

**Donkey Work: Redefining the Democratic Party in an
'Age of Conservatism,' 1972-1984**

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Abstract I

This thesis argues that much of the political historiography is mistaken in portraying the post-1960s United States as a nation moving inexorably to the right. It also argues that historians should not understand the Democratic Party as being in terminal decline between 1972 and 1984, marginalised by a coalescing conservative Republican majority.

Indeed, taking as its focus the U.S. Congress, this thesis asks why the remarkable resilience of the congressional Democratic Party has been overlooked by historians. It further asks why that resilience did so little to help the party in subsequent years. The Democratic revival in the elections of 1974 and 1976, so often dismissed as a post-Watergate aberration, was in fact an authentic political opportunity that the party failed to exploit. Exploring various Democratic factions within Congress that competed to shape their party's public philosophy, this thesis seeks to show how grander liberal ambitions were often subordinated to the logic of legislative politics and policymaking.

The underlying theme is the unsuitability of Congress as an arena for the discussion and refinement of post-Great Society liberalism. Again and again, the legislature displayed a remarkable facility for undermining iconoclasm and stalling policy experimentation. Institutional reforms in the early 1970s, supposed to reinvigorate the Congress and the congressional Democratic Party, actually succeeded

only in intensifying the fragmentation of both. Congressional politics became more entrepreneurial and less party-oriented, leaving legislators with few incentives to look beyond their own political fortunes to the party's future prospects.

Enduring Democratic strength in Congress meant that Capitol Hill remained at the centre of the party's efforts to reclaim its preeminent position in American politics. The fact that the Democrats never experienced a protracted period of minority status, as the Republicans did during much of the mid-twentieth century, left them ill-equipped and without a powerful incentive to think in broader terms about their party's mission.

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Abstract II

This thesis argues that much of the political historiography is mistaken in understanding the post-1960s United States as a nation moving inexorably to the right. It also argues that historians should not understand the Democratic Party as being in terminal decline between 1972 and 1984, marginalised by a coalescing conservative Republican majority. Political histories of the post-1960s US seek to explain a conservative ascendancy which supposedly swept aside the last vestiges of a liberal order that had sustained the Democratic Party's mid-century hegemony. By contrast, most histories of the Democratic Party after 1968 are narratives of decline and exclusion.

There is persuasive superficial evidence supporting this conventional wisdom. After Jimmy Carter's narrow 50.1% in 1976, for instance, no Democratic candidate would win more than 50% in a presidential election for 32 years. By contrast, on two occasions in the 12 years that this thesis covers, the Republican candidate carried all states but one in a presidential election, a feat not equalled by any Democratic candidate since. The number of Americans who self-identify as 'liberal' has trailed the number of self-described 'conservatives' by double digits for decades.

However, beyond electoral indicators, the spotty record of policy successes belies the image of an all-conquering conservative juggernaut rolling across America. Such an interpretation overlooks the important distinction between politics and government. Conservative political successes were often not reflected in the arena of

policy-making. Conservatives have enjoyed some noteworthy policy successes, particularly under President Ronald Reagan: tax reform was vigorously implemented; private sector unions were emasculated; deregulation advanced steadily; government-sponsored affirmative action was essentially halted; and defence outlay was dramatically increased. Yet perhaps more significant are the policy failures. For instance, on a variety of cultural issues, the U.S. remains on a liberal trajectory, despite the efforts of politicised evangelical Protestantism.

Even more striking has been the conservative failure to significantly reduce the responsibilities and scope of the federal government. The credo of modern American conservatism, at least outside foreign affairs, was summarised by Reagan in his first inaugural address: ‘government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.’ Yet under Reagan’s stewardship, the share of gross domestic product occupied by federal spending remained stable at 18 percent and the number of employees on the federal payroll actually increased. A teleological narrative of conservative triumph and liberal disintegration is thus too flawed to be satisfactory. Whereas recent historiography has sought to explain the ‘rise of conservatism,’ it has too often neglected the vital task of seeking out its limits and reversals.

A reconsideration of the fortunes of the Democratic Party between 1972 and 1984 helps to explain those failures. Most contemporary observers recognised the overwhelming sense of transition, and more often of crisis, that pervaded that era. Yet only in hindsight has that transition assumed the character of a realignment. From the perspective of the mid-1970s, the triumph of conservatism was by no means a foregone conclusion. Though Democrats would be deeply demoralised by the

smashing they received at the hands of Richard Nixon in 1972, a mere two years later the party increased its congressional majorities to those of its heyday. Two years after that, the Democrats would control not only Congress, but the presidency as well. By contrast, the Republican Party was more unpopular than it had been in decades. At the time, many Democrats remained complacently confident that they were members of the nation's majority party, a status that seemed fundamentally unchallenged.

The political realities of the 1976 elections – a Democratic president, supermajorities in both chambers of Congress, and a weakened and divided Republican Party – bear comparison with 1936 or 1964. And yet the Carter presidency is almost universally acknowledged as a datum point in liberalism's collapse, while those of Roosevelt and Johnson represent liberalism's high water marks in the twentieth century. It may seem remarkable to modern eyes given events that were to come, but many Democrats felt that they could safely ignore the GOP, hollowed out as it had been by Watergate and economic slowdown. This thesis argues that this should be understood as an era of genuine, unpredictable political contest. The post-1974 Democratic revival was neither an illusion nor a delaying of the inevitable. Instead it was a genuine opportunity that the party failed to capitalise upon.

As well as adding to the underdeveloped historiography of post-war liberalism, this thesis sets out to critique two theories which loom large in much of the literature: critical realignment theory and the presidential synthesis. The former, critical realignment theory, holds that critical elections create enduring electoral realignments between the parties, ensuring that policy preferences are shaped by alternating left-right majority coalitions. Put crudely, liberal reformers and conservative reactionaries

dominate policymaking in roughly forty-year chunks. In the twentieth century, Franklin Roosevelt inaugurated the great era of reform, and either Nixon or Reagan the great era of reaction. As this thesis argues, even if applicable to earlier eras, ‘realignment’ does not reflect the political shifts of 1972-1984. If anything, *dealignment* is a more useful conceptual framework for understanding U.S. politics in this period. Voters increasingly decoupled themselves from parties, ticket-splitting became more pronounced, and ‘divided government’ emerged as American politics’ default setting. By 1984, an American voter could cast his or her ballot for President Reagan (to provide the optimistic, resolute leadership that America needed after years of crisis and drift) and for his or her district’s Democratic representative (who would protect valuable middle class entitlements from budget cutters) and see no contradiction.

Similarly, this thesis argues that the ‘presidential synthesis’ (the interpreting of American political history through the prism of presidential administrations) often has the effect of obscuring longer trends. For instance, between 1955 and 1995, while the White House passed from Republican to Democrat and back again, the House of Representatives remained firmly in Democratic hands. This thesis focuses instead on the Congress, which has remained chronically understudied by historians. It was in the Congress that Democratic strength proved the most durable. Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s (indeed until 1994), the Democrats maintained control of the House of Representatives and, for all but six years, the Senate as well. By the late 1980s, some commentators began to speak of a ‘permanent Democratic majority’ in Congress. Pulling the focus away from the White House to Capitol Hill reveals both the

overlooked robustness of the Democrats after 1972, and the rarely acknowledged obstacles to the party's recovery.

This thesis asks why the remarkable resilience of the congressional Democratic Party has been overlooked by historians. It further asks why that resilience did so little to help the party in subsequent years. The bumper Democratic majorities that were the result of the 1974 midterm elections led directly to the climax of a long reform movement that both defenestrated conservative committee 'barons' and empowered individual representatives with new resources and outlets to pursue a variety of programmatic commitments. The first chapter of this thesis explores the aftermath of those elections. The class of 1974, soon dubbed the 'Watergate Babies', constituted a generational shift within Congress, introducing a distinct breed of legislator – young, media-savvy, ambitious, impatient, and entrepreneurial – that political scientist Burdett Loomis would identify as 'the new American politician' in 1988. They arrived into a Congress that was increasingly determined to assert its own prerogatives against an over-mighty executive. The circumstances were therefore promising not only for a Democratic recovery, but a *congressionally-driven* Democratic recovery.

Yet such a recovery never manifested. Having decisively reformed Congress, the Democratic congressional majorities were faced with a difficult question: what happens next? In the years that followed, various shades of Democrat grasped for the answer.

Chapter two focuses on the House of Representatives in 1975-76, where the Watergate Babies, under the leadership of the redoubtable Phillip Burton, seemed to

be on the verge of moulding the Democratic Caucus into an instrument of liberal reform, before balkanising into individual campaigns and committees. It asks why a reinvigorated Democratic House was not able to seize the legislative initiative from a weakened President Gerald Ford, even with a determined and skilful leader to marshal liberal forces.

Chapter three turns to the Senate, where old guard Democrats such as Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy embraced near-social democratic solutions relying on national planning measures which would be frustrated by fears of inflation and an unsympathetic Carter White House.

Chapter four adopts a regional rather than a cameral perspective to explore Democratic legislators from the Sunbelt West. Hailing from the nation's most economically dynamic region, these 'Sunbelt Democrats' brought an optimistic determination to modernise their party and imbue it with some of their distinctive Western sensibilities. In Washington, they would discover that radical rethinkings of federal responsibilities are easier to advance when no-one's infrastructure project is threatened.

A similar fate would befall New York's Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the central figure in chapter five and a representative of the party's iconoclastic neoconservative wing, who would delight conservatives by denouncing the federal government as 'a pea-brained dinosaur' before emerging as a tenacious defender of Social Security against Reaganite advances.

