

---

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY REMEDIES

STEPHEN SKOWRONEK\*

INTRODUCTION .....	795
I.  COMPETING ASPIRATIONS FOR A PROGRESSIVE PRESIDENCY .....	799
II. PRESIDENT OBAMA’S CHOICE .....	803
CONCLUSION.....	804

*American history shows us that when governmental processes appear to break down, old institutions can be redeployed to operate in new ways, and new institutions can be built around them to reorient the work of the whole. In the early years of the twentieth century, reformers overcame widespread fears of governmental dysfunction by redeploying the presidency; their solutions to the newly emergent problems of governing under the Constitution worked around new conceptions of presidential leadership. This Article examines this faith in the leadership cure, with particular attention to the different roles it assigned to the presidency to revitalize American government. Drawing these ideas forward, I point out that these roles now appear to be at cross purposes, and I question whether the twentieth-century solution to problems of governing is sufficient for negotiating the problems now in view.*

### INTRODUCTION

Political dysfunction is not a new concern. One hundred years ago, anxieties remarkably similar to those that have instigated this Symposium drove a radical reassessment of American government.<sup>1</sup> The progressive reformers in the vanguard of that reassessment were sharply critical of the course of American political development, certain that something fundamental had gone wrong.<sup>2</sup> They expressed deep ambivalence about the Constitution as an

---

\* Pelatiah Perit Professor of Political and Social Science, Yale University.

<sup>1</sup> See generally THOMAS L. HASKELL, *THE EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE: THE AMERICAN SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS OF AUTHORITY* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 2000) (1977) (locating the crisis of the time in the rise of social interdependence and recession of causation); SAMUEL P. HAYS, *THE RESPONSE TO INDUSTRIALISM: 1885-1914* (2d ed. 1995) (describing the social and political dislocations associated with the market transformations of the time); ROBERT H. WIEBE, *THE SEARCH FOR ORDER: 1877-1920* (1967) (relating the political anxieties of that period to distended relations between state and society).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., HERBERT CROLY, *THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE* 35-36 (Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. ed., Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press 1965) (1909) (“[E]very popular government should in the end, and after a necessarily prolonged deliberation, possess the

---

---

instrument of modern government and broad agreement on the importance of breaking what they perceived to be its stranglehold on political possibilities. As they saw it, basic constitutional commitments needed to be relaxed: provisions to limit government; to protect vested rights; to check and balance governmental action; to separate powers – all seemed to be dangerously out of step with the demands of the day.<sup>3</sup>

The progressives responded to the crisis of governability in their day by redeploying the institutions embedded in the constitutional framework, especially the presidency.<sup>4</sup> In one way or another, their new solutions to the problems of governing under the Constitution all revolved around presidential leadership. Investing in the presidency had an obvious appeal, for it held out an endogenous remedy to seemingly systemic maladies. By the same token, improvising a solution out of such unlikely material entailed a good bit of jerry rigging. As in other aspects of the progressive program, pragmatism was the keynote of the turn to the presidency. The radical thrust of the progressives' diagnosis may not have aligned perfectly with the adaptive character of their prescription, but they were content to test the possibilities for leadership, and

---

power of taking any action, which, in the opinion of a decisive majority of the people, is demanded by the public welfare. Such is not the case with the government organized under the Federal Constitution.”); *id.* at 270 (“The economic and social changes of the past generation have brought out a serious and glaring contradiction between the demands of a constructive democratic ideal and the machinery of methods and institutions, which have been considered sufficient for its realization.”); JOHN DEWEY, *THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS: AN ESSAY IN POLITICAL INQUIRY* 111 (Melvin L. Rogers ed., Pa. State Univ. Press 2012) (1927) (“[T]he existing political and legal forms and arrangements are incompetent to deal with the situation.”).

