts; and (5) taking courageous action on civil rights at a moment of maximum danger to his own re-election prospects.

(1) - Cabinet changes and White House appointments

Despite his public emphasis on 'continuity' with Roosevelt, the process of differentiating himself as president began early in Truman's administration. He had little time for many of those he inherited from FDR, not least because of the open contempt they displayed towards him. When Attorney-General Francis Biddle was told (on Truman's instruction) by former White House press secretary Steve Early that he had twenty-four hours to depart, he insisted that Truman should dismiss him in person. When they met, "Biddle gave him a pat on the back and said, 'Now, Harry, that wasn't so bad, was it?'" (Ayers MSS: Diary, May 28, 1945).

The cabinet he inherited from FDR was described by Truman some years later in almost wholly unflattering terms. His observations were set out in a February 1950 letter which he wrote but never sent to former White House press secretary Jonathan Daniels. These observations need to be taken with something of a grain of salt. Partly as a way of coping with stress,

Truman often wrote with more exaggeration and bluster in his private letters, particularly those he never mailed, than he did in more formal accounts. Of the condescending Biddle he wrote enigmatically in 1950, "make your own analysis". In a more restrained account published in 1955 he wrote: "Francis Biddle had been a good attorney general, and there was no ill feeling between us. I did not ask him to quit. He quit voluntarily. I do not believe that he was as well satisfied with me as a liberal president as he had been with my predecessor" (Geselbracht, 2019, 282-3). To say that Truman had not asked Biddle to quit is true only in a very technical sense: as noted above, Truman told Early to tell Biddle that he had to go. To say that Biddle quit voluntarily is also true only in a technical sense: he quit because the president had indicated that he wanted his resignation. These varying accounts indicate the importance of treating Truman's accounts in his *Memoirs* with some caution.

In his other (1950) observations Truman wrote that Secretary of State Stettinius looked the part but had no original ideas. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau was "a blockhead, a nut"[62], but Secretary of War Henry Stimson was "wonderful". Postmaster-General Frank Walker was loyal and decent, but had no new ideas. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the only woman in the cabinet, was a "grand lady but no politician."[63] Secretary of Commerce and former vice president Henry Wallace attracted a fellow politician's guarded assessment: he had "no reason to love me or be loyal to me." Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes was totally self-centred and disloyal. Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard was "a nice man but dumb." Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal was indecisive (HSTL PP – unsent letter to Jonathan Daniels, February 26, 1950).

With one exception, each of the ten member of FDR's last cabinet would be replaced by Truman, although some of the early departees were unlikely to have wanted to continue in office beyond a short transition period. Six had gone by July. Stettinius became the U.S.'s first ambassador to the United Nations and was replaced as secretary of state by Byrnes. (In its first edition after Roosevelt's death, *Time* magazine was already speculating that Byrnes

[62] Truman added more earthily on a later occasion that Morgenthau "didn't know shit from apple butter" (as reported by Morgenthau's daughter-in-law, Lucinda Franks, in Franks, 2014, 469).

[63] Assistant press secretary Eben Ayers recorded in his diary entry for September 14, 1945, "Truman [had] confided to his staff that he really didn't want a woman in the cabinet anyway" (Ferrell, 1991, 78).

would take over from Stettinius (*Time*, April 23, 1945)). Stimson went in September. Ickes and Wallace lasted until 1946. Only Forrestal remained as secretary of the navy before becoming the first secretary of defense in 1947.

White House staffing issues presented Truman with further problems. Many key FDR appointees were determined to leave, including Harry Hopkins, a key Roosevelt adviser who was already dying of cancer, as well as former press secretaries Steve Early and Jonathan Daniels. All three men were persuaded to stay on, at least for a time. FDR's military chief of staff and close adviser Admiral William Leahy was also prevailed upon to stay until 1949.

As press secretary, Truman appointed Charlie Ross, a friend from the *St Louis Post-Dispatch,* who gained the respect of reporters as an old-style newsman and whose death from a heart attack in 1950 was to prove a huge personal blow to Truman.[64] But Ross's appointment (among others) soon led to accusations that the White House had been taken over by a 'Missouri Gang'. The naming of another Truman friend, the fiscally conservative John Snyder, as treasury secretary also prompted left-leaning Democrats to claim that the new administration had departed from the economic policies of the Roosevelt era.

Another old companion from Missouri, Harry Vaughan, was appointed as Truman's military aide. His second naval aide was to be Captain Clark M. Clifford, who soon became indispensable as a more general presidential adviser. In 1946 Truman appointed Labor Department official John R. Steelman as a presidential assistant. As with Snyder's appointment to Treasury, "[the] ideologically minded would soon envision the White House as torn in a power struggle between the 'liberals' headed by Clifford and the 'conservatives' headed by Steelman" (Hamby, 1995, 304).

Truman's early replacement of the cabinet he had inherited from FDR contrasts sharply with the inaction of John Adams and Martin Van Buren, neither of whom engaged in a wholesale purge of their predecessors' holdovers. Of course, those earlier presidents were operating in very different circumstances, with cabinet dynamics in the 1790s and 1830s differing

[64] Ross's unpublished diaries, stored in the archives of the Truman Library, have provided interesting context for many of the 'authority-creating episodes' considered here.

markedly from those of the 1940s, but Van Buren had missed an opportunity to stamp his own identity on what was still the president's key advisory body, while Adams eventually had to sack his secretaries of state and war for disloyalty.

Truman, by contrast, displayed his authority early and openly: those he considered ineffective were retired with dignity while his two leading internal critics, Ickes and Wallace, were kept uneasily in place during the first year but then disposed of when circumstances permitted during the second.[65] It was evident from early in the new administration that Truman had not hesitated to appoint advisers unattractive to those who continued to hold a torch for his predecessor.

(2) - The nationwide rail strike of 1946

Fuelled by the twin problems of demobilising the armed forces and reconverting the economy to a peacetime basis, serious labour trouble started in 1945 and continued throughout 1946. A steel strike began on January 19, and three months later John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers led a nationwide coal strike.[66] A long-threatened national railroad strike was then called by two labour leaders who had previously been close political allies of Truman, A. F. Whitney and Alvanley Johnston, to begin on May 18, 1946. How he handled this strike revealed, in the assessment of one of his leading biographers, "more about Harry Truman than all but a few episodes in his entire presidency" (McCullough, 1992, 494). His relatively new White House naval aide and speechwriter Clark Clifford would later characterise it as having been "a fundamental test of [Truman's] presidency" (Clifford, 1991, 88).

Steelman had been appointed to replace Labour Secretary Lewis B. Schwellenbach as lead negotiator in an attempt to head off a strike that would paralyse the domestic economy and threaten grain shipments to a starving Europe. The day before the strike was scheduled to

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[65] As suggested in footnote 7 above, Truman's decision to change his Cabinet involved the exercise of *both* kinds of presidential power, institutional and collaborative, with a consequential display of executive authority.

[66] Truman despised Lewis. In a private note written on White House stationery he suggested that "Lewis ought to have been shot in 1942, but Franklin didn't have the guts to do the job" (HSTL, PPP, Memoirs File, undated but probably spring 1946).

begin, Whitney and Johnston came to meet the president at the White House, telling him that their men were insisting the strike should go ahead. "'Well then', Truman replied … 'I'm going to give you the gun.' As they watched, he signed an order authorising the government to seize and operate the railroads, effective the next day" (McCullough, 1992, 495).

Faced with the president's refusal to be intimidated, the labour leaders agreed to postpone the strike for five days to allow further negotiations. The day before the new deadline was due to expire, Truman proposed an 18.5% wage increase for rail workers. When that offer was rejected, Whitney and Johnston were summoned to meet Steelman at the White House. Told that they couldn't say no to a president, "[their] response was that nobody paid attention to this President anyway" (McCullough, 192, 497).[67]

In his contemporaneous diary, deputy White House press secretary Eben Ayers characterised Thursday May 23, 1946, as "one of the wildest days here at the White House since the period preceding the end of the war against Japan" (Ayers, 1991, 148). The rail strike began that evening and the whole country ground to a halt. Truman, severely harassed and "sick to death of the situation", prepared a seven-page longhand speech overnight (Hamby, 1995, 377). Venting his frustration by proposing an outrageous course of action was a known Truman strategy for coping with stress, but McCullough characterises the aggressive sentiments displayed in the draft, possibly fuelled by whiskey consumed late into the evening, as "spewing forth …. one of the most intemperate documents ever written by an American president … patriotism run amok, as well as wildly inaccurate"" (McCullough, 1992, 500-1). Clifford himself would describe Truman's draft as "perilously out of control" (Clifford, 1991, 89).[68]

Truman's handwritten draft is stored in Clifford's personal papers at the Truman Library (Clifford Papers, Box 26). Even today it is an astonishing document, and the alarm that it caused among his advisers is understandable. Asserting that the president is empowered by

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[67] McCullough cites no original source for this observation. When Truman ultimately prevailed, Whitney would double-up on his contempt by saying "[you] can't make a President out of a ribbon clerk"(McCullough, 1992, 506: again, no original source cited).

[68] Never one to underplay his own contribution to White House decision-making, Clifford notes in his memoirs that in deciding between the conflicting opinions being offered to him about how to manage the strike, "the President sided with me" (Clifford, 1991, 87),

the Constitution to declare a national emergency and call for volunteers to support the Constitution, Truman declared that the opposition facing the country in the present emergency was similar to that mounted by “two of the most despickable [*sic*] nations the world has ever produced – Germany and Japan.” During the war with those countries, union leader John Lewis has called two strikes just “to satisfy his ego … [and] held a gun to the head of the Government.” With ”effete union leaders” being paid “ten times the net salary of your president”, they now wanted a settlement for their members which would give them “from four to forty times the pay of a fighting soldier”. Rising to his theme, and with the quality of his handwriting deteriorating from Truman’s usually neat longhand to an almost indecipherable scrawl, he denounced “the Lewises, the Whitneys, the Johnsons, the Communist Brigade and the Russians” as well as “the Wall Street crowd”. He then closed with a ringing peroration that took him far from his theme but perhaps revealed the true source of his anxiety: “Let’s … tell Russia where to get off and make the United Nations work. Come on boys let’s do the job”

In his own memoirs, Truman characterised his proposals as “drastic measures … against the principles I believed in, and … proposed … only as a desperate resort in an extreme emergency” (Geselbracht, 2019, 319). The following morning, he summoned the cabinet, not to ask for their advice, but to tell them what he was going to do. A radio address would be made to the nation that evening. Congress would be addressed the following (Saturday) morning. All striking rail workers would then be drafted into the army with immediate effect.

Attorney General Tom Clark advised that if he took the latter action the president would possibly be overstepping constitutional boundaries. Truman’s response was blunt: “We’ll draft them and think about the law later”, and his overnight written remarks were given to press secretary Charlie Ross who “told Truman as an old friend that it wouldn’t do” (McCullough, 1992, 501-2: no original source cited). That evening’s radio address was then largely drafted by Clifford, with additional input from former FDR and Truman counsellor Samuel I. Rosenman, Ross, Snyder and Truman himself. Broadcast at 10pm on Friday 24 May, the radio audience heard Truman telling the country that it was now time for ‘plain speaking’. If sufficient men did not return to work by 4pm the following day, he would call out the army

and do everything he could to break the strike (HSTL PP – Radio Address to the American People, May 25, 1946).

No mention was made in the radio address of drafting strikers into the army. That bombshell was reserved for the speech to Congress the following day, despite the proposal to draft the strikers being strongly opposed by Attorney General Clark and Secretary of State Byrnes. But Truman would not budge from his proposed course of action, even after Johnston and Whitney wrote to him the following morning asking him again to consider their demands (HSTL PSF, Box 117).

When he addressed Congress on Saturday, as Steelman continued to negotiate with union leaders at a nearby hotel, Truman called for temporary emergency legislation authorising the president to draft into the armed forces all workers who were on strike against their government (HSTL PP – Special Message to the Congress, May 25, 1946). The precise wording here was Truman's own: a record of an earlier draft of the speech shows that he scored out eight lines and replaced them in his own handwriting with the words that he used in his address to Congress (HSTL PSF, Box 36). The audience roared its approval, but almost immediately the secretary of the Senate passed Truman a slip of paper containing a message from Clifford: having read it, Truman announced that word had just been received that the railroad strike has been settled on terms proposed by the president. Again, the congressional audience rose to applaud.