The sixth and final chapter finds the party struggling to come to terms with the ‘Reagan Revolution’ and with its frustrated hopes of a renewed Democratic majority. Though there was no shortage of Democrats eager to claim the mantle of intellectual leadership for themselves, it was accepted that the party was on the back foot, that the Republicans had become, in Moynihan’s words, the ‘party of ideas.’ Parallel to the party’s difficult search for a new agenda for ‘Reagan’s America’ was the story of congressional Democrats’ considerable success – particularly in the House under the leadership of the unabashedly old-fashioned Speaker Tip O’Neill – in defending the welfare state from Republican assault.

The uniting theme of these chapters is the remarkable facility of Congress for undermining iconoclasm and stalling policy experimentation. The institutional reforms of the early 1970s, supposed to reinvigorate the Congress and the congressional Democratic Party, actually succeeded only intensifying the fragmentation of both. The proliferation of subcommittee places and resources which allowed every legislator to husband their own policy fiefdom, the transformation of the campaigning environment, and the decline of local party infrastructure, all conspired to create a more entrepreneurial, and less party-oriented, congressional politics. These developments ensured that Democrats in Congress had few incentives to look beyond their own political fortunes to the party’s future prospects. Those Democrats that did pursue grander ambitions often found them subordinated to the logic of legislative politics. Congressional reform should have made innovation easier. In fact, radical actions provoked fierce hostility from important interest groups, and insurgents tended to be absorbed and become defenders of the *status quo*.

Yet the enduring Democratic strength in Congress meant that Capitol Hill remained at the centre of the party's efforts to reclaim its preeminent position in American politics. Ironically, the absence of a decisive electoral realignment may have been the biggest factor working against the Democrats. The party never had to adapt to a prolonged period of minority status; for every lost presidential election, there was a new congressional majority as consolation. The fact that the Democrats were always able to dodge the knockout blow (saved by political crisis or recession or sometimes both) meant that the party did not enter the same trough as the Republicans in the mid-twentieth century. Even by 1984, Ronald Reagan could win an overwhelming 49-state victory in the presidential election while his party failed to take control of the House of Representatives, and actually lost seats in the Senate (where it did hold the majority). By 1984, the Democrats were simply not in a position comparable to the Republicans in 1936 or 1948 or even 1964.

Democrats were not moved, as Republicans had been, to construct an alternative infrastructure to advance their cause (at least until the formation of the Democratic Leadership Council in 1985). The very absence of a stable beachhead in the political establishment forced conservatives to pursue innovative strategies. The Republican Party greeted the 1980s supported by an extensive network of politically-minded think tanks and policy institutes, while the Democrats had to scramble to catch up. The mentality of a minority party accompanied the Republicans into office and was supplemented in important ways by the Democrats' failure to collapse in the face of the conservative onslaught. Opposition is often the best place for a political party to redefine itself, to develop and hone new ideas. Between 1972 and 1984, the Democratic Party never truly experienced it.

Yet the same Congress that obstructed Democratic efforts to formulate a coherent public philosophy for the post-New Deal order must also be acknowledged as the source of some of the most significant Democratic victories of the era. The same features of Congress that militated against the reconceptualisation of their public philosophy enabled Democrats to mount an effective guerrilla campaign against the Reagan administration. As the Reagan revolutionaries endeavoured to roll back the welfare state in the early 1980s, the institutional bias that the Congress creates for the *status quo* worked decisively in liberalism's favour.

Democratic resistance was supported by a public whose anti-government animus often dissipated when specific cuts were proposed. While the American people expressed a growing dislike for, and distrust of, government in the abstract, their expectations of the government's responsibilities remained remarkably high. This ensured that Democrats could preserve much of the legacy of the New Deal and Great Society in an apparently conservative age. Even this proved something of a double-edged sword, however. Democratic victories in such crucial policy battles with Reagan left them with even less incentive to rethink their party's agenda. Whereas the post-New Deal Republican Party was compelled to adapt to expansions of federal prerogatives that challenged its small government ideology, the Democrats never had to adapt to significant government rollback. The Democrats were the party of government and, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, government stayed big. Thus, the seeming weakness and flaccidity of the Democratic Party by the mid-1980s was, paradoxically, a by-product of their success.

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Introduction

What happened to the Democratic Party after the 1960s? For most political historians, the answer is straightforward. The party was marginalised by a resurgent Republican Party and by an increasingly conservative electorate. Democratic politicians were swept from office as they found that their ideals no longer aligned with those of the average American. In recent decades, according to the conventional wisdom, Americans have come to prefer conservative solutions to national problems. They have become ever more in favour of free markets, low taxes, less government, fewer regulations, parsimonious welfare provision, neutered trade unions, bullish nationalism in foreign affairs, and the maintenance of ‘traditional values’ at home. The number of Americans who self-identify as ‘liberal’ has trailed the number of self-described ‘conservatives’ by double digits for decades.¹ Where once the Democrats could send liberal warriors like Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson to the White House, in later years the only candidates able to scuttle over the threshold were milquetoast accommodationists to the new conservative order like Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

Most histories of the Democratic Party after 1968 reflect this narrative of decline and exclusion. Columnist E.J. Dionne’s largely supportive Clinton-era assessment of liberal politics was titled *They Only Look Dead*.² Bruce Miroff has described a Democratic Party trapped in an identity crisis since the early 1970s, ‘torn between their hearts and their heads, between idealistic convictions about equality and peace originally forged in the struggles over civil rights and the war in Vietnam, and

¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Liberal Self-Identification Edges Up To New High in 2013,” *Gallup.com*, January 10, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166787/liberal-self-identification-edges-new-high-2013.aspx>, accessed June 28, 2014.

² E.J. Dionne, *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era* (New York and London, 1996).

practical calculations of how to win elections in a country whose majority evidently does not share such convictions.’ By ‘muffling’ their own liberal instincts, Democrats have ‘produced a muddle.’³ Jeffrey Bloodworth has condemned ‘decades of ideological incoherence and political ineptitude’ as Democrats discarded Vital Center liberalism (defined as ‘an antiutopian fighting faith committed to national greatness at home and human freedom abroad’) and embraced a creed that was beloved by activists and despised by voters.⁴ In more strident, but not wholly dissimilar terms, Ronald Radosh has declared that since 1968 ‘the Democrats [have] stood in the public’s eye for a new kind of liberalism, one that spelled permissiveness and moral nihilism.’⁵ Michael Tomasky has accused the American left of having ‘completely lost touch with the regular needs of regular Americans’ and come to be viewed ‘as pursuing narrow agendas that don’t speak either to their basic needs in day-to-day life or to any larger vision for that society as a whole.’⁶ While Republicans have argued forcefully for their principles, Democrats have offered up ‘focus-group bromides,’ complained Douglas Massey, and ‘voters rationally chose principle over pandering,’ whatever disagreements they may have with aspects of the Republican platform.⁷

By contrast, histories of the Republican Party concentrate on explaining its late twentieth century ascendancy, asking how it was able to sweep aside the last vestiges of the ‘liberal consensus’ that had sustained the Democratic Party’s mid-century hegemony. Indeed Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have gone so far as to argue

³ Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence, KS, 2009), 3-4, 6-7.

⁴ Jeffrey Bloodworth, *Losing The Center: The Decline of American Liberalism, 1968-1992* (Lexington, KY, 2013), 3, 5.

⁵ Ronald Radosh, *Divided They Fell: The Demise of the Democratic Party, 1964-1996* (New York, 1996), xi

⁶ Michael Tomasky, *Left for Dead: The Life, Death, and Possible Resurrection of Progressive Politics in America* (New York, 1996), 10-12.

⁷ Douglas S. Massey, *Return of the “L” Word: A Liberal Vision for the New Century* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2005), ix.

that the New Deal order should be understood as ‘a long exception’ in the twentieth century, ‘a byproduct of the massive crisis of the Great Depression rather than the linear triumph of the liberal state.’ In fact, they argue, the continuities between the pre-1930s and the post-1970s United States are so striking as to negate the idea of an enduring liberal transformation of the nation’s political economy.⁸ Political historians who are loath to go as far as Cowie and Salvatore accept that American politics have moved decisively rightward since the 1970s and that conservative Republican ideas have shaped the choices available to policymakers in the latter third of the twentieth century.

Such analyses rest on an essentially cyclical understanding of American politics, in which policy preferences are shaped by alternating right-left majority coalitions. Much of this writing owes a debt to V.O. Key and Walter Dean Burnham’s ‘critical election’ theories of political realignment, even if those ideas have been absorbed osmotically. Key and Burnham’s writings have been complemented by the work of the historians Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who elaborated a similar theory of the ‘cycles of American history.’⁹ A critical election, as defined by Key, is one ‘in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relations of power within the community, and in which new and durable electoral groupings are formed.’ It creates ‘a sharp and durable electoral realignment between parties.’¹⁰ Burnham expanded this by suggesting that these critical elections occurred at similarly spaced intervals, that American politics has ‘a periodic rhythm, cycling

⁸ Jefferson Cowie, Nick Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 74 (Fall, 2008), 5.

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., “The Tides of National Politics,” in *Paths to the Present* (New York, 1949); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (London, 1987).

¹⁰ V.O. Key, “A Theory of Critical Elections,” *The Journal of Politics*, 17:1 (February, 1955), 4, 16.

between the normal and the disruptive.’¹¹ In such models, 1828, 1860, and 1932 are usually accepted as the critical realigning elections in US history (the first two marked the break between party systems in the nineteenth century, and the third ushered in the New Deal coalition). In the late twentieth century, 1968 and 1980 have been put forward as candidates for inclusion in this canon. Thus, in the twentieth century, Franklin Roosevelt inaugurates the great era of reform, and either Nixon or Reagan the great era of reaction. Liberal reformers and conservative reactionaries dominate policymaking in roughly forty-year chunks.