<sup>3</sup> *E.g.*, J. ALLEN SMITH, *THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT* 186 (1907) (“As a consequence of these limitations originally placed upon the power of the people, the development of our system has not been wholly in the direction of democracy.”); WOODROW WILSON, *CONGRESSIONAL GOVERNMENT: A STUDY IN AMERICAN POLITICS* 5 (Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 15th ed. 1901) (1885) (“We are the first Americans to hear our own countrymen ask whether the Constitution is still adapted to serve the purposes for which it was intended . . . .”); *id.* at 6 (“[W]e are really living under a constitution essentially different from that which we have been so long worshipping as our own peculiar and incomparable possession. . . . [T]his model government is no longer conformable with its own original pattern.”); *see also* ELDON J. EISENACH, *THE LOST PROMISE OF PROGRESSIVISM* 111 (1994) (explaining the progressive critique of constitutional formalism and individual rights and explaining why progressives were impelled toward “ever deeper critiques of American constitutional and party government and to ever more extensive reconstructions of democratic theory”).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *The Conservative Insurgency and Presidential Power: A Developmental Perspective on the Unitary Executive*, 122 *HARV. L. REV.* 2070, 2086-87 (2009); Stephen Skowronek, *The Unsettled State of Presidential History*, in *RECASTING PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY* (Brian Balogh & Bruce Schulman eds., forthcoming 2015) (on file with author).

nothing in their approach to it foreclosed experimentation on other fronts later down the line.

In recent years, much has been made of the misalignment of institutional forms and reform aspirations that followed in the wake of the progressive turn. Scholars have argued with increasing concern about whether investment in the presidency was the best way forward.<sup>5</sup> No one denies, however, that the redeployment of this office responded to new demands for action in a nation radically changed by the traumas of industrialization, or that the creation of the “modern presidency” thoroughly rearticulated governmental operations.<sup>6</sup> In grappling with evidence of governmental dysfunction today, we have good reason to take a hard look at the limitations of the progressive solutions, but that should not stop us from thinking for ourselves about the potential for some creative redeployment of the resources at hand. The progressives showed us that even jerrybuilt solutions may work well enough for a time.

The question of the moment is not whether the twentieth-century investment in the presidency was wise, much less whether it worked. The question is whether we should expect *any* remedy improvised pragmatically in midstream to suffice indefinitely. Faith in presidential leadership is now part of the civil religion, and its ritual invocation every four years suggests a level of complacency foreign to the disposition that originally agitated on its behalf. Waiting for the presidency to work its magic is an odd tribute to the progressive legacy. The progressives advised vigilance in monitoring performance, and they demonstrated a willingness to discard prescriptions that no longer seemed to be producing the desired results. The point has become pressing because faith in presidential leadership is being sorely tested. With each new administration that comes along, we find a different set of reasons to question reliance on the progressives’ remedy. The issues that have been raised in this regard under the Obama Administration are different, perhaps more subtle, than those that were raised under the George W. Bush Administration,<sup>7</sup> but they are no less suggestive of the limits of the leadership cure.

In reflecting upon what has happened to this solution, I think it is important to distinguish the two very different models of political leadership on which it

---

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., BRUCE ACKERMAN, *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC* 4 (2010); RONALD J. PESTRITTO, *WOODROW WILSON AND THE ROOTS OF MODERN LIBERALISM* 23 (2005); JEFFREY K. TULIS, *THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY* 173-74 (1987).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., ACKERMAN, *supra* note 5, at 72, 84, 119 (describing presidential “acceleration” of change beyond its traditional role in keeping government abreast of the demands of the people); SIDNEY M. MILKIS, *THE PRESIDENT AND THE PARTIES: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM SINCE THE NEW DEAL* 5-8 (1993) (describing the systemic changes brought about by the rise of the modern presidency and expressing misgivings about the tradeoffs entailed); TULIS, *supra* note 5, at 176 (describing the problem as a “lack of ‘fit’” between modern models seeking more responsive leadership and the original constitutional model).

<sup>7</sup> See STEPHEN SKOWRONEK, *PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP IN POLITICAL TIME* 117-66 (2d ed. 2011).