In his determination to act decisively despite the objections of his key advisers, Truman's actions had demonstrated firm presidential authority. David McCullough notes that until this point in his presidency Truman had often appeared "bewildered and inadequate", but when the chips were down he proved himself tough and decisive, and "the reaction of the Congress – and of the country by and large – was instantaneous approval" (McCullough, 1992, 505). Clifford would call it "a complete victory for President Truman" (Clifford, 1991, 91).

Truman's press secretary, Charlie Ross, and deputy press secretary, Eben Ayers, both kept diaries which recorded their impressions of the episode. Ross's diary was never published, but Ayers's was published in abbreviated form (Ayers, 1991). The hectic arrangements for

Truman's address to Congress were captured in Ross's record, which gives a minute-by-minute account of the key events of that Saturday afternoon. Ayers provided additional colour in his more detailed unpublished account of events. The strike had begun at 4pm on Thursday 23 May. At exactly that time, the president was hosting a garden party on the White House lawn for war veterans. During the next ninety minutes Truman shook hands with 862 men and women who lined up to greet him. His later observations about the marked contrast between selfish union leaders and selfless soldiers, which found their way into Truman's rambling draft later that evening, were obviously prompted by his encounter with such a large group of veterans.

Despite his reservations about the constitutionality of Truman's actions, the attorney-general drafted the Bill that was sent to Congress along with the president's address. It was voted on at Truman's request despite the settling of the strike. As Clark later recalled, "It passed the House pretty quick – an hour or so; and it went over to the Senate and [Republican Leader] Bob Taft stopped it" (HSTL, Tom Clark Oral History, 96). The Senate defeat followed opposition from both liberal Democrats led by Claude Pepper of Florida, who was outraged that it violated the unions, and Taft, who was outraged that it violated the law. But by then the issue was moot.

Truman's performance during the rail strike marked the first time in his presidency that he demonstrated to a domestic audience his willingness to take clear and authoritative action when circumstances required. *Time* magazine applauded his determination, reporting that his resolve was strengthened when the White House later received over 3,000 telegrams which ran 30-to-1 in favour of his "tough tactics" (*Time*, June 3, 1946). That step-change on domestic matters was also seen in the growing authority he had begun to acquire in international affairs by moving beyond Roosevelt's conciliatory attitude towards the Soviet Union.

(3) - Wallace, Byrnes and a changing foreign policy

Few American presidents have been forced to adjust their country's foreign policy as radically as Harry Truman was. After initial attempts to continue with FDR's efforts to maintain a close

working relationship with the Soviets, the administration eventually adopted the policy of containment that was to guide the U.S. approach to its former wartime ally for the next forty years. Opinion remains divided about the extent and the timing of that change, but this study broadly accepts the case advanced by Wilson Miscamble, who has argued that although the change was not immediate, it was both definitive and highly successful (Miscamble, 2007). That claim has been contested by other commentators who suggest that Truman's departure from Roosevelt's policy towards Russia was undertaken hastily and proved disastrous for the United States (for example Offner, 2008).

This change in foreign policy also required Truman to deal authoritatively with both Henry A. Wallace and James F. Byrnes. FDR had betrayed both Wallace and Byrnes in 1944 when he denied each of them the vice presidency. After initial attempts to develop a productive working relationship, Truman eventually removed both men from his administration. Byrnes was effectively retired as secretary of state in 1947, returning to South Carolina to serve as governor and moving sharply to the political right. Very publicly fired in 1946, Wallace was to prove a continuing challenge to Truman, serving as a focus for liberal discontent both inside and outside the party until the failure of his Progressive Party campaign for the presidency ended his political career in 1948.

Foreign policy transition from Roosevelt to Truman

Miscamble's account is a thorough exploration of how Truman adapted the policy he inherited from Roosevelt to meet very different post-war circumstances. Robustly rejecting the suggestion that Truman oversaw a sharp, early and misguided reversal of Roosevelt's wiser and more conciliatory attitude towards the Soviets, Miscamble suggests that in fact the new president spent an inordinate amount of time trying to follow closely in what he perceived to be his predecessor's foreign policy footsteps.

Until 1947, the new administration continued to attach itself to "Roosevelt's rather romantic plans and vision for the post-war world" (Miscamble, 2007, 323). Initially reluctant to change course, Truman soon found himself overwhelmed by evidence that Roosevelt's optimism about possible post-war cooperation with the Russians had been misplaced, and a robust

policy adjustment was now required. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes shared Truman's initial reluctance to change course, but after a sharp confrontation between the two men in early 1946, Byrnes joined Truman in advocating containment while Henry A. Wallace denounced the new approach as dangerous war-mongering.

The key element of FDR's proposed post-war arrangement envisaged continuing collaboration between the 'Big Four' – the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and China. Maintaining a cooperative relationship with Russia would allow the United States to engage in post-war world affairs largely through the new United Nations Organisation. In short, "Franklin Roosevelt, that great conjurer and juggler, left to his successor rather inflated expectations and unrealistic hopes for postwar peace" (Miscamble, 2007, 324). That those hopes were unrealistic dawned more slowly on Truman than is claimed by those who see his alleged insult to Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov at their famous meeting of April 23, 1945, as marking a decisive and regrettable turning-away from Rooseveltian idealism.

When Molotov visited the White House on his way to the U.N. conference in San Francisco, he responded to a firm lecture from Truman about Soviet failure to honour agreements made at Yalta by saying "I have never been talked to like that in my life." Truman allegedly shot back with "Carry out your agreements and you won't get talked to like that" (Hamby, 1995, 318). Liberal Democrats may have worried that the new president had been needlessly rude to a wartime ally, but Chairman of the Republican Senate Conference Arthur Vandenberg was ecstatic, remarking that "FDR's appeasement of Russia is over" (Vandenberg and Morris, 1952, 176).

Truman's initial desire to implement FDR's plans and maintain policy continuity was wholly sincere. Like Roosevelt, Truman had seen the disastrous consequences of pre-war appeasement and was determined that the United States should not revert to isolationism. He wanted engagement, continuing cooperation between wartime allies, and active participation in the new United Nations. But he was uncertain of his starting point. In sending former ambassador to the Soviet Union Joseph Davies to reassure Churchill in London, Truman apparently told Davies to make clear that while he would definitely honour all of FDR's commitments, he needed to establish first what those commitments were. Having

been kept so firmly in the dark by FDR "[he] knew nothing about these problems and had to start at the beginning" (Ferrell, 1983, 47).

With Davies dispatched to London, Truman also sent the dying Harry Hopkins to Moscow in late May 1945 to assure Stalin of policy continuity following FDR's death. Largely in an attempt to firm-up Russian commitment to the United Nations, he authorised concessions on Poland and the withdrawal of American troops from the Soviet zone in Germany. Miscamble judges that those early actions by Truman continued to reflect the naivety which had characterised Roosevelt's later days. It was not to last.

The transitionary period in the administration's thinking can be dated from the fall of 1945 to the fall of 1946. Soviet behaviour in Iran blunted any remaining sense that Russia could be dealt with as a reliable partner. Churchill and Deputy Head of the Moscow Mission George Kennan raised the alarm, and eventually advisers including then-Special Envoy to China George C. Marshall and Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson prevailed on Truman to change tack. With the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and the energetic implementation of the Marshall Plan in 1948, any idea that Europe was to have no continuing role in world affairs was now firmly rejected, as was the tradition (strongest in the West and Midwest) of American isolationism.

Miscamble's account has been challenged by a number of commentators, including Arnold A. Offner, who suggests that Miscamble's 'polemic' completely mischaracterises the policies of both presidents (Offner, 2008). Roosevelt was not as naïve as Miscamble paints him (Offner suggests), nor was Truman as visionary. He argues that Truman and Byrnes adopted a strikingly more aggressive approach at Potsdam than FDR had shown at Yalta, confirming that the hardening of the U.S.'s attitude towards the Soviets had happened much earlier than Miscamble suggests. Offner is also more receptive than Miscamble to the revisionist case that the atomic bomb was dropped not just to defeat Japan but also to gain a significant negotiating advantage in dealing with post-war Russia.

And yet Miscamble's case remains largely convincing, not least because it coheres with the larger sense of Truman as lacking authority throughout his first two years on a wide range of

issues and gaining authority only after his party lost control of Congress in 1946. It also confirms a key claim of this current study: that the emergence of Truman's authority in foreign policy closely tracked the emergence of significant *domestic* authority in dealing with two key political competitors, men who might most readily have opposed him for a second term – Wallace and Byrnes.

The challenge from Wallace

Having removed Henry Wallace from the vice presidency in 1944, FDR made some amends by appointing him secretary of commerce in early 1945. Wallace and Truman had little in common politically, but Truman retained a professional politician's sense of how unfairly his predecessor had been treated by Roosevelt. He had no great desire to retain Wallace when he restructured the cabinet, but for Truman to have moved against Wallace in the early months of his presidency would have further enraged the liberals who already judged Truman an unworthy successor to FDR.

Wallace's outspoken disagreement with the new administration's foreign policy was eventually to force the issue, but when Truman fired Wallace in September 1946 he did so in an appallingly inept way. As with the mid-terms, which the Democrats were to lose so decisively two months later, Truman's immediate setback was in fact essential to his longer-term political survival. Wallace's dismissal, controversial and chaotic though it was, set Truman on a path to isolate the more excitable elements of liberal opposition to his presidency and allowed him to define himself as occupying the 'vital centre' of the post-FDR Democratic party.[69]

Born on a farm in Iowa in 1888 (as Truman had been in Missouri in 1884), Henry Wallace was one of the most enigmatic individuals ever to rise (almost) to the most senior position in American political life. His father had served as secretary of agriculture in the Harding and Coolidge administrations where he clashed repeatedly with Secretary of Commerce Herbert

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[69] Historian and prominent member of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) Arthur Schlessinger published a celebrated 1949 book, *The Vital Centre,* which defended liberal democracy against opponents both on the left, who (he claimed) tended to communism, and on the right, who tended to fascism (Schlesinger, 1997).

Hoover, a feud that endured into the next generation, with the younger Wallace blaming Hoover for his father's early death in 1924.

Moving away from the Republican Party (although he remained a member until 1938), Wallace displayed no early enthusiasm for Roosevelt but was charmed when he first met the candidate in August 1932. His speeches for Roosevelt helped to boost FDR's share of the farm vote that year, and Wallace was named secretary of agriculture in the new administration. By 1933 he was already "a walking paradox: a registered Republican in a Democratic administration, a vegetarian from a hog-producing state, a reserved and private soul in the most garrulous and public of professions" (Culver and Hyde, 2000, 120).

Wallace brought huge energy to the agriculture department and achieved significant administrative success during Roosevelt's first term. But the defeat of FDR's court-packing plan in 1937 reversed the New Deal's political momentum, fracturing the coalition that Roosevelt had constructed over the previous five years. As Wallace was to note in his later oral history, "[from] then on, while many of us didn't realise it, it was a downhill slide – very much of a downhill slide" (Wallace, CUOH, 464).

Wallace had been considering a bid for the presidency in 1940 until Roosevelt signalled his intention to run for an unprecedented third term. That year's choice of vice presidential candidate proved almost as chaotic as the same process would prove in 1944. Sitting vice president John Nance Garner had openly opposed a third term for FDR. Roosevelt had then asked Secretary of State Cordell Hull to join the ticket, knowing that he would decline. In the end, and despite huge opposition from party conservatives, FDR choose Wallace because he was "a genuine New Dealer, an internationalist, a loyalist on the Supreme Court and third-term issues. There was no hint of corruption about Wallace. He was a mainline Protestant [unlike Byrnes, who had converted from his boyhood Catholicism]. He had a strong geographic base and the support of an important constituency" (Culver and Hyde, 2000, 209).