Yet is this a useful framework for understanding the latter third of the twentieth century? Was American politics after 1968 defined by the collapse of the Democratic Party, and the marginalising of its liberal public philosophy, to be replaced by the Republican Party and a reinvigorated conservatism? This thesis argues that it is not and that historians have overlooked the resilience of the post-1960s Democratic Party. At a more abstract level, this thesis seeks to problematize the idea of ‘realignment’ as an organising concept. Though many political scientists have challenged realignment theory as inadequate, it continues to play an outsize role in much of the political historiography.¹² However, such an approach is of limited use for the scholar of US politics between 1972 and 1984.

Realignment cannot explain, for instance, one of the most striking features of national politics in the years after 1968: divided government. Since the 1830s, unitary

¹¹ Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York, 1970), 181.

¹² Sean Trende, in particular, has argued forcefully “that the entire concept of realignments/permanent alignments ... is bankrupt and should be abandoned.” Sean Trende, *The Lost Majority: Why the Future of Government Is Up for Grabs – and Who Will Take It* (New York, 2012), xiii. See also Byron Shafer’s edited collection, Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison, WI, 1991).

control of the presidency and Congress by one party had been the norm. In the last third of the twentieth century, divided control was the rule.¹³ Eight of the twelve years covered by this thesis saw a Republican White House facing off against a Congress which was at least partly controlled by Democrats. For less than 13 of the 47 years since 1968 have the presidency and both houses of Congress been in the hands of the same party. The immediate cause of divided government has been the rise in split-ticket voting as Americans use their party identifications 'less and less as a cue in voting behaviour.'¹⁴ Indeed, the largest voter bloc in the modern American polity is that of self-identified 'independents,' who refuse to align themselves with either party.¹⁵ Though 'independent' may not necessarily be synonymous with 'nonpartisan' or 'swing voter,' the decline of party identification is a striking feature of politics post-1972.¹⁶ If anything, therefore, the more useful conceptual framework is 'dealignment,' defined by journalist Hedrick Smith in 1988 as 'the erosion of one majority party without the formation of a new one, plus the simultaneous weakening of the party system.' The result was to leave the U.S. with 'two minority parties.'¹⁷ In a similar vein, Byron Shafer and William Claggett have suggested that the American electorate contains 'two opposing majorities' (one 'more liberal than the active Republican Party on economic and welfare issues,' the other 'more conservative than the active

¹³ James P. Pfiffner, "The President and the Postreform Congress," in Roger H. Davidson (ed.), *The Postreform Congress* (New York, 1992), 226-7.

¹⁴ Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-1980* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1984), 27.

¹⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record High 42% of Americans Identify as Independents," Gallup, January 8, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx>, last accessed March 14, 2015.

¹⁶ Abramowitz writes that the 'proportion of pure independents in the electorate has been declining since the 1970s while the level of partisan voting has been increasing.' Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT, 2010), 57.

¹⁷ Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game, How Washington Works* (New York, 1988), 668.

Democratic Party on cultural and national concerns') that wax and wane depending on the prevailing issue context.¹⁸

There is certainly evidence to support a narrative of conservative, and Republican, political triumph after the 1960s. For instance, excluding Jimmy Carter's narrow 50.1 percent victory in 1976, no Democratic candidate would win more than 50 percent of the vote in a presidential election between 1968 and 2008. By contrast, the Republican candidate carried all states but one in the presidential elections of 1972 and 1984, a feat not equalled by any Democrat since. Republicans also made progressive, albeit slower, gains at the congressional and sub-congressional level.

However, examining beyond electoral indicators reveals a more uneven record that undermines the image of an all-conquering conservative juggernaut. Republicans enjoyed some noteworthy policy successes, but what are more significant are their failures. On a variety of cultural issues, for instance, the U.S. remains, in many respects, on a liberal trajectory, despite the efforts of politicised evangelical Protestantism. As David Courtwright has written, moral conservatives 'filled the airwaves with angry talk, the prisons with criminals, and the legislatures with Republicans. But they made little progress on abortion and school prayer, and lost ground on obscenity, gay rights, and legalized gambling. Popular culture kept getting raunchier.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Byron E. Shafer, William J. M. Claggett, *The Two Majorities: The Issue Context of Modern American Politics* (Baltimore, MD, and London, 1995), xvii, 186-191; Byron E. Shafer, *The Two Majorities and the Puzzle of Modern American Politics* (Lawrence, KS, 2003), 23.

¹⁹ David Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2010), 4-5.

There was an even starker failure in the pursuit of the objective which Ronald Reagan put at the centre of his eponymous revolution: the shrinking of ‘big government.’ Beyond a few skirmishes, a determined strike against the principal domestic responsibilities of the federal government was never attempted. The Reagan administration enjoyed more success in cutting taxes and advancing deregulation, but for the most part the federal leviathan went unchallenged. The share of gross domestic product occupied by federal spending remained stable at 18 percent (though even restraining that can be regarded as a success of sorts) and the number of employees on the federal payroll actually increased under Reagan’s stewardship. According to Hugh Heclo, Reagan’s real legacy was ‘to consolidate rather than roll back America’s middle-class welfare state.’²⁰ The federal government continued to grow, reaching into ever more areas of American life.

Recognising these failures requires the historian to reassess whether there was a ‘right turn’ in American politics in the 1970s. Most political historians would likely agree with Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer that America was ‘rightward bound’ in these years.²¹ However, while a sense of transition and crisis pervaded the era, it is only in hindsight has that transformation assumed the character of a decisive political realignment. From the perspective of the mid-1970s, the triumph of conservatism was by no means a foregone conclusion. At the time, many Democrats remained complacently confident that they were members of the nation’s majority party, a status that seemed fundamentally unchallenged. Indeed, though Democrats were deeply demoralised by the smashing they received at the hands of Richard Nixon in 1972, a

²⁰ Hugh Heclo, “The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38, No. 4 (December, 2008), 558-60.

²¹ Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, “Introduction” in Bruce J. Schulman, Julian E. Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2008), 3.

mere two years later, the party increased its congressional majorities to those of its heyday, while the Republicans were at a nadir. Two years after that, the Democrats would control not only Congress, but the presidency as well. To the casual observer, the situation looked much as it had in 1936 or 1964.

Why then have historians been so quick to dismiss this Democratic robustness? In part, the answer is that it has been easy to rationalise the party's unexpected recovery as a post-Watergate aberration. As Godfrey Hodgson has written, '[w]ithout the Watergate scandal, the victory of Reagan conservatism might have occurred in 1976, not 1980.'²² Yet this teleological narrative of conservative triumph and liberal disintegration cannot account for the limitations of the 'Reagan revolution.' In other words, what sort of victory did 'Reagan conservatism' win? In what sense was the Democratic Party, and its liberal ideals, defeated? These questions can only be answered by taking a fresh look at the years between 1972, when Richard Nixon first blew apart the New Deal coalition, and 1984, when Reagan supposedly consolidated the new Republican coalition as the nation's majority party. This thesis argues that 1972 to 1984 should be understood as an era not of glacial rightward drift, but of genuine, unpredictable political contest.

This is only the first half of the question at the heart of this thesis, however. Having convincingly established the resilience of the Democratic Party in the 1970s, we are left with another problem: why did that resilience not help the party's cause? The post-1974 Democratic revival was neither an illusion nor a delaying of the inevitable, but rather a genuine opportunity. Why were the Democrats not able to take

²² Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time: From World War II to Nixon* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2005), 542.

advantage of it? The reasons for that failure are the subject of the foregoing chapters. First, however, it is necessary to explore further the historiographical context of this thesis, and to consider the condition of the Democratic Party by 1972.

The Historiographical Context

The literature on late twentieth century American conservatism is as rich as the scholarship on post-1960s liberalism is underdeveloped. The universal acceptance of conservatism's potency is remarkable given the contempt in which it was held at the midpoint of the last century. Such condescension was driven by those intellectuals who argued that a 'liberal consensus' prevailed nationwide, that the majority of Americans shared the same set of basic, non-conservative assumptions. This consensus was perhaps best encapsulated by the journalist Godfrey Hodgson, who described the post-war American as '[c]onfident to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism.'²³ Domestically, the New Deal settlement was hailed as the next stage in American progress. The first Republican president since Hoover, Dwight D. Eisenhower, sought to accommodate the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt in a new ideology, 'Modern Republicanism.'²⁴ Conservatism was on the defensive, its adherents denounced as extremists. For Richard Hofstadter, conservatism could be understood only as some form of mental derangement, the product of 'a profound if largely unconscious hatred of our society and its ways.'²⁵ Conservatives could expect

²³ Hodgson is sceptical about the extent of the supposed consensus, but summarises it with admirable precision. Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, 75.

²⁴ Alonzo Hamby, *Liberalism and Its Challengers: From FDR to Bush* (2nd ed., New York and Oxford, 1992), 121.