---

rested. One model cast the President as an agent of democratic transformation, a leader who could be counted upon periodically to break through the knot of interests protected by the Constitution, thereby opening the government to new possibilities and revitalizing the political system at large. The other model cast the President as a policy entrepreneur, a political facilitator who would bring together actors across dispersed and relatively independent institutions to orchestrate timely responses to national problems as they arose. Each of these roles entailed a significant departure from the original conception of the presidential office; both sought to rework the constitutional system to make it more responsive and adaptable. Each contributed something vital to government in the twentieth century.

We seldom pause, however, to consider just how different these two assignments are from one another. On the contrary, the tendency is to conflate the two roles. Policy accomplishment has become the gauge of transformation, as if the more policy that gets enacted, the more significant the political change. It is easy to see how each role might be useful, even indispensable, to keeping American government vital. It is evident as well that these two assignments have, from time to time, been undertaken simultaneously, for example, during the New Deal and the Great Society. But facilitating policy is not the same thing as transforming the polity. Moreover, these two assignments have developed along very different trajectories, and in recent years, their divergent premises have become harder to ignore.

Surely, no leader has tried harder to convince us that these roles *are* equivalent and interchangeable than President Barack Obama. Obama came to the presidency steeped in the progressive tradition,<sup>8</sup> and his rise to power joined together the progressives' twin aspirations for political leadership. The premise of his campaign was that a pragmatic, problem-solving style could be employed to forge a "new foundation"<sup>9</sup> for government and to change "the trajectory"<sup>10</sup> of national affairs. What we have learned is that, when the rhetoric of transformative leadership translates into a pragmatic quest for policy remedies, it does not cut very deep. Policy lends itself to expedient responses to immediate challenges. One of policy's great attractions is that it invites the leader to work around engrained obstacles and to sidestep the more formidable challenges of securing an alternative footing for the work of government. The historical association of structural breakthroughs in American

---

<sup>8</sup> JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG, *READING OBAMA: DREAMS, HOPE, AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION* 16-18 (2011).

<sup>9</sup> President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Economy at Georgetown University (Apr. 14, 2009) (transcript archived at <http://perma.cc/9WCB-F3YF>).

<sup>10</sup> Fernando Suarez, *Clinton Hits Obama on His Reagan Comments*, CBS NEWS (Jan. 18, 2008), <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-hits-obama-on-his-reagan-comments>, archived at <http://perma.cc/85SA-BBBB> (quoting then-Senator Barack Obama praising Ronald Reagan for "chang[ing] the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not").

government with great bursts of policy productivity is deceiving, for it obscures the difference between these two responses to the demand for change. Policy innovation without a structural breakthrough is a juggler's game, a balancing act, an intricate negotiation with the powers that be. At issue today are the very different entailments of these two leadership assignments.

#### I. COMPETING ASPIRATIONS FOR A PROGRESSIVE PRESIDENCY

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the progressive historian Henry Jones Ford described presidential leadership as “the work of the people, *breaking through* the constitutional form.”<sup>11</sup> Ford perceived a paradox in the Constitution's framing. The Framers fashioned the presidency as a conservative counterweight to congressional impulsiveness but, by worrying so much about the power of Congress, they inadvertently constructed an institution able to deploy itself to achieve purposes far more unsettling than the congressional purposes the Framers initially feared.<sup>12</sup> Ford extrapolated from the examples of Presidents Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, suggesting that the two apparent anomalies of presidential leadership in the nineteenth century were similar to one another, and that their similarities might serve as a model for democratic transformation in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