When Dewey ran against Truman in 1948 (as he had against FDR in 1944), Truman would ignore Dewey and run instead against the GOP-controlled 80th Congress. FDR anticipated a version of this strategy in 1940: with Republican candidate Wendell Wilkie running against

Roosevelt, Roosevelt ran against Hitler. The president's success gave Wallace victory in an election for the first (and last) time. His most famous speech as vice president came on May 8, 1942, in response to Henry Luce's suggestion that the end of the war would see the arrival of the 'American Century' (*Life magazine*, February 17, 1941): Wallace himself foresaw the emergence of 'the Century of the Common Man' in which the key tenets of the New Deal – including (to Churchill's horror) the end of colonialism – would be spread around the world (Wallace, 1942).[70] Wallace recorded how Roosevelt had congratulated him on his speech, and his distinctive identity as the administration's leading progressive took shape during those years (Wallace Diary, May 18, 1942).

How Truman found his place onto the ticket and Wallace lost the vice presidency in 1944 has been outlined earlier, and how Wallace ended up running against Truman in 1948 is considered below. In failing to be re-adopted as vice president in 1944, Wallace had stepped out of FDR's immediate political shadow just as Truman was stepping into it. And despite the public declarations of 'no hard feelings', Wallace did not hold Truman in anything approaching high regard, considering him to be "a small man of limited background … [an] opportunistic man, a man of good instincts, but therefore probably all the more dangerous. As he moves out in the public eye, he will get caught in the webs of his own making" (Wallace, CUOH, 3443).

The foreign policy changes which followed Truman's succession to the presidency have been referred to earlier. For Wallace, the newly hardening attitude towards Soviet Russia was a disastrous mis-step: he blamed Truman's advisers, in particular then-ambassador to Russia, Averell Harriman, who was pushing for an increasingly hard line towards the former war-time ally. Wallace never criticised Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, but he soon began to take very different positions from the administration on the control of atomic energy, the future of Germany, post-war governments in Eastern Europe, reparations, and the administration of Japan. In each case Wallace argued that an accommodating approach to Russia, including a frank and open recognition of Russia's right to maintain its own sphere of

[70] Wallace's biographers note wryly that Truman's succession to the presidency meant that "[the] century of the common man, if one were coming, would be led by one of its own" (Culver and Hyde, 2000, 387).

influence in Eastern Europe, was more likely to keep the peace than the policy of containment which the administration adopted in 1946.

Despite his strong support from left-wingers, the former vice president's own brand of liberalism remained something of a puzzle. Alonzo Hamby has argued that Wallace was "[an] advocate of private enterprise and economic opportunity, tempered always with a sense of Christian responsibility, [who] spoke for a humanitarian capitalist democracy rather than a proletarian social order" (Hamby, 1973, 27).[71] Another (unnamed) politician summed up the confusion about Wallace's personality more colourfully: "Henry's the sort that keeps you guessing as to whether he's going to deliver a sermon or wet the bed" (cited in Schlessinger, 2000).

It is possible to see the whole of 1946 in terms of Truman's relationship with the liberals and their *de facto* leader, Henry Wallace, as a kind of slow-motion car crash. Having previously blamed the president for American inaction in dealing with European starvation, liberals then re-doubled their condemnation when he chose Herbert Hoover to lead a Famine Emergency Committee. They were also incensed that the US was allying itself with reactionary regimes overseas including the Dutch in Java, the French in Indochina, and the British who, to protect their own oil interests, were "appeasing pro-fascist Arabs" (Hamby, 1973, 92). Because of this, "[most] liberals .... found it impossible to feel any special moral indignation against the Soviet Union" (Hamby, 1973, 94). But Wallace's polar opposite within the Truman administration, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, took a wholly different view.

The challenge from Byrnes

Truman had been used by Roosevelt to remove Wallace from the vice presidency in 1944. He had also been used to deny that role to Byrnes; but while Truman inherited Wallace as secretary of commerce, it was his own decision, taken the day after he succeeded Roosevelt (but not formally announced until July 1945), to appoint Byrnes as secretary of state.

[71] Recent attempts to tie Wallace's philosophy to contemporary Democratic socialists including Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez seem strained (for example Nichols, 2020).

Born in 1882 into a relatively prosperous Catholic family in Charleston, South Carolina, James F. Byrnes was elected to the House of Representatives in 1910. At first a relative moderate on racial matters (at least by the standards of his party and his region at the time) Byrnes nonetheless "never questioned the truth of white superiority or the necessity of a legal system of segregation". After a summer of racial turmoil in his home state in 1919, however, he delivered an extraordinarily inflammatory speech on the floor of the House (*Congressional Record*, August 25, 1919, 4302-5). His opposition to the Dyer anti-lynching bill then established his enduring reputation as a Southern racist even though he rejected the open support of the Ku Klux Klan in 1924.[72]

Despite converting to marry his Protestant wife in 1906, Byrnes lost his bid for election to the Senate in 1924 when his cradle Catholicism was used against him by former governor Cole Blease. Byrnes then persuaded wealthy financier Bernard M. Baruch to bankroll his successful 1932 Senate campaign, and on returning to Washington he went on to become FDR's indispensable man in the Senate. Maintaining his links to the South was part of Byrnes's preparations to succeed FDR at the end of the president's second term. Keeping his options open, however, he was also willing to support FDR's controversial court-packing legislation, but not even Byrnes's negotiating skills could move that bill through the Senate. Roosevelt's 1938 attempt to purge Southerners who stood in his way was similarly unsuccessful, and the alliance that emerged between congressional Republicans and Southern Democrats was to remain powerful for more than two decades.

Accepting Roosevelt's offer of a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court in 1941 marked an uncharacteristic career diversion for a senator who still hoped to become president. Unanimously approved by the Senate within eight minutes of being nominated, Byrnes served for only fifteen months. The Court was never a happy environment for him, and he jumped at the opportunity to move to the executive branch in 1942 as director of the office of economic stabilisation and later as director of the office of war mobilisation, resigning from the last position just two weeks before Roosevelt died.

[72] Byrnes's later colleague in both the Senate and the Supreme Court, Hugo Black of Alabama, had joined the Klan in 1923, and Truman himself came (momentarily) close to joining in 1922.

Robert Messer's account of the tangled three-way relationship between Byrnes, Truman and FDR draws a sharp contrast between the almost limitless foreign policy authority that Truman initially invested in Byrnes and the more constrained authority that Roosevelt had given him as wartime 'assistant president for domestic affairs' (Messer, 1981, 34). Various attempts by FDR to atone for depriving Byrnes of the vice presidency in 1944 all met with rebuttal, including Byrnes's rejection of Roosevelt's offer to become U.S. High Commissioner to Germany. He wanted to succeed Cordell Hunt at State, but Harry Hopkins convinced Roosevelt that Byrnes would interfere with the president's own management of foreign affairs in ways that the eventual appointee, Stettinius, never would.

It was Roosevelt's decision to bring Byrnes to Yalta that made Truman believe that Byrnes could offer indispensable guidance in the early days of his presidency. The former 'assistant president' had been brought along in order to sell any agreement to the pivotal group in the Senate – the Southern conservatives who had been the target of Roosevelt's purge in 1938 but whose votes were now essential to achieve the two-thirds majorities needed to ratify post-war treaties. Despite this, Roosevelt never allowed Byrnes to know about some of the more sensitive decisions taken at Yalta, including the agreement to yield Japanese territory to the Russians in return for Russian help in defeating Japan.

When Roosevelt died, Byrnes immediately sent a telegram to the new president offering help (HSTL WHROF, April 13, 1945). Truman had shown no confidence in his capacity to take on the presidency when he repeatedly pleaded to friends that day, "I'm not big enough. I'm not big enough for this job" (Messer, 1981, 67). But although he sought Byrnes's help, there were also indications even at that early date that Truman might not have been quite as overawed by Byrnes as is often suggested. When South Carolina Senator Olin Johnston opposed the appointment, Truman explained: "I'm doing it, Olin, because I think it's the only way I can be sure of knowing what went on at Yalta" (Truman-Johnston phone call of June 30, 1945, quoted in Phillips, 1966, 84).

In his early months as secretary, Byrnes worked well with Truman, including at the Potsdam conference of wartime allies in July 1945. He was a firm advocate of using the atomic bomb

on Japan without warning in order to bring the war in the Far East to an immediate end. The outgoing British ambassador to Washington, Lord Halifax, noted of Byrnes, "[he] has an eye for ability, and is not afraid of surrounding himself with clever young men in the best old New Deal tradition. In this respect he differs markedly from Mr Truman" (Halifax to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, July 3, 1945; cited in Gormly, 1978, 202). But Byrnes's early attempts to find a way of dealing cooperatively with the Soviets quickly began to diverge from Truman's growing sense that accommodation would not succeed. His behaviour at the Moscow conference of foreign ministers in December 1945, including his apparent unwillingness to keep Truman abreast of negotiations and his request for radio time to address the nation before briefing the president on his return to Washington, drove a wedge between the two men which quickly opened into an unbridgeable gap.

Truman discovered only indirectly that when Stalin had agreed to allow token pro-Western parties to join the communist-dominated governments of Romania and Bulgaria, Byrnes had confirmed that the U.S. would recognise those governments. Having obtained confirmation of Soviet support for Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government in China and a promise to have Soviet troops withdrawn from Manchuria by February 1946, Byrnes then agreed to an Allied Control Council which would advise General Douglas MacArthur in Japan. He also agreed to a compromise relating to the proposed U.N. atomic energy commission which breached an agreement that Truman had reached with Britain and Canada the previous month.

Key details of how the break between the two men came about remain unclear, but by the beginning of 1946 a confrontation had been brewing for some time. John Synder, later Truman's treasury secretary, recalls in his oral history at the Truman Library that "Secretary Byrnes did begin to take on a great number of prerogatives which were not rightly his in connection with transactions with heads of state" (HSTL, John Snyder Oral History, 727). Having flown back from Moscow, Byrnes was told that the president, then on a New Year's cruise along the wintry Potomac, wanted to see him immediately. Whether Truman reprimanded Byrnes in the privacy of his cabin and, much more significantly, whether Truman read a formal letter of reprimand to Byrnes when they met in the White House on January 5, 1946, remains wholly disputed by both men.

A typewritten record of an earlier handwritten version of that letter is on file at the Truman Library, together with a typed cover slip which says, "Read to the Sec of State and discussed - - not typed or mailed. HST" The tone of the letter is cold and direct (despite the claim that "I have the utmost confidence in you and in your ability"). Truman's key complaint was that Byrnes had exceeded his authority in recent negotiations with the Soviets. He was forceful in stating that "I do not intend to turn over the complete authority of the Presidency nor to forego the President's prerogative to make the final decision." Truman then berated Byrnes for not communicating with him from Moscow and made it clear that he did not agree with his approach and wanted it to change: "I do not think we should play compromise any longer … I'm tired of babying the Soviets." (HSTL, Eben Ayers Personal Papers, Box 22).

Byrnes's proposed radio broadcast never happened. In his own later account, Byrnes insisted that Truman had not reprimanded him on the Potomac, nor had he read anything to him at their later White House meeting (Byrnes, 1958, 402). The inference of Byrnes's claim is that Truman had either composed the letter at a later date to create a retrospective record of what he would *like* to have happened, or that he had indeed written the letter in longhand but did not read it to Byrnes when they met. Byrnes always insisted that no such encounter had taken place, maintaining that he would have resigned on the spot had Truman ever behaved in that way. Truman insisted that he had reprimanded Byrnes and had both composed and read the letter to him.

Although Byrnes subsequently adopted a much harder line in dealing with the Soviets, the relationship between the two men was by then damaged beyond repair.[73] Byrnes stayed on as secretary of state for another year. He engineered a Soviet withdrawal from northern Iran and brought the negotiation of post-war treaties to a successful conclusion before retiring in

[73] The relationship later turned poisonous. After Byrnes had broken with Truman's domestic policies in a speech at Washington and Lee University on June 18, 1949, Truman added a handwritten postscript to a 'Dear Jim' letter saying that after the speech "I'm sure I know how Caesar felt when he said, 'Et tu, Brute'." Byrnes responded by saying "I hope you are not going to think of me as a Brutus, because I am no Brutus. I hope you are not going to think of yourself as a Caesar, because you are no Caesar." (HSTL PSF, Box 159). Shakespearian references sometimes repeat themselves across the decades. In his last letter to Vice President John Calhoun on May 30, 1830, Andrew Jackson had written, "I had a right to believe that you were my sincere friend, and until now, never expected to have occasion to say to you, in the language of Caesar, *Et tu, Brute'*" (Jackson to Calhoun, May 30, 1830: Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, microfilm reel 73; cited in Burstein, 2003, 192).