²⁵ Hofstadter uses the word 'pseudo-conservative' to categorise those groups that most historians would recognise as forerunners of the New Right. This was to distinguish them from 'the temperate and

to find themselves dismissed as Luddite reactionaries, senselessly decrying modernity and civilisation.²⁶

When the historian Otis Graham, Jr. entered graduate school at Columbia in 1960, liberalism was ‘a proud and politically dominating tradition of ideas and social reforms with roots in the progressive era, given mature form under Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and in 1960 gathering moral force and political energy for a third phase of what Harvard historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. would teach us to call the Schlesinger Cycle of corrective liberal reform.’²⁷ ‘[T]he fact is that anyone who today identifies himself as an unmitigated opponent of liberalism can hope at best for only local or regional power in American politics,’ wrote philosopher Charles Frankel that same year.²⁸ The first years of the 1960s seemed to confirm the supremacy of both liberalism and of the Democratic Party, the principal vehicle for its dissemination. When Barry Goldwater was overwhelmed in the 1964 election, commentators raced to proclaim the marginalisation, if not the imminent extinction, of the Republican Party. James ‘Scotty’ Reston encapsulated the conventional wisdom when he wrote afterwards that ‘Goldwater not only lost the Presidential election yesterday but the conservative cause as well. He has wrecked his party for a long time to come and is

compromising spirit of true [classical] conservatism’ and the ‘practical conservatism’ of the Eisenhower administration. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), 43-44.

²⁶ As Michael Heale points out, of course, such contempt was not exclusively reserved for conservatives, but extended to all those who disdained consensus liberalism. Communists and later New Leftists would find their psychological stability questioned with equal persistence. Michael J. Heale, “The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography,” *Reviews in American History*, 33 (2005), 138.

²⁷ Otis L. Graham, Jr., “Liberalism After The Sixties: A Reconnaissance,” in William H. Chafe (ed.), *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies* (New York, 2002), 293

²⁸ Charles Frankel, “A Liberal Is A Liberal Is A --,” *NYT*, February 28, 1960.

not even likely to control the wreckage.’²⁹ It was, says Rick Perlstein, ‘one of the most dramatic failures of collective discernment in the history of American journalism.’³⁰

Perlstein has been at the forefront of efforts to explain the conservative insurgency that would destroy the liberal consensus only a few years after Hofstadter pronounced conservatism the product of a psychological disorder. In his analysis of Goldwater’s disastrous 1964 presidential campaign, he has probed the full extent of the conservative networks that were assembled and honed in propelling the Arizona senator to national prominence.³¹ Two other books have followed placing Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan centre-stage in turn, the former as the progenitor of a divisive politics that continues to plague the nation and the latter as the refiner of the optimistic conservatism that would secure the Republican majority.³²

Perlstein is only one of the better-selling historians to have turned their attention to reconstructing the triumph of American conservatism. The field is abundant and a full accounting of its flora is beyond the scope of this thesis. To take a representative sample: Mary C. Brennan has posited an alternative history of the 1960s focusing on the conservative activists who spent the decade infiltrating the Republican Party and isolating its liberal Northeastern wing.³³ Thomas Sugrue and Dan Carter

²⁹ James Reston, “What Goldwater Lost,” *NYT*, November 4, 1964.

³⁰ Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, 2001), ix.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York, 2008); Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York, 2014).

³³ Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill, N.C., and London, 1995). See also John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997) and Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans: From 1952 to the Present* (New York, and Oxford, 1989).

have argued for the centrality of race to the conservative ascendancy.³⁴ Lisa McGirr has explored the world of the highly motivated suburban conservatives in California's Orange County.³⁵ Steven M. Teles has dissected the multi-faceted, largely elite-level assault on the 'liberal legal regime' by conservative judges, academics, public interest law firms, and think tanks.³⁶ Michael Flamm has identified the rise of 'law and order' politics and the widespread fear of social breakdown at the end of the 1960s as a key motor of the conservative ascendancy.³⁷

This has led to a hardening consensus about the character of the 1970s, that the decade was witness to an inexorable march towards a new conservative hegemony.³⁸ As columnist George Will gloated on the morning of Reagan's inauguration in 1981, 'Goldwater won the election of 1964. It just took sixteen years to count the votes.'³⁹ The 'rightward bound' thesis is currently the most popular framework through which historians understand the 1970s, a decade which has often defied interpretative

³⁴ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J., 1996); Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge, LA, and London, 1996). See also, Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York and London, 1995).

³⁵ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J., 2001).

³⁶ Steven M. Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law* (Princeton, N.J., 2008).

³⁷ Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 2005). See also, among others: Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (Oxford, 2001); John Micklethwait, Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Why America Is Different* (New York, and London, 2004); Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York, 2012); Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York, 2010); Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad As Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right* (New York, 2011); and Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill, N.C., and London, 2004).

³⁸ The best syntheses are Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London, 1990); Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, 2001); Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York, 2006); and Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2012).

³⁹ Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan, 1964-1980: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order* (Roseville, CA, 2001), xii.

synthesis. It has supplanted Tom Wolfe's 'Me Decade' and Christopher Lasch's more censorious 'culture of narcissism.'⁴⁰ Both Wolfe and Lasch contributed to a popular sense that the 1970s were a decade best forgotten, even by historians. As Stephen Tuck has noted, sandwiched between 'the swinging sixties and the materialistic eighties ... the 1970s stand small.'⁴¹ They were a decade of malaise, crisis, and bad decisions, at both a personal and political level. 'Post-Watergate America,' Sean Wilentz writes, 'lingers in Americans' memories as a jumble of bad clothing fads, shag haircuts, an embarrassingly puerile popular culture, and political stasis.'⁴² Andreas Killen has gone so far as to label 1973 the year of America's 'nervous breakdown.'⁴³

There is little doubt among most historians that such chaos was transforming the country to the benefit of conservative politicians and activists. Philip Jenkins has described 1973-1984 as a 'decade of nightmares' when a heady cocktail of rational and irrational fears – of Communist and terrorist foes abroad and criminals, drug pushers, and child abusers at home – drove Americans into the arms of conservative politicians who responded to those anxieties.⁴⁴ The intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has argued that the last quarter of the twentieth century should be understood

⁴⁰ Wolfe argued that the era's defining pursuit was 'remaking, remodelling, elevating, and polishing one's very *self*.' For Wolfe, the sharp increase in divorce rates ('wife-shucking') and the sudden explosion of evangelism revealed the astonishing self-indulgence of the generation. Though Lasch cited Wolfe approvingly, for him the crisis was 'therapeutic, not religion.' What Americans sought was 'the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security.' He fashioned a clinical condition out of pathological narcissism, diagnosed the population with it, and blamed it for having sullied every part of modern American life, from politics to intellectual culture to sport. Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (Toronto, New York, and London, 1977), 126, 134; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London, 1980).

⁴¹ Stephen G.N. Tuck, 'Introduction: Reconsidering the 1970s – The 1960s to a Disco Beat?' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43:4 (2008), 617.

⁴² Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York, 2008), 26

⁴³ Andreas Killen, *1973: Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York, 2006).

⁴⁴ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York, 2006).

as ‘an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture’ as the terms that had dominated intellectual life since the Second World War dissipated:

Across multiple fronts of ideational battle, from the speeches of presidents to books of social and cultural theory, conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstance, institutions, and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire. Strong metaphors of society were supplanted by weaker ones. Imagined collectivities shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out.⁴⁵

The language of ‘society, history, and power’ gave way to talk of ‘individuals, contingency, and choice.’ The liberals and radicals who pioneered rights-consciousness and identity politics were also key in this transformation, but it was conservatives who were the ultimate beneficiaries.

Whereas considerable energy has been given over to explaining the ‘rise of conservatism,’ historians have too often neglected the vital task of seeking out its limits and reversals. It was in 1994 that Alan Brinkley diagnosed ‘The Problem of American Conservatism’ and called upon his colleagues to exhibit more ‘historical imagination’ in reconstructing previously neglected traditions.⁴⁶ Now there is a comparable problem of American liberalism. Its post-1960s potency has been ignored in favour of a clean teleological story of Republican triumph as the American people embraced conservative remedies and rejected liberal reform.

The genial figure of Ronald Reagan looms large over most histories of post-1960s conservatism. The Gipper has been on the fast track to beatification among

⁴⁵ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2011), 3.

⁴⁶ Alan Brinkley, ‘The Problem of American Conservatism’, *American Historical Review*, 99 (April 1994), 409-29.

conservatives for decades and, after some initial rough handling, his reputation has been rising among historians too. Steven Hayward and Sean Wilentz have both published works under the title, *The Age of Reagan*. Between them, that era spans 1964 to 2008.⁴⁷ Yet, as John Ehrman has written, ‘a framework that assumes the centrality of Reagan and his legacy ... distorts and hides as much as it reveals.’⁴⁸ As early as 1986, the political scientists Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers were drawing on extensive polling data to conclude that most components of the ‘Reagan revolution’ lacked a stable popular mandate. If anything, on specific issues of economics, social issues and foreign policy, the American public had shifted leftward. From this they concluded that the American people were ‘ideologically “conservative” but programmatically “liberal.”’⁴⁹ Their work suggests a more complicated relationship between American voters and their political class, and goes some way toward explaining both Reagan’s apparent aura of invincibility by the early 1980s and the remarkable failures of his revolution.

Recent work has pushed that revisionist narrative further. David Courtwright, for instance, has shown that moral or evangelical conservatism has been an almost comprehensive failure.⁵⁰ Timothy Stanley has re-evaluated the 1980 election through the candidacy of Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts senator who mounted a primary challenge to incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Stanley argues persuasively that Kennedy’s strength as a candidate, both within the party and nationally, has been

⁴⁷ Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*; Steven F. Hayward, *Age of Reagan, 1964-1980*, and *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution, 1980-89* (New York, 2009).

⁴⁸ John Ehrman, “The Age of Reagan? Three Questions for Future Research,” *The Journal of the Historical Society*, 11:1 (March, 2011), 111-12.

⁴⁹ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York, 1986), 12.