In Jackson and Lincoln, Ford saw the potential for the President to serve as a single, independent voice for the mobilization of popular will. He identified the presidency as the one institution that could excise interest-bound arrangements of power – arrangements of the sort that the Constitution naturally generates and protects – and in the process, release the government from outmoded institutional constraints.<sup>14</sup> The essential task of democratic leadership in this regard is constitutional reconstruction. During the New Deal Era, President Franklin D. Roosevelt exemplified Ford's theory of presidential power, and the promise of presidentially led political breakthroughs imprinted itself indelibly on the American imagination.<sup>15</sup> This model remains the standard against which presidential leadership is judged. Faith in the presidency's regenerative capacity was revived at the end of the twentieth century in agitation on behalf of a Reagan “Revolution.”<sup>16</sup> President Obama himself nodded to the Reagan Administration's exemplification of reconstructive leadership.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Obama invoked all prior exemplars of this model in his bid for the White

---

<sup>11</sup> HENRY JONES FORD, *THE RISE AND GROWTH OF AMERICAN POLITICS* 292-93 (New York, MacMillan & Co. 1898) (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 287-88.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 173-74, 280-81.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 366-67.

<sup>15</sup> STEPHEN SKOWRONEK, *THE POLITICS PRESIDENTS MAKE: LEADERSHIP FROM JOHN ADAMS TO BILL CLINTON* 36-39 (3d prtg. 2000).

<sup>16</sup> President Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address to the Nation 2 (Jan. 11, 1989) (transcript archived at <http://perma.cc/WE28-PXFN>).

<sup>17</sup> See Suarez, *supra* note 10.

House, his now-famous promise of “change” delivered Lincoln-style on the Illinois State Capitol steps.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have since elaborated this model analytically into a theory of “reconstructive leadership,”<sup>19</sup> and through Bruce Ackerman’s depiction of the New Deal as a “constitutional moment,” the model has gained all the trappings of an encompassing theory of constitutional development.<sup>20</sup>

The irony is that by the time Ford prescribed reconstructive leadership as a cure for the sclerotic tendencies of the American constitutional system, the remedy was already losing some of its potency. Jackson and Lincoln cleared the ground for new regimes to take hold by dislodging institutions and interests critical to the operations of the old order. They forcibly dismantled long-established governing arrangements; Jackson’s destruction of the National Bank and Lincoln’s eradication of slavery eliminated the institutions that supported the old governing elite. Opening the government to previously excluded interests and concerns, and changing the trajectory of affairs, hinged on outright repudiation of a prior constitutional settlement.<sup>21</sup> Change in this mode is now much harder to pull off, and the contemporary implications of changing things in this way are sobering. This is so, in no small measure, because prior presidential ground clearing facilitated an expansion of the range of legitimate claimants on the government’s attention.

The New Deal’s opening to organized labor, and to the working classes more generally, was pivotal in this regard, for restructuring government to accommodate those interests put a categorically higher premium on effective management of the interests of everyone else. President Roosevelt railed against intransigent justices and economic royalists in the old Jacksonian style, but beyond that, the parallels were already beginning to strain. Unlike Jackson or Lincoln, Roosevelt could not get rid of the institutions against which he arrayed himself. To advance his transformative purposes, he needed to accommodate them, and in his efforts to set the terms for their incorporation into his new order (that is, in his efforts on behalf of the National Industrial Recovery Act, Court packing, the party purge, and executive reorganization), he repeatedly went down to defeat. For President Lyndon Johnson,

---

<sup>18</sup> Senator Barack Obama, Announcement for President (Feb. 10, 2007) (transcript archived at <http://perma.cc/FWT7-Z9FP>).

<sup>19</sup> SKOWRONEK, *supra* note 15, at 36-39.

<sup>20</sup> See 2 BRUCE ACKERMAN, *WE THE PEOPLE: TRANSFORMATIONS* 409 (1998).