January 1947, having been named as *Time* magazine's 'Man of the Year' for 1946. Four months before stepping down, however, he helped to force the removal from office of Truman's other key party competitor.

September 1946: Truman, Wallace and Byrnes collide

Although September 1946 marked the point of no return in Truman's relationship with Wallace, it had been obvious for some time that a serious problem was brewing. The fault was as much Truman's as Wallace's, with the president apparently unable to refrain from venting his frustrations about one senior adviser when speaking privately with another. In a meeting with Truman on November 28, 1945, Wallace apparently told the president that he did not believe Byrnes really understood what was going on with Russia. Truman is reported (in Wallace's own diary) as having responded that he "agreed with me entirely; that he didn't realised that I had watched the situation so closely as to catch what he was up against" (Wallace Diary, November 28, 1945).

Nine days after Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, Wallace wrote to Truman on March 14, 1946, emphasising the need for a new economic and trade approach to the Soviets. His next approach to the president, which was to cause such difficulty in the days leading up to his dismissal, came in a long letter dated July 23, 1946. Again, Wallace recommended a much more accommodating approach to the Soviets. Truman did not reply but apparently sent the letter to Byrnes, who did not reply either. The letter only came to public attention two months later as part of the White House's inept 'spin exercise' following the third and final act in that year's Truman-Wallace drama.

Wallace's Madison Square Garden speech of September 12, 1946, has passed into history as marking the final break with Truman, but the reality is more complicated. His oration that evening followed a fiery pro-Russia warm-up act from Florida Senator Claude Pepper, but Wallace's speech had actually pulled back from his previously unrestrained liberal optimism about the Soviets. In fact a significant section of the crowd "hooted and jeered as he asserted that the Russians were suppressing civil liberties in Eastern Europe" (Hamby, 1973, 130-1).

By advanced liberal standards, Wallace had given a relatively moderate speech, but he had clearly urged a shift in U.S. foreign policy just as Secretary of State Byrnes was negotiating with his fellow foreign ministers in Paris. Wallace openly proposed that the U.S. should recognise a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe in the same way that the U.S. had developed its own sphere of influence in Western Europe. In fact, Wallace's sin was not in favouring a spheres-of-influence approach but in advocating it so publicly. As with so much in politics, timing is everything: conceding such an arrangement would in fact prove acceptable as Byrnes's 'final offer' in his negotiations with the Soviets, but it was wholly *un*acceptable as Wallace's 'opening bid'.

The Russians apparently noticed the crowd's mixed reaction to Wallace's comments. Four days later a telegram to the secretary of state from the U.S. embassy in Moscow said that the Soviet press had described the Madison Square Garden meeting as follows: "Wallace and Sen. Pepper appealed for improvement in Soviet US relations and demanded return Roosevelt's foreign policy. Audience loudly applauded those portions Wallace's speech in which he censured imperialism and speculation on threat of war, and it greeted with shouts of disapproval certain his statements directed against USSR" (HSTL PSF, Box 49).[74] This Soviet reaction would undoubtedly have further antagonised Byrnes and strengthened his resolve to see Wallace removed from the administration.

Having delivered a key speech in support of German self-government less than two weeks earlier in Stuttgart, a matter that put the U.S. in direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, Byrnes now threatened resignation over the administration's apparently incoherent approach. Wallace also believed that the administration was incoherent but in a different way: he later remarked that "[you] wonder if Truman actually knew what Byrnes was doing" (Wallace, CUOH, 4953). With Truman blustering about whether he had known in advance and approved the content of what Wallace had said or just his right to say it, the whole episode left him looking both disingenuous and conflicted (HSTL PP, President's News Conference, September 12, 1946). The journalist Drew Pearson somehow obtained a copy of Wallace's July letter to Truman and was about to publish it when Press Secretary Ross, with

[74] FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was also providing regular secret reports about Wallace to Truman aide Harry Vaughan at this time (HSTL PSF, Box 144).

Truman prevaricating, decided to leak it peremptorily. Rather than bringing the issue back into the White House's control, the leak left the president looking just as hapless in managing his officials as he was in managing the members of his cabinet.

After speaking with Byrnes by teletype[75] and walking the secretary of state back from the threat of resignation he had issued in an earlier telegram to Truman, the president retired to the residence to consider his options. He first dictated a note to himself about his two and a half-hour meeting with Wallace the previous day. Referring to him as 'X', Truman wrote: "I am not sure he is as fundamentally sound intellectually as I had thought …. X is a pacifist 100 per cent. He wants us to disband our armed forces, give Russia our atomic secrets and trust a bunch of adventurers in the Kremlin Politbureau. I do not understand a 'dreamer' like that" (HSTL PSF, Box 146).

Truman then wrote a longhand letter of dismissal to Wallace and sent it directly from the White House that evening. The contents of the letter are unknown, but the fact that it was sent at all caused consternation among his staff when Truman mentioned it the following morning. It was, by all accounts, a bitter and intemperate letter which Wallace, to his great credit, returned the following day.[76] Truman's statement to the press announcing Wallace's firing stressed (as Byrnes had required him to do) that the foreign policy of the United States was made by the Congress, the president and the secretary of state, and that all statements about foreign policy by other cabinet members had to be cleared in advance with the State Department (HSTL PP, News Conference of September 20, 1946). On paper at least, this was as complete a victory as Byrnes could possibly have wished for. But three months later he too would have left the administration.

In his later oral history, Wallace offered an assessment of why Truman had fired him: "Truman may have been convinced politically that the cost of breaking with Byrnes was greater than

[75] Adverse atmospheric conditions across the Atlantic apparently prevented any communication between Washington and Paris by phone.

[76] Truman apparently then destroyed the letter. Clark Clifford took credit for having asked Wallace to return it (Clifford and Holbrooke, 1991, 121) but Wallace recounted that he himself phoned Truman the following day to say "You don't want this thing out" (Wallace, CUOH, 5028). Truman agreed, sent someone over to retrieve the letter, and "recognised that Wallace had made a genuinely magnanimous gesture" (Culver and Hyde, 2000, 426).

the cost of breaking with me … I think he'd lost his personal esteem for Byrnes at this time, but the combination of Vandenberg and Byrnes and [Tom] Connolly [chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee] … was just too much for him. So he swung over to their point of view. He didn't really want to do it but he was forced to." (Wallace, CUOH, 4985-86).

A less partisan explanation may be that the president now recognised that both Wallace *and* Byrnes had to leave if Truman was to be able to demonstrate that he was in charge of his own administration. Byrnes had been on borrowed time since January 1946, and Truman had received multiple requests from him since then asking for permission to retire. Although the mechanics of removing Wallace were undoubtedly messy and the timing unfortunate (with the mid-terms just six weeks away), it made perfect political sense for Truman to free himself from the more advanced 'liberal drag' that threatened to paralyse his presidency. The mid-terms were already lost and, as Clark Clifford endlessly emphasised, Truman needed to 'move left' if he was to have any chance of re-election two years later. But he needed to advocate his *own* brand of moderate and pragmatic liberalism, not the more extreme version that Wallace was preaching but for which the country at large had little appetite. If Truman was to show that he was both his own man and his own kind of liberal, Wallace would have to go, and Byrnes would quickly follow.

Few if any liberals supported Truman's action when he fired Wallace. A key rift in the Democratic Party which Roosevelt had managed to contain for more than a decade was now exposed. The public also sensed the chaos, with Truman's poll ratings continuing to slide from 87 percent at the start of 1946 to 37 percent just before the mid-terms. Meanwhile the Republicans unveiled their slogan for the forthcoming mid-terms: "Had Enough?"

In fact, however, the 1946 electoral disaster for his party would prove the making of Truman as president. Half-way through his first term he had exercised significant authority by seeing off his two main party opponents, Wallace and Byrnes. Half-way through John Adams's only term as president he had taken no action to deal with two cabinet members who were openly taking instructions from Adams's most determined 'same-party' opponent, Alexander Hamilton. Half-way through Van Buren's only term, the man he had displaced as vice president, now-Senator John C. Calhoun, was playing cat-and-mouse with the administration,

repeatedly offering support before just as repeatedly withdrawing it. Half-way through George H.W. Bush's only term, Congressman Newt Gingrich would refuse to support the deficit reduction package because it reversed the president's 1988 campaign commitment not to raise taxes, and Patrick Buchanan was preparing to scourge Bush at the 1992 GOP Convention on 'family values'. All four were in the political doldrums at the end of their first two years, but only Truman would find a way of generating fresh wind for the next two. If dealing quickly – albeit messily – with key internal opponents is an essential element of independent presidential authority, only Truman had taken positive action to control the issue before it could start to control him.

(4) - Dealing with the 80th Congress

The 1946 mid-term elections marked the turning-point in Truman's presidency. After his party lost control of Congress that year, he told his wife in a letter dated November 18, 1946, that he was going to do as he pleased for the next two years and to hell with those who opposed him. He brushed aside the suggestion of Democratic Congressman J. William Fulbright of Arkansas that he should appoint Vandenberg as secretary of state and then resign, making Vandenberg president and giving the Republicans complete control of the government.[77] Instead he would now face Republican Speaker of the House Joseph W. Martin of Massachusetts instead of Sam Rayburn of Texas, and in place of Alban Barkley he would have to deal with Senate Republican leaders Taft, who spoke on domestic policy issues, and Vandenberg, the GOP's foreign policy leader.

The outcome of the mid-terms was seen by liberals as finally repudiating any possibility that Truman might have been a worthy successor to Roosevelt. It quickly became clear, however, that having Congress controlled by the Republicans actually gave the president a significant political asset – something to push against. Speaking out in opposition to the new Republican majority in Congress also helped to distract attention from the divisions within Truman's own

[77] Truman ever afterwards referred to Fulbright as Half-bright. Records at the Truman Library show an influx of mail both supportive and dismissive of Fulbright's recommendation. One telegram from a voter in Salt Lake City might (had he ever seen it) have given Truman a laugh: "Resign in the interests of the Democratic Party. I did." (HSTL PSF, Box 23).

party. Having Congress in GOP hands allowed Truman to adopt a new approach to the political circumstances of the mid-1940s, which were quite different from those faced by his predecessor. He was now the 'liberal' leader of a country that was quickly returning to a more conservative attitude. It was in fact his very public humiliation at the mid-terms that freed Truman to establish his own independent presidential authority and paved the way for electoral success two years later.

Different approaches to foreign and domestic policy

By judiciously balancing bipartisan accommodation with Congress in foreign policy and firm resistance on domestic policy, Truman was now able to display strikingly different types of authority in the two spheres in which he operated. Coordinating closely with Vandenberg, who had publicly repudiated his earlier isolationism in 1945, the president could be seen as working productively with Republicans to adapt his predecessor's foreign policy to new global realities. On the home front, however, he claimed full credit for resisting Republican attempts to dilute or reverse FDR's key domestic policies.

Having remained largely silent during the 1946 campaign, Truman now relished the opportunity to take on the GOP in an all-out domestic policy fight, but he chose his interventions carefully. His State of the Union address two months later was a deliberately modest affair, because it was clear that the electorate no longer wanted the kind of radical extension of the New Deal first outlined by Truman to Congress in September 1945 (Truman Public Papers, Annual Message to the Congress, January 6, 1947). This gave him the opportunity to defend Roosevelt's legacy without feeling obliged to extend it any further, casting himself "as a protector of treasured programs rather than as an advocate of more change" (Hamby, 1995, 422).

The new spirit of 'overseas' bipartisanship allowed Truman to enjoy considerable success in bringing Congress with him on key military and foreign policy initiatives. Although some administration requests for military expansion were rejected, the 80th Congress enacted the first peace-time draft, approved a significant increase in U.S. air power, supported aid to

Greece, Turkey and Europe generally (the Marshall Plan), and approved U.S. membership of NATO, the first permanent military alliance the country had ever agreed to join.