⁵⁰ David Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2010).

underestimated, and his failure to unseat Carter was due more to foreign policy crises which boosted the president's domestic popularity, the incompetence of Kennedy's campaign, and the senator's benighted past. Absent these factors and the inauguration of a second President Kennedy in 1981 is not so wild an outcome.⁵¹ Bradford Martin has challenged the idea of the 1980s as an uncontested 'age of Reagan,' examining, among others, the nuclear freeze campaign, ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), the South African divestment movement, feminist activism after the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and even post-punk music to show the continued vitality of the American left politics in a supposedly conservative decade.⁵² This thesis seeks to contribute to this growing, but still underdeveloped, historiography of late twentieth-century liberalism.

Nowhere was the failure of Reaganism more apparent than in the aborted push to demolish significant portions of the expanded welfare state that the New Deal and Great Society had left behind. The credo of modern American conservatism, at least outside foreign affairs, was summarised by Ronald Reagan in his first inaugural address: 'government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.' Reagan could point to polling data that showed an upswing in anti-government animus since the 1960s. In 1964, for instance, the University of Michigan's National Election Study found that 76 percent of respondents believed government could be trusted 'to do what is right ... just about always [or] most of the time.' By 1980, that figure had slumped to an anaemic 25 percent.⁵³ However, these sentiments translated into meagre

⁵¹ Timothy Stanley, *Kennedy vs. Carter: The 1980 Battle for the Democratic Party's Soul* (Lawrence, KS, 2010).

⁵² Bradford D. Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York, 2011).

⁵³ A Gallup poll taken in 1981 showed that only 30 percent of Americans believed that less than 25 cents of every dollar collected in tax was wasted. Other polling firms show a similar collapse in public

political support for Reagan's anti-statist agenda. As will be shown in chapter 5, when the Reagan administration sought to retrench one of the largest entitlement programmes, Social Security, it ran headlong into a damaging and ultimately futile political controversy. The administration's mishandling of the Social Security issue stands as one of the most spectacular political blunders in recent political history.

In spite of declining faith in government in the abstract, Americans still expected some protection from what Franklin D. Roosevelt called the 'hazards and vicissitudes of life.'⁵⁴ Reagan's failure to fundamentally reduce the size of the government reflects continued and enduring support for much the New Deal welfare state among Americans. As R. Shep Melnick has noted, the welfare and regulatory state has become so embedded in American society because the American public's expectations of the government's responsibilities remain remarkably high. Melnick notes that while Americans might cheer denunciations of tyrannical big government, the only federal programs they seem to oppose 'are foreign aid (whose cost they substantially overestimate) and something called "welfare."⁵⁵ Popular expectations of government have remained high even as the average American has continued to lose faith in 'government.'

Explaining the growth of government in a nation with such a strong anti-statist tradition has been key to the revival of political history in recent years. Displaced

trust in the federal government. "Trust in Government," n.d., *Gallup.com*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>, last accessed June 29, 2014; "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2013," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, October 18, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/10/18/trust-in-government-interactive/>, last accessed June 29, 2013; "Government," *Gallup.com*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27286/government.aspx#3>, last accessed June 29, 2013.

⁵⁴ Samuel I. Rosenman (ed.), *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt: Vol. 4, The Court Disapproves*, 1935 (New York, 1938), 324.

⁵⁵ R. Shep Melnick, 'Governing More but Enjoying It Less' in Morton Keller and R. Shep Melnick (eds.), *Taking Stock: American Government in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1999), 281, 301.

methodically and professionally by the new social history, by the mid-1980s, wrote William Leuchtenburg, ‘the status of the political historian had sunk to somewhere between that of a faith healer and a chiropractor. Political historians were all right in their way, but you might not want to bring one home to meet the family.’⁵⁶ Taking a cue from Theda Skocpol, ‘bringing the state back in’ became a crucial part of the mission to revitalise the discipline.⁵⁷ Drawing on insights from colleagues in the political and social sciences, political historians developed new approaches for reconceptualising their field. One of the liveliest subfields, policy history, has elongated the study of state development and detached it from presidential administrations and crudely delineated reform cycles. The historical study of politics has expanded to encompass ‘the unwieldy world of policy experts, think tanks, lobbyists, academics, bureaucrats, staffers, and congressional committees’ most of whom had been previously ignored.⁵⁸

Policy historians have introduced greater complexity into the policy-making process, stressing the reliance on contingency and the presence of multiple political actors, each with varying interests. Gareth Davies, for instance, has studied federal education policy from the Great Society to the Reagan years and discovered that, far from waxing and waning with the political climate, the federal presence in education has steadily increased since the 1960s. Education reform has been protected, concludes Davies, by ‘powerful inertial forces in American political life,’ which ‘can

⁵⁶ William E. Leuchtenburg, “The Pertinence of Political History: Reflections on the Rise of the State in America,” *The Journal of American History*, 73:3 (Dec., 1986), 587. Some historians were critical of social history’s apparent disdain for the political. See, for example, Tony Judt, “A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians,” *History Workshop Journal*, 7:1 (Spring 1979), 66-94.

⁵⁷ Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,” in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In* (New York, 1985).

⁵⁸ Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer “The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History” in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, Julian E. Zelizer (eds.) *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (2003), 4. See also, Julian E. Zelizer, “Clio’s Lost Tribe: Public Policy History Since 1978,” *Journal of Policy History* 12 (2000), 369-94.

work to preserve the liberal legacies of periods of reform foment in less propitious times just as much as they constrain innovation.’⁵⁹ Jonathan Rauch has identified these inertial forces as a principal cause of a malady he has christened ‘demosclerosis,’ or ‘government’s progressive loss of the ability to adapt’. Once a program exists, he has written, a lobby is almost instantly born to defend it. As a result, asserts Rauch, experimentation becomes impossible; new layers of government may be added, but efforts to subtract them will invariably prove Pyrrhic, if they are successful at all. The most important rule in Washington, D.C. is ‘Never challenge someone’s sinecure.’⁶⁰

The Democratic Party by 1972

Where did this leave the Democratic Party – the political organisation with the greatest share of responsibility for expanding federal authority over the course of the twentieth century – by the 1970s? How was the ‘party of government’ to respond to a paradoxical political climate in which the ideology of government activism was abjured and mocked while the activist federal government enjoyed broad public support? The Democrats’ struggle to navigate these shoals is the subject of this thesis. However, before proceeding one caveat must be noted: despite the promiscuous use of the term so far (and indeed throughout this thesis) there is, in fact, no single ‘Democratic Party.’ The party has national institutions (the Democratic National Committee, for instance), but those institutions have limited control over the actions of other cogs within the party machine. There is a Democratic Party in the House of Representatives and another in the Senate; there are fifty state parties; there are the networks surrounding presidential, gubernatorial, congressional, and sundry other

⁵⁹ Davies, *See Government Grow*, 2.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Rauch, *Government’s End: Why Washington Stopped Working* (New York, 1999), 125-27.

state-level candidates; there are activist groups and labour unions; there are innumerable caucuses, coalitions, committees, and conferences that are, to a greater or lesser extent, Democrat-associated. When the party does not control the White House, it has no formally, or even informally, recognised leader. Even a Democratic President, nominally the party's leader, struggles to impose his will on its membership. As the entertainer Will Rogers once famously joked, 'I am not a member of an organized political party – I'm a Democrat.'⁶¹

It is in part for these reasons that the focus of this thesis is on the congressional Democratic Party (or parties). However, practicalities are not the only considerations that have informed this decision. It was in Congress that Democratic strength proved the most durable. Throughout the 1970s and '80s (indeed until 1994), the Democrats maintained control of the House of Representatives and, for all but six years, the Senate as well. By 1990, political scientist Norman Ornstein was describing 'the persistence of firm Democratic Party majorities in Congress' as one of 'the most enduring, puzzling, and contentious phenomena of modern American political life.'⁶² This stands in stark contrast to the substantial Republican congressional losses in the 1930s and 1960s, the two supposed apotheoses of twentieth-century liberal reform foment. Why did this tenacious refusal to collapse in the face of the conservative onslaught not help the Democratic cause?

The U.S. Congress has been chronically understudied by historians, save in reference to a presidential agenda. Indeed, presidencies remain at the forefront of twentieth century political history, despite the 'presidential synthesis' having been

⁶¹ Robert A. Rutland, *The Democrats: From Jefferson to Carter* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1979), 1.

⁶² Norman Ornstein, "The Permanent Democratic Congress," *Public Interest*, Summer 1990, 24.

dismissed as ‘a failure’ by the historian Thomas Cochran as early as 1948.⁶³ Dividing U.S. political history into discrete four- or eight-year chunks often has the effect of obscuring longer trends. For example, between 1955 and 1995, while the White House passed from Republican to Democrat and back again, the House of Representatives remained firmly in Democratic hands. In part, the comparative neglect of Congress can be explained, as Kenneth Kato and Elizabeth Rybicki have written, by ‘the inherent complex nature of a legislature. Focus and emphasis become constant problems in congressional history, forcing an endless series of choices. Should the emphasis be on events, organizations, or individuals? Should the focus be on the floor activities of Congress, the committee rooms, or the campaign trail?’⁶⁴ This dissertation does not claim to have satisfactorily resolved this conundrum, ranging as it does from floor debates to committee rooms to the campaign trail. Nonetheless, it does aspire to give the Congress a more prominent place in US political history, and thereby help in supplanting the ‘presidential synthesis.’

On the day of the 1972 election, the fact that Nixon’s coattails had been unable to deliver either house of Congress seems to have cast a pall over the president’s enjoyment of his stupendous victory. ‘That’s how [the press]’ll piss on the whole thing,’ the despondent conqueror spat to White House aide, Kevin Phillips.⁶⁵ Nixon’s disappointment would have been scant comfort to many Democrats, who by 1972 had seen their presidential candidate go down to an unprecedented 49-state defeat while their party was threatening to tear itself apart in a vicious civil war. The ‘liberal

⁶³ Thomas C. Cochran, “The ‘Presidential Synthesis’ in American History,” *The American Historical Review*, 53:4 (July 1948), 748. See also Julian E. Zelizer, “Beyond the Presidential Synthesis: Reordering Political Time” in Jean-Christophe Agnew, Roy Rosenzweig (eds.) *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (Malden, MA, 2006).