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln made the connection between his repudiation of the prior constitutional settlement and Jackson’s explicit. When Stephen Douglas asked him how he planned to overcome the Court’s ringing affirmation of slavery in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1857), *superseded by constitutional amendment*, U.S. CONST. amends. XIII, XIV, Lincoln replied that he would use the same methods that Douglas “and his political friends” had used “to reverse the decision of that same Court in favor of the constitutionality of the National Bank.” Abraham Lincoln, Sixth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas (Oct. 13, 1858), in 3 COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 278 (Roy P. Basler ed., Rutgers Univ. Press 1953).

reconstruction became a management nightmare. Johnson embraced the dismantling of Jim Crow laws with a sense of fatalism, keenly aware of the risks of getting caught in the crossfire between commitments old and new. Leadership for him was a desperate, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, effort to satisfy all. By the time President Reagan rekindled the idea of a presidentially led political transformation, the drive to dismantle and displace was thoroughly encumbered by incorporated interests, and reconstruction turned out to be a severely attenuated affair. The prospect of breaking through the knot of institutions and interests that perpetuate the politics of the past was more useful to Reagan in mobilizing opposition to the status quo than in dislodging interests or institutions of vital significance to it.

It would appear, then, that the President's political capacities to repudiate and reconstruct weakened over the course of the twentieth century. That, however, is only half of the story, for when the transformative capacities of the presidency dissipate, burdens on the other aspect of the progressive solution are magnified. I am referring here to the progressives' idea of turning the presidential office into "policy central," the locus of problem solving. Though this may be the more familiar of the two leadership roles put forward for the modern presidency, it is also the more novel. Its referents to nineteenth-century practice are murkier; it relies less on a paradox of constitutional inadvertence than on building new institutional capacities into routine operations. No doubt, the progressives imagined the two parts of their remedy working in tandem. Periodic arousal of the President's ground-clearing instincts might be just the thing to keep policy leadership from getting bogged down in cross pressures. But in practice, one part of the remedy has come to substitute for the other, and as presidential ground clearing has become less effective, policy leadership has found itself mired in an increasingly dense thicket.

Again, the New Deal Era proved to be the pivot point. Roosevelt's Committee on Administrative Management put the case directly: "The President needs help."<sup>22</sup> Over the next decades, the elaboration of the presidency into the locus of problem solving reworked institutional relationships throughout the governmental system. To deal with all the new interests coming into play, the President was recast as a coordinating agent, a bridge between institutions that the Constitution divides, a conductor orchestrating the work of the whole. The presidential office was "institutionalized," instilled with policy competence, enhanced with oversight capacities, and connected to the other branches and to constituent groups in the society and economy.<sup>23</sup> These changes have enlisted the incumbent in

---

<sup>22</sup> PRESIDENT'S COMM. ON ADMIN. MGMT., *ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES* 5 (1937).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., JOHN P. BURKE, *THE INSTITUTIONAL PRESIDENCY: ORGANIZING AND MANAGING THE WHITE HOUSE FROM FDR TO CLINTON* 11 (2d ed. 2000) (discussing the creation of the Executive Office of the President); PAUL C. LIGHT, *THICKENING GOVERNMENT: FEDERAL HIERARCHY AND THE DIFFUSION OF ACCOUNTABILITY* 6 (1995)

---

---

continuous, hands-on management. They have elevated the President's leadership profile by turning political entrepreneurship into the fulcrum of ongoing operations.<sup>24</sup>

Consider the competing aspirations now in view. In the transformative model, leadership is redemptive and largely negative. This model anticipates movement politics and populist intervention. The President spearheads a mobilized citizenry to assault the legitimacy of entrenched interests and expose the fundamental mismatch between received institutions and reform aspirations. Government is rearranged and reoriented by breaking up the infrastructure that supports the politics of the past. Renewal is achieved by cutting deeply enough through extant arrangements of government to reset the standards of legitimate national action. Dysfunction is resolved by restructuring the government's basic mode of operations and installing within those operations a new common sense about the government's purposes. The objective is a regime change.