Some commentators have argued that this bipartisan cooperation probably went too far, with the administration overdoing its advocacy of containment (Hartmann, 1971). As a result, it found itself on the losing side in the Chinese civil war, a development that hardened public attitudes towards communism both abroad and at home, and limited the possibility of any rapprochement towards the USSR as advocated by Wallace and his followers. The same commentator also notes that for Truman bipartisanship meant keeping foreign policy out of political campaigns rather than engaging in any real consultation with Republicans *before* administration policy was decided (Hartmann, 2011, 148). In his oral history at the Truman Library, Dean Acheson would refer to this Truman-era bipartisanship as "a necessary fraud" (HSTL Dean Acheson Oral History, 13-14).

Despite its cooperation with the administration on foreign affairs, the congressional GOP also launched ferocious attacks on Truman and the Democrats for leading the country down the road to socialism, Communism and totalitarianism. Responding to these attacks, and at the insistence of Attorney-General Tom Clark, Truman issued an executive order on March 21, 1947, establishing a loyalty programme for federal government employees (Truman Public Papers - Executive Order 9835). He had misgivings about the programme from the outset, believing that it offered no protection to people being investigated, but he had little capacity to resist the pressure coming from the newly-empowered congressional Republicans and their Conservative Democratic allies. If Truman is to be credited (rightly) with launching the policy of containment which saw the collapse of the Soviet Union forty years later, he must also take some of the blame for not having offered sturdier resistance to the paranoia and anti-communist hysteria that erupted in the 1940s.

Taft-Hartley and income tax vetoes

Responding to the wave of labour disputes which had blighted Truman's first two years, Republicans in Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which imposed significant restrictions on strikes, working practices and union political contributions. Taft-Hartley also outlawed the

‘closed shop’ and supported state ‘right-to-work’ laws which prevented unions from compelling new employees to become members. Anti-labour sentiment was widespread across the country at the time, and Truman was, in Alonzo Hamby’s assessment, “smart enough to stand clear of any involvement in the actual legislative process” (Hamby, 1995, 423).

Approved with significant Democratic support, Taft-Hartley was presented to Truman for signature in June 1947. This provided the president with a significant veto opportunity, although not one without political risk. As *Time* correspondent Frank McNaughton noted, “[the] veto was good politics – provided only that it is overridden” (HSTL, McNaughton Public Papers, June 21, 1947). If Truman vetoed and Congress failed to override, every labour dispute in the period leading up to the 1948 election would have been blamed on Truman and his dependence on union bosses. But the gamble paid off, and Truman’s veto was indeed over-ridden, the House voting 331-83, with significant support from conservative Democrats concerned about union activity in the South, and the Senate voting 68-25, following a filibuster attempt by Glen Taylor of Idaho and Wayne Morse of Oregon. Liberals were ecstatic about the president’s newly re-discovered enthusiasm for labour, with the *Nation* claiming that Truman had “given American liberalism the fighting chance that it seemed to have lost with the death of Roosevelt” (Editorial, June 28, 1947).

Truman also vetoed two Republican tax reduction bills (successfully) in 1947 and a third one (this time over-ridden) in 1948. The first bill provided for an immediate 20 percent reduction across the board in personal income taxes. The administration was aware that in a Gallup poll taken in October 1946, 41 percent had favoured an immediate reduction in income tax while 49 percent wanted any reduction to be deferred until part of the large wartime national debt has been paid off. Wartime taxes were scheduled to end on June 30, 1947, and Truman wanted to continue those taxes beyond that date in order to bring the federal budget into balance for the first time in seventeen years.

Truman consulted the Cabinet and the Democratic National Committee consulted its members, but there was never any real doubt that Truman would veto. He returned the bill to the House on June 16, 1947, four days before he also vetoed the Taft-Hartley bill, with a

message saying that it provided for the wrong kind of tax reduction at the wrong time. The following day the House failed to override the veto: its 268-137 margin (even with 35 Democrats voting with the Republican majority) fell two votes short of the necessary two-thirds.

The vetoed bill had required the tax reductions to come into effect on July 1, 1947. Five days after Truman's veto, an identical bill was introduced but with a new effective date – January 1, 1948. Republicans also introduced an anti-poll tax bill to "to get even with Southern Democrats who helped kill the income tax reduction bill" (Alton, 1970, 78). In response, Democratic Senator Harry Byrd of Georgia assured the Republicans that he could muster enough votes to override a second presidential veto. With adjournment looming, it was necessary to get the new bill to Truman in time to prevent a pocket veto. When it passed both the House and the Senate, Truman duly vetoed it again. The House overrode his veto 299-108 (an increase on the 268-137 margin which had failed to override his first veto) but despite Byrd's assurances the vote in the Senate fell three votes short (57-36). Truman's two vetoes stood. He had displayed significant authority in resisting congressional opponents who were – Truman claimed – acting in the interests of their partisan supporters rather than for the benefit of the country at large.[78]

(5) - Civil Rights

Early in 1948 Truman openly chose – in what looked at first like a dangerous political misjudgement – to challenge the powerful Southern wing of his own party on its defining issue. A racist only in the most casual sense of the word, Truman had at first avoided the issue, insisting (with the concurrence of many leading liberals) that the fight for full employment was more important than civil rights. He had been the first president to address the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (HSTL PP, June 29, 1947), but as the 1948 election approached he moved from gestures to action. The Civil Rights Committee which he established in late 1946 issued its far-reaching report – *To Secure These*

[78] A third tax bill was passed in March 1948. Truman vetoed it but this time, in an election year, Congress voted to override.

Rights – in October 1947. Its call for the dismantling of racial restrictions caused widespread outrage in the South, and support for the proposed changes was tepid at best in the North.

Roosevelt had dodged the whole issue of civil rights, creating only a temporary Fair Employment Practices Committee in order to head off the threatened 1941 March on Washington by advocates of fair working practices for black Americans. Of all his Cabinet appointees, only Harold Ickes at Interior had aggressively dismantled the departmental segregation put in place under Woodrow Wilson a quarter of a century earlier. With his likely 1948 opponent Thomas E. Dewey having a good civil rights record in New York, Truman had political reasons to act, but he was also persuaded that a breakthrough on civil rights could only be achieved at federal level and under presidential leadership. His decision to 'federalise' such a sensitive issue, depriving the states of their right to decide how they would deal (or not deal) with it, moved the whole issue to a new level of confrontation.

Although the matter was obviously tangled in electoral politics, it is hard to disagree with the assessment of one Truman biographer that "[the] president's espousal of black rights was more than a tactical effort to disconnect the blacks and northern liberals from Wallace" (Ferrell, 1983, 97). But a historian of Truman's civil rights initiative offers a less negative interpretation: "Truman was different from his predecessor, Roosevelt, and from later presidents – Dwight David Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson; Truman did not need political pressure to do what he felt was morally right and constitutionally mandated for black Americans" (Gardner, 2002, 12).

Another historian of the Truman presidency, Donald McCoy, suggests that a further important *caveat* applies to Truman's civil rights legacy. His ambition to establish civil rights at home was not matched by a similar concern about behaviour overseas, where resistance to Communism trumped concerns for civil rights wherever the United States intervened. That overseas preference for security over civil rights also found an echo at home, with Truman's domestic loyalty and security programme breaching the rights of those wrongly accused of anti-American activity. But McCoy does acknowledge Truman's limited room for manoeuvre on the loyalty programme because he found himself caught in hysterical circumstances of the

kind that had ensnared John Adams with the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 (McCoy, 1984, 274-6).

In February 1948, Truman sent an extensive package of civil rights legislation to Congress without any prior discussion with congressional leaders and in the face of deep cabinet divisions (HSTL PP, Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights). When he announced that he would take executive action to end discrimination in the civil service and desegregate the armed forces, he experienced a huge drop in his public approval ratings. Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 were issued on June 26, 1948, desegregating the armed forces and the federal government. Clifford later recalled working on Truman's speech for the Democratic Party Convention that summer and worrying about the implications of Truman's civil rights stance: "I remember discussing it shortly before the convention with President Truman and his being absolutely positive and unequivocal that he wasn't going to retreat an inch. He simply said: 'I want to lay it down just the way we have laid it down. This is the way it is going to be, and whatever the results of it are, we will face those results'" (HSTL, Clark Clifford Oral History, 232). This action on civil rights, taken in the face of a firm refusal by Congress to address the problem, would become a defining issue in Truman's bid for re-election later that year.

5 – Truman's closing political capital

By 1948, Truman's political capital has improved remarkably on the negative stock with which he had assumed office in April 1945. His management and leadership skills, although obviously quite different from those of his predecessor, were by now readily apparent. He had overseen a significant policy change towards the Soviet Union and prevented Western Europe from sinking into social and economic despair. Ending the global war on two fronts happened sooner than anticipated, but converting from a wartime to a peacetime domestic economy and dealing with the inflationary pressure and waves of labour unrest prompted by that process had taken most of his first term. By then, however, the first pulses of the long post-war boom were beginning to course through the American economy.

On the 'debit' side, Truman's relationship with Congress took an obvious turn for the worse after 1946, and even those who admired his approach to the presidency never credited him

with rising to the heights of Roosevelt's personal performance in office. But he held the key elements of the New Deal regime together with skill and determination, despite some defections to the progressives and Southern conservatives at election time. Crucially, by 1948 Truman had also seen off all the main challengers from within his own party. Wallace and Thurmond would run against him in 1948 but to no avail, while Byrnes remained a bitter opponent from the sidelines for the rest of his career. But none came close to displacing Truman from his role at centre-stage in American political life.

Truman went into the 1948 election facing Dewey, a talented but apparently low-energy opponent, but whether you liked or loathed the president there was nothing remotely low-energy about him. His party also went into the election well-positioned to reverse the Republican gains of two years earlier. Table 4 below compares Truman's standing at the end of his first term against that of the other three presidents considered in this study. By the end of that term, having started which much less political capital than Adams, Van Buren or (later) Bush, he ended with significantly *more* than any of these other three presidents. It was a remarkable turnaround. The independent authority he had displayed across those four years did much to bring about this change in Truman's capital stock, and he reaped the re-election reward that escaped each of the other three men.

Table 4

Closing Political Capital

Truman compared to Adams, Van Buren and Bush

	John Adams (1800)	Martin Van Buren (1840)	Harry S Truman (1948)	George H. W. Bush (1992)
1 - Perceived leadership skills	-	- -	+ + +	-
2 - Perceived managerial skills	-	- -	+ + +	+ +
3 – How coped with his inheritance?	+ +	- -	+ +	+ +
4 – Relationship with Congress	+ +	-	-	-
5 – Standing v/v predecessor	+	- -	-	- - -
6 – How managed regime relationship	- -	-	+ +	- - -
7 – How dealt with internal opposition?	- - -	+	+ + +	- - -
8 – Standing of his own party v/v the opposition party	- -	- - -	+	-
9 – Standing v/v opponent	-	- - -	+ +	-
Summary of Closing Political Capital	**- 5**	**- 15**	**+ 14**	**- 9**
Opening Political Capital	**+ 2**	**+ 11**	**- 23**	**- 6**
Change over four years	**- 7**	**- 26**	**+ 37**	**- 3**

6 – Proving His Authority – The 1948 election

The 1948 election year opened with two widely accepted political predictions: Dewey would win the presidency, and the Republicans would retain their majorities in both the House and the Senate. Eleven months later, both these predictions would turn out to have been completely wrong. Not only would Truman retain the presidency, but the Democrats would also win 75 seats to recover control of the House as well as gaining 9 seats to retake the Senate.

The likelihood of either such outcome had looked decidedly low at the start of the year. In 1948 the Democrats were a fractious coalition of urban liberals, unions and working-class voters, former progressive Republicans, farmers, blacks, and intellectuals. Although the nation's big cities were key to the Roosevelt coalition, the capstone – certainly as far as the party's congressional profile was concerned – was the solid block of conservative Southern Democrats, "most of whom retained both a Jeffersonian political outlook and a commitment to racial segregation along with their hereditary loyalty to the Democracy" (Busch, 2012, 18).