⁶⁴ Kenneth Kato, Elizabeth Rybicki, “Congressional History: A Literature Review,” *OAH Magazine of History*, 12:4 (Summer, 1998), 5.

⁶⁵ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 744.

consensus' had seemed secure in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson routed Barry Goldwater and pledged to build a 'Great Society' for the American people. Within four years, that same consensus was on the verge of collapse, buckling under the weight of its own hubris, an urban crisis, the Vietnam War, and assaults from critics on the left and right. On campuses across the nation, branches of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) along with other New Left groups denounced 'establishment liberals' for enacting reform agendas that propped up an iniquitous corporate-capitalist system. On the right, Alabama governor George Wallace, a once and future Democrat, embarked on an unexpectedly successful Independent presidential campaign channelling the anxieties of working class whites over social anarchy and denouncing 'briefcase-totin' bureaucrats, ivory-tower guideline writers, bearded anarchists, smart-aleck editorial writers and pointy-headed professors.'⁶⁶

Within the party, a reformist contingent was mounting an assault on the Democratic establishment under the banner of the 'New Politics.' The New Politics had been born in opposition to the Vietnam War and soon evolved into a broader critique of establishment liberalism. It coalesced first into a challenge to LBJ, through the insurgent campaigns of Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Though the New Politics faction was able to force Johnson into an early retirement, it could not prevent the party's establishment from bestowing the nomination on Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, without his having entered a single primary.⁶⁷ Denied their candidate, and bitterly resentful of the party machinery, the New Politicians resolved to mount a series of challenges to the credentials of other

⁶⁶ William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (Chicago, 2005), 389.

⁶⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *Eugene McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism* (New York, 2004), 163-224; William Chafe, *Never Stop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), 262-314.

delegations and to the rules governing delegate voting patterns. If they could not have their candidate, they could at least force a series of rule changes to ensure that the circumvention of their campaigns could never be repeated. Though Humphrey's campaign sought to facilitate most of these challenges, to appease the insurgents, it often ended settling for disagreeable compromises with the regulars that only antagonised both sides.⁶⁸

Most significantly, the New Politics delegates succeeded in pushing through a resolution to create the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, to reform the rules by which the Democratic Party selected its presidential nominees and convention delegates. Dubbed the McGovern-Fraser Commission after its two chairmen, this body set out to democratise the primary process and open the party's structures to previously marginalised groups – primarily women, nonwhites, and the young.⁶⁹ New Politics liberals were disdainful of the party's traditional power brokers, who in turn feared that such identity politics would pit the blocs of the party's coalition against each other. New Politics priorities, however, reflected the conviction that liberalism's future lay, as the journalist Jack Newfield defined it, in a coalition of 'campus, ghetto, and suburb.'⁷⁰ In 1972, they had an opportunity to test the viability of this strategy through the presidential candidacy of George McGovern, an unassuming senator from South Dakota and first chair of the Reform Commission, whose dazzling

⁶⁸See, for example, the dispute over the 'unit rule,' which required all members of a delegation to vote the same way, Carl Solberg, *Hubert Humphrey: A Biography* (New York and London, 1984), 358-9.

⁶⁹ A full analysis of the post-1968 reform of the party rules can be found in Byron E. Shafer, *Quiet Revolution: The Struggle for the Democratic Party and the Shaping of Post-Reform Politics* (New York, 1983).

⁷⁰ Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968* (New York, 1969), 376.

grassroots campaign would deftly exploit the new rules to leapfrog more recognized candidates into the nomination.⁷¹

Though the modest, decent South Dakota senator was an underdog throughout the campaign, many in McGovern's campaign hoped desperately that he might defy the gloomy psephology and pull off the biggest electoral upset since 1948.⁷² It was not to be. Post-election post-mortems seemed to confirm that the Democratic Party had disintegrated. For the first time in the party's history, a Republican presidential candidate swept the South, winning some states with over 70 percent of the vote. More ominously, in the North, 55 percent of blue-collar workers opted for Nixon over McGovern, an alarming increase on the 41 percent who had voted for the Republican in 1968. A majority of Catholics opted for the Republican over the Democrat, and among union families, Nixon achieved a 17 percentage point increase on his 1968 tally, which testified to the failure of union leadership to rally to McGovern. Though the party's black support remained solid, noted Timothy Thurber, 'other members of the New Deal coalition deserted their party like passengers on a sinking ship.'⁷³

The elections of 1968 and 1972 represented the Democratic Party coming to terms with the mixed legacies of the New Deal and Great Society. The New Politics liberals who were the backbone of the McGovern insurgency are frequently blamed for the 1972 implosion, and for crippling the Democratic Party thereafter. The familiar critique is that middle-class reformers and narrowly-focused minority activists pushed the Democratic Party away from the 'vital center' that had sustained the party's

⁷¹ For a detailed account of McGovern's innovative and accomplished 1972 primary campaign, see Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 41-71.

⁷² Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 115.

⁷³ Timothy N. Thurber, *The Politics Of Equality: Hubert H. Humphrey and the African-American Freedom Struggle* (New York, 1999), 230.

hegemony from FDR to LBJ. By privileging a divisive, rights-based identity politics, they fractured a liberal coalition that had once been held together by the class-based politics of economic self-interest. As conservative Democrat Ronald Radosh put it, the New Politics institutionalised ‘a new kind of liberalism ... that ignored and ridiculed the conservative desires of white ethnic working-class Americans who once voted Democratic as a matter of ritual.’⁷⁴ Jeffrey Bloodworth has condemned New Politics activists who eschewed the New Deal’s emphasis on economics for ‘moral piety’ and cultural concerns that alienated Middle America.⁷⁵ Perhaps the best known formulation has been offered by Thomas Frank in his bestselling polemic, *What’s The Matter With Kansas?* Frank argues that liberal elite preoccupations have enabled Republicans to hoodwink working-class cultural conservatives into supporting an agenda that runs counter to their economic interests.⁷⁶

Such an interpretation is founded upon two misconceptions, however: first, that the New Deal model was still tenable by the 1970s; secondly, that rights-conscious liberals were concerned only with cultural issues and not questions of economic status. Many scholars have noted that the ‘universalism’ of the New Deal was, in fact, no such thing. For example, when Social Security was established in 1935, it made no provision for the widows and dependents of beneficiaries, and excluded agricultural and domestic workers, both professions that were disproportionately occupied by African-Americans.⁷⁷ Democratic policymakers since the New Deal, writes Robert O.

⁷⁴ Ronald Radosh, *Divided They Fell: The Demise of the Democratic Party, 1964-1996* (New York, 1996), xi.

⁷⁵ Bloodworth, *Losing the Center*, 5-13.

⁷⁶ Frank calls this ‘a tragically inverted form of class consciousness.’ Thomas Frank, *What’s The Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York, 2004), 7, 16, 173-75, 244.

⁷⁷ Edward D. Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State: From Roosevelt to Reagan* (Baltimore, MD, 1991) 24-25. Historians who have explored the gendered New Deal include, Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York, 1994); and Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century*

Self, were driven by an ideology he defines as ‘breadwinner liberalism.’ Reforms were constructed around the ‘male head of the household contracting his labor in the marketplace.’ They sought to assist the ‘idealised nuclear family’ (with all its attendant racial and gender baggage) with the male head of the household as the conduit.⁷⁸

By the 1960s, this ideology was under assault by rights-conscious activist movements – most notably civil rights, feminist, and gay rights organisations – who would no longer tolerate being overlooked by elite policymakers. Reconstituting some Cold War ‘vital center’ would have required Democratic politicians to ignore the intense pressure they were under from previously marginalised groups. Moreover, many such groups fought not to destroy the New Deal order, but to be included within it. Demands for rights were inextricably bound up with issues of economic citizenship. Susan Hartmann, for example, has shown that many liberal feminists placed material security at the heart of their campaigning: ‘Rather than deviating from the New Deal policy order, liberal feminists sought to include women within its benefits and to expand its regulatory and social provision powers to accommodate women’s dual roles as workers and mothers.’⁷⁹ Similarly, the identity politics of many other activists came down to Harold Lasswell’s age-old definition of politics as fundamentally distributional: who gets what, when, how.⁸⁰ As this thesis will show, the economic

America (New York, 2001), 64-169. For more on the racial biases of New Deal policies, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2005), 25-52.

⁷⁸ Robert O. Self, *All In The Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York, 2012), 4, 10, 18-19.

⁷⁹ Susan M. Hartmann, “Liberal Feminism and the Shaping of the New Deal Order,” in Jonathan Bell, Timothy Stanley (eds.), *Making Sense of American Liberalism* (Urbana, IL, 2012), 203

⁸⁰ Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York, 1950)

liberalism of the New Deal and rights liberalism of the New Politics were intertwined in more complex ways than many historians have acknowledged.