In the policy model, by contrast, leadership is prudential and positive. This model *assumes* a thickened universe of institutional action where interests are unlikely to be dislodged decisively, and where effective action takes the form of negotiated adjustments and workable settlements. Leadership in this mode anticipates a pluralist politics. The objective is responsive and responsible accommodation. The leader is there to induce coordination and collaboration, to ensure that interests are served, that things get done, that the system does not break down, and that the demands of the moment are met. I do not mean to suggest by this contrast that policymaking is insignificant. The Affordable Care Act of 2010<sup>25</sup> (ACA) is rightly considered a historic achievement, but threading the needle on healthcare reform has also become emblematic of the distinction I am drawing, the distinction between negotiating a policy fix for a pressing national problem and releasing the government from ingrained constraints. The ACA, in all its complexity, is a marker of the development of America's policy state and of the labyrinthine course that its policy entrepreneurs now negotiate.

---

(explaining the multiplication of overhead management positions in administrative agencies); Terry M. Moe, *The Politicized Presidency*, in *THE NEW DIRECTION IN AMERICAN POLITICS* 235-71 (John E. Chubb & Paul E. Peterson eds., 1985) (discussing the incongruity between the President's governing responsibilities and his institutional resources).

<sup>24</sup> For a general discussion of the notion of political entrepreneurship in the context of American political development, see Adam Sheingate, *The Terrain of the Political Entrepreneur*, in *FORMATIVE ACTS: AMERICAN POLITICS IN THE MAKING* (Stephen Skowronek & Matthew Glassman eds., 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Pub. L. No. 111-148, 124 Stat. 119 (2010) (codified in scattered sections of 42 U.S.C.).



## II. PRESIDENT OBAMA'S CHOICE

The incongruity of the two leadership roles assigned to the presidency by progressive reformers has grown ever more glaring, and it now runs deep in contemporary American politics. By all appearances, President Obama came to power with the best opportunity in thirty years to break decisively through received constraints. The leader of the opposition to conservative commitments and priorities, he swept his party into full control of the political apparatus on the heels of a crisis that could be attributed directly to the failings of those commitments and priorities.<sup>26</sup> He was clearly aware of the historical parallels, for he repeatedly invoked reconstructive tropes in his campaign rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> But notwithstanding the alignment of so many of the trappings of a presidentially led political reconstruction, President Obama, even more than President Reagan, shied away from any attempt at ground clearing. Potential targets for repudiation were not hard to identify – they included, for example, banks, insurance companies, and the Supreme Court. Almost immediately, however, Obama submerged the promise of reconstruction in the prospect of reinvigorating and vindicating a problem-solving style of rule.

Progressives who cling to the formula of presidentially led political breakthroughs are likely to lament Obama's choice as a lost opportunity. But if I am correct about the latter-day encumbrances on reconstructive leadership in the American presidency, it may be judged more appropriately as an insight. Expectations drawn from historical parallels fail to account for the cumulative consequences of prior reconstructions. The incorporation of new interests achieved at these "constitutional moments" has altered the calculus of leadership moving forward, diminishing the practical and political value of purging interests or directly assaulting the institutional arrangements that support them. Obama perceived this new reality – the reality that, for all intents and purposes, the interdependence of interests has rendered the reconstructive option counterproductive, that the value of "ruthless pragmatism"<sup>28</sup> has supplanted the value of resolute insurgency, that we were "all in this together."<sup>29</sup>

Today's conservative movement shows us the flip side of the same coin. This insurgency draws on a deep understanding of what political renewal in the American system has historically entailed. It is driven by suspicion of

---

<sup>26</sup> President Barack Obama, *President's Message*, in OFFICE OF MGMT. & BUDGET, A NEW ERA OF RESPONSIBILITY: RENEWING AMERICA'S PROMISE 1 (2009), archived at <http://perma.cc/53YW-FU4M>.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., SKOWRONEK, *supra* note 7, at 167-72.

<sup>28</sup> David Leonhardt, *After the Great Recession*, N.Y. TIMES MAG., May 3, 2009, at 36, 41 (reproducing an interview with President Obama, who said, "[W]hat I've been constantly searching for is a ruthless pragmatism when it comes to economic policy").