The electoral potency of Roosevelt's new Democratic coalition had first emerged at the 1934 mid-terms and was confirmed by FDR's 1936 landslide. Further electoral successes in 1940 and 1944 were largely attributable to the international situation rather than domestic achievements, and the decline in Roosevelt's later presidential votes showed the difficulty of keeping the coalition together during his third and fourth terms. From 57.4% in 1932 to an extraordinary 60.8% in 1936, FDR's vote had fallen to 54.7% in 1940 and to 53.4% in 1944. His electoral college victories in 1940 and 1944 were still striking, but the possibility of a Republican recovery was by now becoming apparent. By 1948, the key electoral question was clear: how stable was the New Deal coalition without the 'FDR magic'?

Eisenhower had emerged as mainstream liberals' early favourite to replace Truman that year.[79] For more committed liberals, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, "a non-

[79] Truman himself is reported as having offered Eisenhower the 1948 Democratic nomination at a meeting in the White House on July 25, 1947. Having visited the Senate informally two days earlier, where he sat in his old seat and was recognised for five minutes as 'the ex-Senator from Missouri' by presiding officer Arthur

Communist alternative to Wallace", offered a surer prospect of electoral success (Hamby, 1973, 229). But both Eisenhower and Douglas declined to be drafted to the cause. Just before the convention, Florida Senator Claude Pepper announced his candidacy in opposition to Truman, which "simply added a comic touch to the dump-Truman effort" (Hamby, 1973, 243). International developments were by now damaging any chance that Wallace might have had of galvanising the left-wing vote: as the Berlin airlift got underway in June 1948, his call for America to abandon Berlin confirmed his continuing desire to accommodate the Soviet Union by granting it a formal sphere of influence across the whole of Eastern Europe. Coming shortly after the Soviet-directed coup in Czechoslovakia and the murder of non-Communist foreign minister Jan Masaryk, Wallace's 'Gideon's Army' campaign began to disintegrate even before the campaign season had opened.

The Clifford - Rowe memorandum

Truman's re-election strategy was outlined in a celebrated briefing document prepared in late 1947 by James Rowe and forwarded to the president by his special counsel, Clark Clifford (HSTL, Clark Clifford Personal Papers, Box 21: hereafter the 'CRM'). James Rowe had been an administrative assistant to FDR: on leaving the White House in 1945 he joined a law firm headed by another former Roosevelt aide, Tommy 'the Cork' Corcoran, a legendary Washington wheeler-dealer whom Truman despised.[80] Rowe himself had (Clifford suggests) no great affection or respect for Truman, but he was desperate that the White House should not fall to the Republicans in 1948. Preventing that outcome could only be assured if "President Truman ran as a liberal, reassembling the key elements of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal coalition" (Clifford, 1991, 190).

In the summer of 1947, Rowe had been encouraged by James Webb, director of the Bureau of the Budget, to set out his thoughts about the 1948 election. Webb offered Rowe's

Vandenberg, Truman was apparently cheered at the prospect of returning to the Senate in 1949 as Eisenhower's vice president (Geselbracht, 2011, 61).

[80] J. Edgar Hoover had Corcoran's phones tapped, with Truman's tacit approval. Transcripts are stored at the Truman Library (HSTL PSF, Boxes 279 and 280). The existence of the tapes remained a secret until the Church Committee hearings of 1976 (www.washingtondecoded.com/site/1999/12/the-tapping-o-1.html: date accessed 13 July 2023).

memorandum to the president late that autumn, but when Truman heard that it came from Rowe he told Webb to give it to Clifford instead. It was hand-delivered to Clifford by another presidential aide, Richard E. Neustadt.[81]

Clifford claims that he then re-wrote the memorandum and re-submitted it to Truman. The final product was a 43-page document which offered seven major predictions about the campaign and suggested a strategy for victory. The president's key political problem for 1948 was clearly stated at the outset: "The Democratic Party is an unhappy alliance of Southern conservatives, Western progressives and Big City labor". The challenge facing Truman would be "to lead enough members of these three misfit groups to the polls" in November 1948 (CRM, 1947, 1). The memorandum suggested how the campaign should be structured to achieve this.

The first prediction was that Dewey rather than Taft would be the GOP nominee. Second, Truman would be elected if he focused on strengthening the traditional Democratic alliance between the South and the West. This led to the most famous miscalculation of the memorandum: "It is inconceivable that any policies initiated by the Truman Administration no matter how 'liberal' could so alienate the South in the next year that it would revolt. As always, the South can be considered safely Democratic. And in formulating national policy, it can be safely ignored" (CRM, 1947, 3).

Pressed in 1971 about why he had thought this, Clifford recalled: "It was traditional. I felt that when the chips were down in 1948, that although the South had bucked before, and the South had not been fond of Franklin Roosevelt or Mrs Roosevelt, when the time came to vote, why, they had voted Democratic. And I thought that we had not pushed the South beyond the limit that they would accept. I was wrong" (Clifford, HSTL Oral History, 53).

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[81] Neustadt's later work in coordinating written input for the Hoover Commission on Organisation of the Executive Branch was to provide much material for his Harvard Ph.D. (HSTL, Richard Neustadt Personal Papers, Box 1). Neustadt is also credited with drafting much of Truman's farewell address in 1953 (HSTL, David C. Bell, Oral History, 74).

Clifford and Rowe's third prediction was that Henry Wallace would run as a third-party candidate. Fourth, and perhaps most crucially, they suggested that the old party organisation was now gone forever and has been supplanted by new 'pressure groups', all of which would need specific handling. Those distinct groups were identified as Farmers, Labor, Liberals, Negroes, Jews, Italians, Catholics and 'the Aliens group'. Traditionally Republican, farmers would (Clifford and Rowe advised) be central to the campaign's number 1 priority – the 'Winning of the West'. Inspired by Roosevelt, labor was traditionally Democratic but had largely 'stayed home' for the 1946 mid-terms. Although its support might have increased because of the president's recent veto of the Taft-Hartley Act, "much work needs to be done with organised labor" (CRM, 1957, 10).

The 'Liberals' constituted another group that might (it was suggested) decide to stay home on election day. Roosevelt New Dealers had largely found a home in Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), but they felt increasingly alienated from the Democratic Party because they had been cut off by Southern Democrats and 'organisation' leaders. Clifford and Rowe suggested that despite being numerically small, the Liberal group was disproportionately influential via the press, the radio, and the movies.

The 'Negro' [*sic*] was geographically concentrated in New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. (The phrase as used in the memorandum applied exclusively to *northern* blacks, given how few African Americans in the South were able to vote). Dewey had carefully cultivated this vote in his home state and there was a developing sense that voting as a bloc for the GOP might improve their economic situation. "Unless the Administration makes a determined campaign to help the Negro ... on the problems of high prices and housing ... the Negro vote is *already lost* [italics added]" (CRM, 1947, 12). The anti-segregation orders issued by Truman in June 1948 are likely to have been influenced in part by this advice.

The Jewish group (the memorandum continued) was important only in New York and was primarily interested in Palestine. The Catholic group was traditionally Democratic and motivated primarily by a fear of Communism. The Italians voted as a bloc and were notoriously volatile. The 'Alien' group was primarily interested in lowering the barriers to immigration. In fact (the authors noted) both parties faced internal pockets of hostility in

relation to any proposal to make immigration easier: the Democrats from Southern conservatives, the Republicans from small town and rural voters. The sense that emerged from the memo was that no action should be taken by the president on this matter unless his hand was forced by some initiative taken by the other party during the campaign.

The memorandum's fifth prediction was that relations with the Soviet Union and the administration's handling of foreign reconstruction and relief would be the key foreign policy issues of 1948. The president had considerable advantages here, largely because of his brilliant appointment of General Marshall as secretary of state and the employee loyalty programme which had stolen the Republicans' thunder on anti-Communism. (Any reservations Truman may have had about that programme came up firmly against his advisers' view that he had done exactly the right thing in terms of political strategy.) But the president now needed to re-position himself to remind voters that *he* rather than Marshall had the final say in matters of foreign policy.

Sixth, the key domestic issues of the campaign would be high prices and housing. The president was likely to be blamed for inflation because he had removed price controls. The rather cynical advice was that Truman should present an ambitious price control bill to Congress: he could then take credit if the bill succeeded and blame the Republican Congress if it failed.

Finally, the authors predicted that conflict between the president and Congress would increase in the coming year. Bipartisanship on foreign policy was likely to come to an end in 1948, and the administration could also assume that it had no chance of getting any part of its domestic programme approved. It should therefore carefully select the issues which Congress would oppose and appeal directly to voters for support on those issues. Overall, the authors stressed that "the only tenable Democratic strategy …. is to continue to stay to the 'left' of its opponents" (CRM, 1947, 32).

Truman accepted the key thrust of the memorandum – that he needed to run as a liberal while painting Wallace and his supporters as extremists. As the author of a recent study of the 1948 election notes, having begun 1947 as a middle-of-the-roader Truman "ended it ... as

a more earnest New Dealer than Franklin Roosevelt." But actually the president "did not advocate anything after the Clifford/Rowe memorandum that he did not already support, at least in principle." (Busch, 2012, 36).

Truman's decision to recognise the State of Israel was taken against the strong advice of the State Department, which continued to press for a trusteeship arrangement under the United Nations (HSTL PP – 'Statement by the President Announcing Recognition of the State of Israel', May 14, 1948). It may have gained him Jewish votes in New York, but the perception of blatant political opportunism may also have lost him votes in other parts of the country. His civil rights executive orders were certain to aggravate the South, but they might also yield him compensating electoral votes in the North. Whatever his true motives, Truman was determined to act decisively in both matters. He took both decisions believing them to be correct and just, but each came with a political tail. In any election year, matters of politics and matters of policy often merge uncomfortably. Truman's decisions on civil rights and on Palestine, both taken in 1948, fall firmly within this conflicted category.

The Democratic convention

When Wallace supporter Leo Isaacson won a New York congressional election on the American Labor Party ticket in February 1948, Truman was forthright in declaring that he did "not want and ... will not accept the political support of Henry Wallace and his Communists" (Busch, 2012, 61). But early enthusiasm for Wallace quickly faded as it became clear that the most likely consequence of a strong vote for him would be the election of a Republican president. Significant Communist influence in his campaign was also highlighted when Wallace accepted the endorsement of the Communist Party of the USA. Rejected by prominent liberals including Eleanor Roosevelt, Walter Reuther of the CIO, and Arthur Schlesinger of the ADA, Wallace's poll ratings slid significantly during the first six months of 1948. Publication of the peculiar 'Guru Letters' that Wallace had exchanged with a spiritualist mentor weakened him still further.

Persistent rumours suggested (correctly) that Truman had made an offer to Eisenhower in the autumn of 1947 to back him for president with Truman serving as his vice president. Truman

denied having made the offer and by early 1948 he had determined to run on his own, but the Eisenhower option refused to fade away. As one historian of that year's election remarks, "ADA liberals, big-city bosses, and Southern defenders of Jim Crow were in league, all aiming for the same goal of replacing Truman with Eisenhower on the Democratic ticket ... the Dump Truman alliance was nothing but the New Deal coalition revivified with the goal of winning one more election, this time driven by desperation" (Brandt, 2012, 80). One final reinvigoration of the Roosevelt coalition was therefore both Truman's goal and also the goal of those plotting to oust him.

With various prominent Democrats publicly urging Truman to retire, the president was forced to declare that he would not withdraw from the contest, calling the reporter's enquiry "foolish question number one" (HSTL PP, 'President's News Conference', July 1, 1948). As one later commentator wrote, "No president in memory, not even Herbert Hoover in his darkest days, had been treated with such open contempt by his own party" (Busch, 2012, 104). Southerners staged a states' rights protest at the Baltimore convention and liberals (orchestrated by Minneapolis Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey) responded with a demand for a stronger civil rights plank. The liberal demonstration led to a walkout by a number of Southern delegations, this time a much more serious development than in 1944 when 89 Southern delegates had walked out on FDR. If Roosevelt had only "nibbled at the edges of the civil rights question", Truman's attention to the issue was significantly more engaged (Busch, 2012, 108). After the Dixiecrats had broken away, "[a] reporter asked Thurmond, who was no fool, why he was taking this extreme step. 'President Truman is only following the platform that Roosevelt advocated', the reporter argued. 'I agree', Thurmond said. 'But Truman means it'" (Ferrell, 1983, 99; no original source cited). Truman himself recounted this anecdote in his own memoirs with obvious pride (Truman, 1956, 195).