Less than two years after the McGovern debacle, the Democratic ship was looking distinctly more buoyant. In the 1974 midterm elections, with the GOP bogged down by the Watergate scandal and economic downturn, the party garnered some of its best results since Johnson's glory days. The share of the electorate registered as Republicans slumped to 18 percent.⁸¹ If the Democrats had to undergo an identity crisis and civil war, it must have seemed fortuitous that at the same time the Republican Party was reeling, having spectacularly failed to capitalise on the opportunity they had been handed by the Nixon administration. That same year, Lanny Davis, a New Politics activist (and a future member of the Clinton administration) published *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, an explicit rejoinder to Kevin Phillips' book of five years earlier which sported a nearly identical title, *The Emerging Republican Majority*.⁸²

Within Congress, where Democratic majorities had swelled to remarkable proportions, the 1974 elections led directly to the climax of a long reform movement that both defenestrated conservative committee 'barons' and empowered individual representatives with new resources and outlets to pursue a variety of programmatic commitments. The first chapter of this thesis explores the aftermath of those elections. The class of 1974, soon dubbed the 'Watergate Babies,' constituted a generational shift within the institution, introducing a distinct breed of legislator – young, media-savvy, ambitious, impatient, and entrepreneurial – that Burdett Loomis would identify

⁸¹ Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, KY, 2005), 65.

⁸² Lanny J. Davis, *The Emerging Democratic Majority: Lessons and Legacies from the New Politics* (New York, 1974).

as ‘the new American politician’ in 1988.⁸³ They arrived into a Congress that was becoming increasingly determined to assert its own prerogatives against an over-mighty executive. The circumstances were therefore promising not only for a Democratic recovery, but a *congressionally-driven* Democratic recovery.

Yet such a recovery never manifested. Having decisively reformed Congress, the Democratic congressional majorities were faced with a difficult question: what happens next? In the years that followed, many Democrats grasped for an answer. The remainder of this thesis takes a case-study approach, exploring various Democratic legislators, from an assortment of backgrounds and regions, who sought to use the postreform Congress as a platform to renew the Democratic Party to confront the problems of the 1970s and early 1980s. Chapter two focuses on the House of Representatives in 1975-76, where the Watergate Babies, under the leadership of the redoubtable Phillip Burton, seemed to be on the verge of moulding the Caucus into an instrument of liberal reform, before balkanising into individual campaigns and committees. It asks why a reinvigorated Democratic House was not able to seize the legislative initiative from a weakened President Gerald Ford, even with a determined and skilful leader to marshal liberal forces. Chapter three turns to the Senate, where old guard Democrats such as Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy embraced near-social democratic solutions relying on national planning measures which would be frustrated by fears of inflation and an unsympathetic Carter White House. The legislative struggles that form the basis of this chapter show that historians have been misguided in drawing so sharp a distinction between traditional New Deal ‘economic liberalism’ and Sixties ‘rights liberalism.’ Chapter four adopts a regional rather than a

⁸³ Burdett Loomis, *The New American Politician: Ambition, Entrepreneurship, and the Changing Face of Political Life* (New York, 1988).

cameral perspective to explore Democratic legislators from the Sunbelt West. Hailing from the nation's most economically dynamic region, these 'Sunbelt Democrats' brought an optimistic determination to modernise their party and imbue it with some of their distinctive Western sensibilities. In Washington, they would discover that radical rethinkings of federal responsibilities are easier to advance when no-one's infrastructure project is threatened.

A similar fate would befall New York's Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the central figure in chapter five and a representative of the party's iconoclastic neoconservative wing, who would delight conservatives by denouncing the federal government as 'a pea-brained dinosaur' before emerging as a tenacious defender of Social Security against Reaganite advances. The sixth and final chapter finds the party struggling to come to terms with the 'Reagan Revolution' and with the frustrated hopes of a renewed Democratic majority. Though there was no shortage of Democrats eager to claim the mantle of intellectual leadership for themselves, it was accepted that the party was on the back foot, that it was the Republicans who had become, in Moynihan's words, the 'party of ideas.' Parallel to the party's difficult search for a new agenda for 'Reagan's America' was the story of congressional Democrats' considerable success – particularly in the House under the leadership of the unabashedly old-fashioned Speaker Tip O'Neill – in defending the welfare state from Republican assault.

Certain lacunae in this dissertation require explanation. Chapter three aside, the relative absence of race might strike some readers as unusual. This has not been a deliberate omission, but in the course of researching this thesis it became apparent that

issues of race held little appeal for Democrats at the national level. Scarred by the backlash politics of the late 1960s and early '70s, and by growing public hostility to affirmative action programmes, national Democrats had little incentive to address race as a distinct issue. This was compounded by the lack of pressure from a national civil rights movement (at least compared to that of the previous decade). As Stephen Tuck has shown, though civil rights activism was no less dynamic in the 1970s, it was more fragmented and more localised.⁸⁴ At the national level, Democrats preferred to couch their policy agendas in explicitly colour-blind terms.

The absence of any detailed treatment of the South likewise requires explanation. Economist and columnist Paul Krugman only overstates a case that many others have argued when he says that 'the great Southern flip ... accounts for *all* of the conservative triumph – and then some.'⁸⁵ Though Southern affairs are by no means ignored (New South governors and boll weevil Democrats both have their part to play), there is no dedicated chapter to the realignment of South from the Democratic to the Republican column. Here, the author pleads a crowded market. There are already many books dedicated to exploring this phenomenon and making a significant contribution to that literature is beyond the scope of this thesis.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Tuck shows post-Civil and Voting Rights Acts, grassroots campaigners continued to push back against white supremacy in a range of areas (welfare and penal reform, feminism, even subjects as superficially trivial as the siting of rubbish dumps). Stephen Tuck, "'We Are Taking Up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left Off': The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest during the 1970s,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43:4 (2008), 637-54.

⁸⁵ Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York, and London, 2007) 12, 181-2. See also, Tim S. R. Boyd, *Georgia Democrats, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Shaping of the New South* (Gainesville, FL, 2012).

⁸⁶ See, among others, Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2006); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2007); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2005); Essays by Douglas Smith, Kevin M. Kruse, and Nancy MacLean in Matthew D. Lassiter, Joseph Crespino (eds.), *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York, 2010); Byron E. Shafer, Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism: Class, Race, and Partisan Change in the Postwar South* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

This thesis seeks to demonstrate the inadequacies of political or policy ‘realignment’ as a framework for thinking about political conflict. The resilience, and even vitality, of the congressional Democratic Party, revealed in the upcoming chapters, is a rebuke to the idea that the years 1972-1984 witnessed a decisive victory for conservatism. This is only part of the story, however. The other uniting theme of these chapters is the remarkable facility of Congress for undermining iconoclasm and stalling policy experimentation. The explanation for this, as will be shown, is rooted partly in the institutional barriers to purposive action baked into the Congress, but also in the unexpected consequences of reforms that were intended to strengthen the legislature’s prerogatives and make it more responsive to parties. Enduring Democratic strength in Congress meant that Capitol Hill remained at the centre of the party’s efforts to craft a popular public philosophy that would help it reclaim its preeminent position in American politics. Ironically, therefore, the absence of a decisive political realignment may have been the biggest factor working against the Democrats. The fact that the party never had to adapt to a prolonged period of minority status meant that it was never moved to construct an alternative organisational infrastructure to advance its cause, unlike the post-New Deal Republican Party.

After 1984, a group of moderate and conservative Democrats sought to resolve that conundrum by founding the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). Kenneth Baer, who offered the first historical account of the rise of the DLC, uses his study of the organisation to provide ‘a framework for understanding how modern parties and

their public philosophies change.’⁸⁷ The Democratic Party between 1972 and 1984 would certainly have benefitted from semi-detached party organisations akin to the DLC, and its think tank the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), committed to thinking holistically about the party’s future and electoral prospects. As this thesis will show, the efforts to use intra-congressional bodies to retool the party’s public philosophy – such as the Democratic Study Group (chapter 2) which had once fulfilled that role in the 1950s – would be immobilised by the increasingly particularist nature of the legislature. As Baer writes, a ‘group of reformers first needs an institutional base, preferably outside the aegis of the national party.’⁸⁸ However, Baer’s obvious sympathy for the DLC leads him into a fall-and-rise narrative, in which New Politics liberals drag the party away from the American people while sensible moderates struggle to pull it back. Though Baer offers a thoughtful amendment to realignment theory, this thesis argues that ‘realignment’ is simply not a useful organising principle for scholars of post-1968 U.S. politics. It is misleading to consider 1972-1984 as the beginning of a long Democratic sojourn in the political wilderness.⁸⁹

This thesis is bookended by two of the worst defeats at the presidential level that the Democratic Party has ever suffered: George McGovern’s 49-state loss to Richard Nixon in 1972, and Walter Mondale’s near-identical defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1984. Both are routinely cited as indicating the American people’s decisive rejection of liberalism and the Democratic Party’s enervation after the 1960s. The years in between – of bumper Democratic congressional majorities, the presidency of

⁸⁷ Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence, KS, 2000), 3.

⁸⁸ Baer’s second chapter deals with the unsuccessful efforts of the New Democrats to reshape the party from within the House Democratic Caucus, a story which also forms a part of the last chapter of this thesis. Ibid, 36-63, 266.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 5-6.

Jimmy Carter, and unified control of two branches of government – are dismissed as a post-Watergate anomaly. They are, to borrow a financier’s phrase, a political ‘dead cat bounce.’⁹⁰ In 1980, Massachusetts Senator Paul Tsongas declared liberalism to be ‘at a crossroads. It will either evolve to meet the issues of the 1980s or it will be reduced to an interesting topic for PhD-writing historians.’⁹¹ Fundamentally, this is a story of failure. In important respects, congressional Democrats were unable to evolve to meet the issues of the era – at least not quickly enough to forestall the Republican political ascent. However, while this has proved an interesting topic for this D.Phil.-writing historian, that is no indicator of liberalism’s total irrelevance in these years. Democrats were not without their own successes, even if they were largely a matter of retrenchment.