<sup>29</sup> BarackObamadotcom, "Always" – Obama for America TV Ad, YOUTUBE (July 24, 2012), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0yK5NakN2o> ("I'm Barack Obama, and I approve this message because I believe we're all in this together.").

---

---

established parties and institutional elites, and it actively resists their efforts to contain its critique. It projects the necessity, and clings to the live possibility, of a redemptive ground-clearing exercise. For cultural resonance, the mobilizing ideology of this movement puts policy enthusiasts to shame.

But this choice appears no less self-limiting than Obama's. After thirty years in the field, the conservative insurgents have been unable to articulate a politically credible alternative to pragmatic policy management or to field a national leader who will forthrightly repudiate performance standards of rule. The insight of this movement is that twentieth-century government was built on the counsels of rationality and managerial responsibility, and its contention is that respect for these siren songs preempts a fundamental redirection of affairs. The movement has flirted with outright rejection of these norms and standards, but it has found, time and again, that such a course risks marginalization. Unable to resolve their redemptive message in a categorically different way of governing, the insurgents have settled in for a permanent siege.<sup>30</sup> As a persistent assault on the legitimacy of the policy state, the movement not only thrives on the limitations of that system, but also contributes to its shortfalls.

With the insurgents' rejection of collaboration and cooperation, the objectives of presidential leadership in the problem-solving mode have grown even murkier. President Obama, with his initiatives blocked on all fronts, has begun to match his opponents' resistance by stiffening his own repudiative posture. His second term appears to be devoted to stigmatizing conservative intransigence as irrational and untenable, thereby abetting the insurgency's implosion. In this, Obama has crystallized a new, curiously defensive form of progressivism. In an odd twist to the original aspiration, presidential leadership is now arrayed against the reconstructive movement of our time and oddly radicalized on behalf of responsible management and system maintenance. A vindication of these ideals does not contemplate a political alternative, nor does it hold out a credible response to the ever-increasing burdens of negotiating policy fixes. Despite the high-stakes drama being played out, President Obama promises little more than to lift the siege on the policy state and to get on with the business at hand.

#### CONCLUSION

A century after the progressives offered up the promise of presidential leadership, the idea appears to be at a crossroads. Prospects for a presidentially led political transformation seem to have been crowded out by the demand for policy fixes, even as this demand appears to be overwhelming the presidency's managerial capacities. Meanwhile, the frustration of transformative ambitions appears to have deepened the cultural appeal of the reconstructive ideal, even

---

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Robert L. Borosage, *Tea Party Zealots Hold the Public Debate Hostage*, REUTERS (Oct. 15, 2013), <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/10/15/tea-party-zealots-hold-the-public-debate-hostage>, archived at <http://perma.cc/4W2S-7P4R>.

---

---

as that appeal is being registered in increasingly wild and dangerous delusions. Barack Obama may be correct that, as a practical matter, threading the policy needle is the best a President today has to offer, but he stretches to convince us that a new, more vital regime can be created without action aimed directly at the institutional structure of interest representation. Threading the policy needle will not suffice to reach the goal he set; no discrete list of policy accomplishments will deliver the promised transformation.

The problem does not lie with President Obama, nor does the solution lie with any leader currently on the horizon. What we face today is the exhaustion of an old remedy. Contemplating such a prospect is difficult. The final refuge for those who would cling to the old formulas is the claim that this is but a moment of transition, and, like all such moments in the past, it is hard in the midst of it to see the way through. That is undoubtedly true: all moments are moments of transition. The question to be confronted today is whether the mechanisms upon which we have relied historically for negotiating transitions are still effective and whether they still portend a reasonable resolution of the challenges we face. If there is ground for doubt on that score, it is cold comfort to recognize that the status quo is not sustainable.

If the goal is to renew American government once again, faith in the presidency appears unlikely to suffice. The reformers of the twentieth century should instruct us by example, not by prescription. The challenge is to do again what they did: to conjure some new mechanism for working through dysfunction and to reconfigure our institutions so as to bypass the limitations of the old.