The president easily prevailed over Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia on the first ballot, taking the nomination by 947½ votes to 263. His first choice as running-mate, William O. Douglas, declined to serve: anticipating a possible nomination in his own right in 1952, he was also reported as saying that would not be the number two man to a number two man (McCullough, 1992, 637; no original source cited). The position eventually went to Senate

Minority Leader Alben Barkley of Kentucky, with whom the president had a cordial but unenthusiastic relationship.

Delivering a fighting 2 a.m. acceptance speech, Truman stunned both his own party and the Republicans by becoming the first president since Franklin Pierce in 1856 to call Congress back into session in an election year. It would meet on July 26 – 'Turnip Day' in Missouri.[82] He was under no illusions that the special session would achieve anything, but it did allow him to position himself exactly where he wanted to be for the campaign. Writing to his former Senate colleague from Missouri, conservative Democrat Bennett Champ Clark, Truman said, "I don't believe [this Republican majority in the Senate] want to do anything about the program I suggested to them. I suppose I shall have to make the campaign on the Congress and not on Dewey" (HSTL PSF, Box 251). That was precisely what he did.

Dixiecrats, Progressives and Republicans

On the face of it, the Clifford-Rowe memorandum had been wrong about the South: the Dixiecrat fracture (catalysed by Humphrey's success in inserting a strong civil rights plank into the platform) meant that disgruntled Southern Democrats *did* in fact have somewhere else to go. But in a larger sense Clifford and Rowe were correct in their assessment because – crucially – "unlike Henry Wallace, the dissident Southerners were not threatening to take votes away from Truman in places where the overall vote between the major parties was likely to be otherwise close enough to make a difference" (Busch, 2012, 115). While a strong showing by Wallace might give victory to Dewey in Northern states, Thurmond could only hope to reduce Truman's majority (without causing him to poll less than Dewey) in most Southern states. Clifford and Rowe's reading of the situation was further validated when the bulk of the Southern Democratic leadership, including Truman's one-time ally but now resolute opponent James F. Byrnes of South Carolina, opposed the third-party bolt.

Up north, Wallace's supporters failed to enthuse a substantial section of the electorate, not least because of his campaign's inability to shake off the constant accusations of Communist

[82] Truman was drawing attention to his home state origins, where farmers had been advised for decades past, 'On the twenty-sixth of July, sow your turnips, wet or dry.'

infiltration. Wallace sent Truman a belligerent telegram on October 8, 1948, setting out his party's key disagreements with the president on foreign policy. Pledges given by Truman at Potsdam had been repudiated; no reparations had been paid to Hitler's victims even as Nazis were being taken back into the German government; and the administration was steadfastly refusing to negotiate with Russia but moving to restore relations with fascist Spain (HSTL PSF, Box 120). Truman ignored Wallace's claims.

Dewey had polled 47% as the Republicans' presidential candidate in 1944. Re-elected as governor of New York in 1946, he passed important civil rights legislation in his home state and aimed to adjust rather than to overturn the New Deal. An internationalist in foreign policy, Dewey was advised by future secretary of state John Foster Dulles. Although recognised as competent, trustworthy and hard-working, he was also considered condescending and passionless in his public presentation. He was memorably described by Theodore Roosevelt's daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth as like the 'little man on top of the wedding cake', with another critic observing that 'you have to know Mr. Dewey really well in order to dislike him' (McCullough, 1992, 671, 672: no original sources cited).

Dewey's leading opponent for the Republican nomination, Robert Taft, offered to make Governor Harold Stassen of Minnesota his running-mate if Stassen released his delegates to him, but California Governor Earl Warren's endorsement ultimately assured Dewey of the nomination. As he had done four years earlier, Dewey once again offered Warren the vice-presidential nomination and this time Warren accepted. In fact this was a poor tactical decision because "Dewey's decision to ignore the Midwest may have had important repercussions in the fall" (Busch, 2012, 99). Truman himself thought that Vandenberg (who was to die of cancer in 1951) would have been the toughest candidate to beat, followed by Taft. He was pleased with the nomination of Dewey because he felt that it left the Democrats better positioned to exploit the split between the two Republican camps.

Dewey's strategy for his campaign was to avoid all controversy and push for 'national unity'. Intent on maintaining a dignified stance and behaving like an incumbent, he was reluctant to 'rock the boat' since he was already ahead by such a large margin. As an electoral strategy, however, Dewey's approach backfired. In seeking to remain above the fray, he came across

to voters as aloof and detached, offering no pushback against Truman's energetic attacks and speaking little about civil rights despite his strong record on the issue. Reluctant to attack the president on foreign policy, he also said nothing about that summer's Berlin crisis and played it so safe on domestic issues that his campaign was characterised as "the bland leading the bland" (Busch, 2012, 139). Dewey's running-mate, Earl Warren, was reportedly "maddened by his vagueness" (Busch, 2012, 137).[83]

By October, with both Wallace's and Thurmond's campaigns flagging, Truman had cut Dewey's lead in half. His energetic campaigning style on the celebrated 'whistle-stop' train tour led to some wonderful exhortations, including his warning that "[if] you send another Republican Congress to Washington you're a bigger bunch of suckers than I think you are" (Ferrell, 1983, 100). On October 29 he addressed a crowd of over sixty-five thousand mainly black supporters in Harlem, where he made clear his continuing commitment to civil rights reform. He made a late-campaign error, however, when he asked Chief Justice Vinson to go to Moscow to meet Stalin for peace talks. Secretary of State Marshall reacted angrily to the proposed intrusion of electoral politics into matters of national security, and Truman cancelled the plan.

The outcome

In one of the most celebrated upsets in American electoral history, Dewey lost the 1948 election, with Truman taking 49.5% of the popular vote to Dewey's 45.1%, Thurmond's 2.4%, and Wallace's 2.38%. Truman won twenty-eight states and 304 electoral college votes to Dewey's sixteen states and 189 votes. Thurmond won four states and 39 votes while Wallace, performing best in New York, took no states.

On the face of it, Wallace's tally of zero electoral votes meant that he took little away from Truman in 1948, but the truth may be that he actually did Truman a significant *service* in that year's election. It was an ally of the defeated Republican candidate who best articulated the advantage which the breakaway Wallace candidacy conferred on the president. Had Wallace

[83] The lack of respect was returned in kind by Dewey who referred to future Chief Justice Warren, the son of a Norwegian father, as "that dumb Swede" (Busch, 2012, 206: no original source cited).

not run, he suggested, "'all the extreme left wingers, screwballs, etc.' would have been Truman's load to carry." Dewey is said to have responded laconically, "There is a lot to what you say" (Dewey Papers, Second Term Personal Correspondence, Series 5, Box 92).

Despite taking four states, the Thurmond campaign may also have assisted Truman. The Dixiecrats' furious reaction to his relatively modest civil rights initiatives boosted the nationwide black vote for Truman whilst isolating the segregationist white vote. Truman's record on civil rights might not have been all that advanced liberals wanted, but as one black minister remarked in a spin on Strom Thurmond's celebrated comparison of Roosevelt and Truman's civil rights pronouncements, "You may not believe Truman, but the Dixiecrats believe him, and that's enough for me" (Wallace Papers: Wallace to Fulton Lewis, November 17, 1953).

In an important observation, Hamby also suggests that the idea that Truman had managed to bring together the Roosevelt coalition for one last outing is not wholly accurate. "The 1948 'Fair Deal majority' was actually an election year *conglomerate* [italics added], not a coalition which felt a degree of unity and had a broad ideological base. Primarily concerned with its own objectives, each group within the conglomerate functioned without a deeply held attachment to the entire Fair Deal ... The middle-class liberals attempted to provide the ideological cement which the conglomerate needed in order to become a coalition ... [but the] progressives never fully grasped that no unified, coherent 'Fair Deal mandate' had emerged from the 1948 campaign" (Hamby, 1973, 321).

6 - Conclusion

Having worked in the White House Office in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Richard Neustadt gave Truman generally high marks for his ability to exercise power effectively, despite one significant setback late in his presidency (Neustadt, 1990, 144-50). The two key Truman episodes analysed by Neustadt lie outside the scope of this study as they occurred during his second term, when Truman gave the clearest possible demonstration of his presidential authority by dismissing MacArthur in April 1951 before suffering a dramatic *loss* of authority

in the steel mills case the following year.[84] Truman may never have shown the subtlety of FDR, whose unerring instinct for "how [his actions] would advance his capacity to put his personal imprint on politics and policy" allowed him to dominate the office for so long (Greenstein, 1995, 312). But he nonetheless appreciated – perhaps even inspired – the central point that Neustadt was later to make in his famous study: "Truman was quite right when he declared that presidential power is the power to persuade" (Neustadt, 1998, 28).

As suggested at the outset of this study, two key questions need to be answered when judging whether each of the four presidents considered here managed to develop his own stock of 'independent presidential authority' during his time in office. First, if he ran for re-election, was he successful? And second, is there political and scholarly agreement that he made a lasting and positive difference to the country through his actions as president? Harry Truman was indeed successful in his bid for re-election in 1948: he therefore passed the first test, which Adams, Van Buren and Bush all failed. There is also little doubt that Truman is now judged to have passed the second test as well, enjoying widespread and relatively consistent approval for most of his actions as president.

Partly because of later comparisons between Truman's presidential performance and that of some of his more problematic successors, particularly Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, assessments of Truman changed dramatically over the decades after he left office (Savage, 2020, 83-88). When commentators were asked in 1953, with the Korean War still frozen in stalemate, whether Truman's presidency had been a success, the answer was firmly negative. His poll ratings on leaving office that year were 32%, having dipped to 22% a year earlier. Ten years later, however, the assessment of Truman's success had enjoyed a significant turnaround: by 1962 he was ranked 8th in Arthur Schlesinger's poll of 75 historians, published in *The New York Times* that July, a ranking he has held with remarkable consistency in the sixty years since then.

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[84] In an interview given in retirement, Truman again stressed the central importance of *authority* in his decision to fire MacArthur: "I fired him because he wouldn't respect the authority of the President. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was, but that's not against the law for generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail" (*Time*, December 3, 1973).

If, as Sean Savage has remarked, "[the] image of Harry S. Truman benefitted from the [1970s] nostalgia boom for a better past", that boom has now lasted well into the twenty-first century (Savage, 2020, 85). The publication of Merle Miller's *Plain Speaking*, a series of frank interviews with the former president, followed by James D. Barber's characterisation of Truman as an 'active-positive' presidential type, and then by David McCullough's best-selling biography, all continued the momentum towards a positive reinterpretation of his presidency (Miller, 1974; Barber, 2020; McCullough, 1992). This was quite a turnaround for a man who left office with a poll rating lower than any other post-FDR president, apart from Richard Nixon. Both George W. Bush and Donald Trump left office with higher ratings than Truman.[85]

Truman's standing has not been without its challengers, however. By the late 1960s and early 70s, the 'traditionalist' and 'realist' explanations of the origin of the Cold War had been joined by a third school which, echoing the criticisms of Henry Wallace in the 1940s, blamed Truman for stoking an unnecessary conflict and held his administration wholly responsible for the post-war tensions that emerged between the United States and Russia (Powaski, 2017). These revisionist claims have in turn been rebutted by others, often vigorously (Ferrell, 2006, 13).

More recently, Kenneth Weisbrode has provided a highly critical account of Truman as an insecure, stubborn, self-righteous and indecisive president: if Truman called 1945 his 'year of decision', Weisbrode sees 1946 as the 'year of *in*decision' (Weisbrode, 2016). The rose-tinted McCullough view should be discarded, Weisbrode claims, and Truman should instead be seen as "an overrated president – not as overrated as he was underrated during his time in office, but nevertheless a figure of misdrawn historical proportions" (Weisbrode, 2016, 40-41). Weisbrode echoes one of Truman's most acerbic critics, the columnist Joe Alsop, who nonetheless (unlike Weisbrode) could not quite make up his mind about him: "[Truman] is an overrated president, although he had more guts, more sheer, naked guts than any leader the United States has had during this century barring, perhaps, Theodore Roosevelt" (Alsop, 2009, 285)

[85] See UCSB-APP, Final Presidential Job Approval Ratings | The American Presidency Project (ucsb.edu): date accessed 17 December 2023).

These criticisms aside, the consensus in favour of Truman's capable execution of the presidency has remained largely unchanged for the last forty years, and the ending of the Cold War in 1991 was widely held to have validated his decision to adopt the policy of containment in 1946. This study has suggested that the independent presidential authority which Truman developed across his first term rescued him from the low regard in which the commentariat and the American people generally held him on the day FDR died, allowing him to boost his political capital, achieve re-election success in 1948, and place him firmly among the 'near-great' American presidents.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Most of the key conclusions to be drawn from this study have been identified in the preceding chapters. In summary, Truman (and Truman alone) passed both tests to show that he had emerged from under his predecessor's shadow – successful re-election and a consistent assessment by later commentators that he was indeed a consequential president in his own right. Leuchtenberg's suggestion that he remained under Roosevelt's shadow is over-stated: as has been shown, Truman's fighting response to the setback of 1946 moved him in a new direction that clearly established his own independent presidential authority (Leuchtenberg, 1983). Of the three other presidents considered here, Adams failed the first test but passed the second; Bush failed the first and 'half-passed' the second (as a successful foreign affairs president but a failure on the domestic front); while Van Buren failed both tests.

Based on these four individual case studies, it is possible to offer six more general conclusions here:

1 – *Developing independent authority is important for every new president but vital for those who succeed transformational predecessors.*

Generating and displaying 'independent presidential authority' is essential for any president if he is to escape from under his predecessor's shadow and become a significant chief executive in his own right. The institutional authority of the office, which has grown steadily since 1789, is supplemented for every new president by the authority he inherits from his predecessor, but *institutional* and *inherited* authority need to be supplemented very quickly by *independent* authority created by the successor himself. By analysing a series of key 'authority-creating episodes', the ways in which Truman did this have been identified, and the comparable shortcomings of Adams, Van Buren and Bush have also been established.

2 – *Facing down opposition from within one's own political party is essential if a president is to create robust independent presidential authority.*

Facing down political opponents, particularly those from within a president's own party who claim to be 'more faithful followers' of his predecessor, is essential if a new president is to succeed in establishing his own authority. Although he may have to 'live with' the problem for some time before being able to address it directly, relatively early action remains essential. Truman dealt with both Wallace and Byrnes within eighteen months of becoming president. Adams, by contrast, waited until just a few months before his term expired to get rid of Pickering and McHenry, and never fully confronted their leader, Alexander Hamilton.

Van Buren faced a less direct challenge from those within his own party. John C. Calhoun wandered all over the political landscape, creating trouble from whatever his latest vantage point happened to be, while Conservative Democrats Tallmadge and Rives were openly moving towards the Whigs throughout Van Buren's term. Bush never faced up effectively to either Gingrich or Buchanan: indeed he fatally miscalculated by allowing Buchanan to address the 1992 GOP convention on its first (televised) evening, a misjudgement that made it abundantly clear how poorly Bush understood the proto-populist sentiments that were about to engulf the Republican party (Millbank, 2023).[86]

3 – *Independent presidential authority is essential to preserving and, if possible, enhancing the stock of political capital held by any president as he enters office.*

As the only president considered in this study who developed significant independent authority during his first term, Truman succeeded in enhancing his political capital across those four years. Indeed, he improved it dramatically from the deeply negative standing with which he began his presidency, eventually finishing his term as the only one to show a positive balance on his 'capital account' as his re-election campaign opened. None of the other three,

[86] Of these various challengers, only Calhoun and Gingrich continued to play key roles in public life in later years. Calhoun served as Tyler's secretary of state while Gingrich, forced out of the speakership by his own party in 1998, inspired the Republicans to adopt extremist positions which have progressively poisoned U.S. politics over the last quarter of a century (Zelizer, 2020).

this study suggests, developed any net independent authority during their terms in office. Indeed, in Van Buren's case, he showed so little authority, independent or otherwise, that he wholly depleted the positive capital with which he had begun his presidency. Adams started with a small positive capital balance and Bush began with a small negative one, but their failure to develop significant independent authority during their presidencies meant that they finished with negative capital holdings, although not nearly as negative as the unfortunate Van Buren.

4 - *Having a healthy stock of closing political capital is important (possibly even essential) to running a successful re-election campaign.*

As noted above, ending a first term with positive political capital can be achieved either by having healthy opening capital and preserving it across one's presidency, or by generating so much authority during four years in office that a negative opening stock become a positive closing one four years later. Truman alone fell into this second category, and Truman alone was re-elected.

It is very important, however, to emphasise that this conclusion is not tightly drawn. The concepts of 'authority' and 'political capital' were defined earlier, but neither is so closely specified that their relationship can be reduced to a formal mathematical equation. Independent presidential authority and political capital are obviously linked concepts, but that linkage points to correlation rather than to cause-and-effect. Both concepts are also drawn from a very small sample size and cannot therefore serve to suggest sweeping and tightly inevitable 'laws' of presidential politics. Nonetheless, the correlation may be instructive.

5 – *Skowronek's key proposal as it relates to these four presidents rings true: their positioning as 'first-generation orthodox-innovators', succeeding 'transformational, regime-changing predecessors', located each of them at a particularly challenging position within 'political time'.*

Skowronek's 'political time' is more than just an abstract concept in political science. As noted earlier, it has been criticised for trying to reduce complex situations influenced by multiple factors to an overly rigid, perhaps even contrived, deterministic model. But to caricature Skowronek's model in this way would be unfair. There *does* seem to be a recognisable cycle to presidential succession, and the idea of periodic regime change initiated by a transformational president, continued and corrected by one or more same-party successors, challenged by one or more opposition-party presidents[87], and then brought to an end by a frustrated 'late regime affiliate', rings true across the four cycles in which Adams, Van Buren, Truman and Bush all played a 'first successor' role. The peculiarity of the truncated cycle within which Adams found himself located has already been noted. After Adams, however, the cycles 'settled down' to show remarkable resilience across the more-than-two centuries that separate Thomas Jefferson and Donald Trump.

6 – *Neustadt's model also rings true across these four presidents. An incumbent's 'power to persuade' does seem to have allowed one particularly effective successor (Truman) to develop enough authority to escape from the shadow of his predecessor and establish himself as a consequential president in his own right despite the constraints of his position within political time.*[88]

Like Skowronek's 'political time', Neustadt's 'power to persuade' remains a concept of enduring value, although in these days of rhetorical-, televisual-, and social-media presidencies, 'persuasion' now extends much farther than the conversations between key decision-makers that applied when Neustadt first developed his model in the 1950s. But reaching out directly or indirectly to the American people, and building authority by persuading them that a proposed course of action is honourable, proportionate, and likely to prove effective, has always been a key skill for any president irrespective of his position in political time. In Truman's day whistle-stop tours sufficed; today, however, a president's social media identity has become a key part of his 'power to persuade'.

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[87] Although, as noted earlier, Gary Gerstle has suggested that Eisenhower and Clinton actually played the role of *facilitator* rather than challenger within the Roosevelt and Reagan orders (Gerstle, 2022).

[88] Note again, however, the small sample size involved.

Truman's not-wholly-comparable position within political time

Some final comments about Truman may help to provide further context for his unique success among the quartet of presidents considered here. Locating him as FDR's successor in political time is correct, but in fact Truman found himself in a position not wholly comparable to those occupied by Adams, Van Buren and Bush in at least three respects.

First, Truman was the only one of the four presidents considered here whose predecessor had died in office. As such, while he faced endless challenges from those who charged that he was failing to honour his predecessor's legacy, Truman never faced the possibility of personal criticism or direct interference from his predecessor. Reagan departed the national scene in 1989 as Alzheimer's Disease increasingly impaired his cognitive facilities, although (as noted earlier) he did address the 1992 GOP convention in his last major public appearance. While there is no record of any undue post-presidential influence by Reagan over Bush, the sense that there was still a 'king over the water' continued to apply until Reagan's death in 2004. Washington lived until 1799, never openly challenging his successor but creating a significant problem for Adams when he insisted that Hamilton should serve as commander of the army in the later stages of the Quasi-War. Andrew Jackson lingered until 1845, openly disagreeing with his successor's management of the nation's finances, rejecting Van Buren's choice of vice presidential running-mate in 1840, and actively opposing his bid for the Democratic Party's nomination in 1844. Each of these three successor presidents served all (Van Buren and Bush) or most (Adams) of their single terms with their predecessors just 'off-stage'. Truman alone started (in this respect at least) with a clean sheet.

Second, Truman served as vice president for only three months. Adams and Bush had each served for eight years and Van Buren for four. Although undoubtedly a committed New Deal Democrat, Truman had never been publicly associated with the decision-making core of the regime he inherited in the same way that each of the other three men had been. It seems likely that while this made Truman's immediate succession more difficult (because he knew virtually nothing about the work-in-progress he inherited), it also freed him to modify and correct his inheritance sooner and more fully than Adams, Van Buren or Bush could do.

Despite being vice president, Truman had not been anywhere near the White House when the key problems he would inherit as president were created. Vice President Adams was largely ignored by Washington until late in his predecessor's second term, but he did come to office knowing that war with France was a looming possibility (unlike Truman's lack of any knowledge about the atomic bomb). Van Buren inherited a failing economy from Jackson, but he had known as vice president that it was heading for disaster and deliberately stood back (largely for his own electoral reasons) from resisting Jackson's decisions. Bush inherited the mounting deficit that resulted from Reagan's 'voodoo economy', about which he himself had warned as early as 1980, as well as the Iran-Contra scandal, in relation to which he may or may not have been 'in the room where it happened' when the key decisions were made. All three men were therefore personally tainted by some of the more questionable actions of their predecessors' regimes. Truman was not, and this may ultimately have made it easier for him (after 1946) to move on and establish his own independent identity.

Finally, as noted earlier, Truman's predecessor had served as president for twelve years while Washington, Jackson and Reagan were each in office for eight. By its sixth or seventh year, the gloss is invariably beginning to come off *any* presidency, however energetic it may have been in its early days. Washington's late second term was a torrid time as political divisions wrecked any possibility that the regime he had helped to create would survive unchallenged. Jackson's sixth year saw him withdrawing the deposits from the national bank and placing them in state banks, an action that was energetically opposed in Congress and led directly to economic instability across the country.

Much of FDR's sixth year was spent campaigning to remove obstructive members of his own party from Congress. Reagan's sixth year saw him facing the consequences of Iran-Contra, a major policy misstep which could have led to his impeachment and removal from office. By that time Reagan was also a 'lame duck' president with no opportunity of running for a third term.[89] Washington and Jackson *had* the option of running again but decided not to exercise it. FDR not only won a third term but would later win an unprecedented fourth term as well.

[89] The Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1951, prevented any president after Truman from seeking a third term.

Roosevelt's third term allowed him to put those 'year-six issues' behind him, forging a new identity as a successful wartime president just as his domestic political problems had begun to become more intractable. This meant that his successor was not directly associated with those earlier end-of-second-term issues. It also meant, of course, that after twelve (rather than eight) years of a predecessor's term, Truman came to office at a time when there was a growing sense that the regime could not continue on a business-as-usual basis but needed to be refreshed in order to face new challenges in new times. This is precisely what Truman did after the 1946 mid-terms provided electoral confirmation that the regime, now fourteen years old, needed redirection.

It was the success of his new post-1946 approach, and in particular the opportunity presented by having to deal with an opposition Congress, that propelled Truman to his re-election victory in 1948. More generally, it was his success in developing independent presidential authority across his first term that gave Truman a fighting chance in that election, just as Adams, Van Buren and Bush, having failed to generate their own independent authority, were facing re-election campaigns with a mounting sense that catastrophe awaited.

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