⁹⁰ The saying ‘even a dead cat will bounce if it falls from a great height’ has reportedly been in use on Wall Street since the mid-1980s; the phrase is used for stock prices that experience a small uptick after a significant depreciation. William Safire, “Bringing the ‘Dead Cat’ Back to Life,” *New York Times* (NYT), December 2, 1991.

⁹¹ David S. Broder, “Politically Passé?” *Washington Post* (WP), June 25, 1980; “Bunker Liberalism: Find Realistic Solutions For Tomorrow’s Problems,” WP, November 9, 1980.

1. What New Republican Majority? The 1974 Elections

As the 1972 campaign faded into memory, politicians and commentators set about trying to determine what issues had been settled. The American people had rejected McGovern, but the fact that they had returned solid Democratic majorities to both houses of Congress suggested that they were hardly making a decisive break with liberalism. The Democrats increased their Senate majority by two, from 55 to 57. The GOP fared better in the House, but the 12 additional seats they won fell well short of the 39 needed to take control, and so the Democratic advantage remained substantial at 244 to 191. Indeed, given the relative moderation of Nixon's first term – the passage of unprecedented environmental legislation, the steady desegregation of the Southern school system, the imposition of wage/price controls and general adherence to Keynesian economics, a guaranteed income plan and a proposed national health insurance reform – observers could be forgiven for thinking that business was carrying on as usual despite the upheaval of the Sixties. The utopianism of the Great Society had been tempered by the hard-headed Republican pragmatist in the White House, but the fundamental trajectory had not been altered.

By the time the Democratic Party convened for its first ever mid-term convention in Kansas City, Missouri, in December 1974, the national picture looked very different. Watergate had driven Nixon from office and Democrats were celebrating their best congressional election results in a decade. The nominal purpose of the convention was to approve a new charter for the party and formally resolve those issues of representation and access that had not been settled by the McGovern-Fraser Commission or the 1972 national convention. More important, however, was the need for an ostentatious public display of unity that would erase memories of

1972. Presiding over all was the chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), Robert Strauss. An exuberant and colourful Texas pol, Strauss revelled in the political bear pit in a way that few of his contemporaries could match. Being DNC chairman – a position to which he had ascended in December 1972 – Strauss reflected, was ‘a little like makin’ love to a gorilla. You don’t quit when you’re tired – you quit when the gorilla’s tired.’⁹² He was less concerned with resolving bitter ideological disputes than with presenting a unified front to the public. Amidst Watergate and economic downturn, if the bickering Democratic factions could be persuaded to call a truce in their civil war, then the Republican implosion might be counted upon to return them to political dominance.

This was Strauss’s strategy and the 1974 midterm convention was his first big public test. In his first year as chairman, Strauss embarked on a national unity tour with the intention, according to his biographer, of shaking hands ‘with every Democrat from Hawaii to Connecticut.’ Speaking to various groups around the country, Strauss would echo the same refrain: ‘I remain committed to the proposition that our conservatives are not bigots, our business community is not evil, that our young are not irresponsible, that our minorities are not selfish, our liberals are not foolish, and that our Democratic Party is not leaderless or without purpose.’⁹³ He brought these conciliatory instincts to Kansas City. ‘Strauss moved like a rug merchant in the Casbah,’ one journalist reported, ‘cutting his deals with divided factions; placating, cajoling, begging, promising.’ Strauss delighted in engineering public rapprochements between seemingly natural adversaries. At the mini-convention, he had the liberal

⁹² Myra McPherson, “Mr. Chairman: The Texas Touch of Bob Strauss,” *WP*, January 5, 1975; Paul Wieck, “Chairman Strauss’ Hot Seat,” *The New Republic (TNR)*, April 20, 1974.

⁹³ Kathryn J. McGarr, *The Whole Damn Deal: Robert Strauss and the Art of Politics* (New York, 2011), 136, 141.

black congresswoman and civil rights champion Barbara Jordan of Texas deliver a fulsome introduction for former Ku Klux Klan member Robert Byrd. He even persuaded Jesse Jackson and Richard Daley to publicly shake hands.⁹⁴ For journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, however, the unity on display in Kansas was ‘a gossamer façade’ concocted by Strauss. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the hostility and mutual suspicion exhibited by the proto-presidential campaigns. The convention, wrote *The New Republic*’s correspondent, was ‘a dry run for 1976, with candidates rushing from caucus to caucus, plying delegates with liquor and fighting for floor passes for staff.’⁹⁵ Left-wing delegates remained implacably opposed to the candidacy of Washington senator Henry Jackson, and his fellow standard-bearer for the party’s anti-McGovernite wing, Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, and threatened to bolt the party if he were to close in on the nomination. This unease was all the more pronounced because the party’s liberals had yet to coalesce behind a candidate.⁹⁶

However, these were all problems for the future. The seeming collapse of the Republican Party was a powerful inducement to cooperation, or at least armistice. The jubilation of the Democratic convention in Kansas was a marked contrast with the despondency of conservatives who gathered at the Mayflower Hotel in downtown Washington, D.C. a few months later for the second annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). There the delegates were consumed by chatter about the possibility of a third party, an authentically conservative challenge to the supposedly impure Republicans. The chairman of the American Conservative Union, M. Stanton Evans, made an explicit call from the podium for work to begin on a new national

⁹⁴ Myra McPherson, “Mr. Chairman.”

⁹⁵ Paul R. Wieck, “Everything Hunky-dory in Kansas City,” *TNR*, December 21, 1974.

⁹⁶ Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, “Toward a Democratic Collision,” *WP*, December 9, 1974; McPherson, “Mr. Chairman”.

conservative party. ‘The people at this conference,’ declared Ronald Docksai, the head of Young Americans for Freedom, ‘no longer reflexively see the Republican Party as home.’⁹⁷ In early 1975, the publisher of *National Review*, William Rusher, began agitating for the creation of a new party, to be called the Independence Party, which should aim ‘to do to the Republican Party what the latter did to the Whigs: namely, replace it *in toto*.’⁹⁸

The volatility of the political climate in the mid-1970s is often underestimated by historians of conservatism. The knowledge that in six short years the ‘New Right’ wave, with Ronald Reagan surfing atop it, would come surging into Washington can blind the scholar to the role of contingency in the ‘conservative revolution.’ In 1974, the Democratic Party may have been in crisis, but it was by no means alone. The GOP was stumbling punch drunk from the blows inflicted by Watergate and economic downturn. Those who had hoped that the Nixon presidency would consolidate a ‘new Republican majority’ could draw very little comfort from the 1974 election. Moreover, the travails of both parties took place amidst a much larger crisis of authority that was engulfing the U.S. in the 1970s. From Watergate, to the Pentagon Papers, to the humiliations meted out by OPEC, to the Vietnam War grinding to its conclusion, it seemed Americans were confronted everywhere they turned by reminders of their nation’s decline, of its failure to live up to its highest ideals.

Watergate may have been, to Nixon’s press officer Ron Ziegler, ‘a third-rate burglary,’ but by 1974 it had become a catch-all term for an array of official improprieties. Not only the transgressions of the Nixon administration – the break-in

⁹⁷ R.W. Apple, Jr., “Conservative Parley Taken Up With Talk of 3d Party,” *NYT*, February 15, 1975.

⁹⁸ William A. Rusher, “A New Party: Eventually, Why Not Now?” *National Review*, May 23, 1975.

at DNC headquarters and its subsequent cover-up, the use of the FBI, CIA and IRS to intimidate political opponents, the wiretapping and harassment of those opponents, the misdirection of federal funds for personal purposes, the payoffs to Vice President Agnew, and sundry other ‘dirty tricks’ – but almost any Washington-based malfeasance could be folded into ‘Watergate,’ confirmation to an increasingly sceptical American people of the rottenness of their political class and institutions. In 1958, Pew Research polls reported that 73 percent of Americans trusted the government ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time.’ By November 1974, that figure was at 36 percent. A few exceptional situations aside, the figure has rarely been above 45 percent since then.⁹⁹

In this context, one response to contemporary disenchantment was to disengage from the politics. A March 1974 issue of *National Review* noted that the number of independent voters had climbed to an all-time high of 34 percent in a recent Gallup poll, overtaking self-declared Republicans on 24 percent. Democrats seemed more robust on 42 percent, but even that was down from 53 percent two years earlier.¹⁰⁰ In the 1974 congressional elections, only 38 percent of those eligible voted, the worst turnout for midterm elections since 1942. Two years earlier, in 1972, 55 percent of eligible voters had showed up at the polls.¹⁰¹ A psephologist looking past the enormous Democratic majorities might have seen the beginnings of dealignment, as voter attitudes towards the parties and the political process increasingly soured.

⁹⁹ “Public Trust in Government, 1958-2013,” *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/01/31/trust-in-government-interactive/>, last accessed September 3, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ “Political Independents,” *National Review*, March 1, 1974.

¹⁰¹ “Politics As Spectator Sport,” *TNR*, January 18, 1975.

Alongside popular disillusionment, the political class also had to contend with an increasingly aggressive media. Larry Sabato has characterised this as a transition from ‘lapdog’ to ‘watchdog journalism.’¹⁰² Though this is perhaps unfair to the pre-Watergate Washington press corps, journalists in the 1970s were undoubtedly far more confrontational and cynical about the political class than they had been in decades. Any politician who complained about this increased scrutiny, said *Washington Post* correspondent Chalmers Roberts, was exhibiting ‘simply the reflex of a man who has felt the muckraker’s barb for the first time.’¹⁰³ As Texas congressman Jim Wright put it, in a characteristically earthy simile, ‘Our reputations are up there like dartboards, where everybody can spit tobacco juice at them.’¹⁰⁴

For congressional Democrats, these trends were deeply worrying. Liberal policymakers in the 1960s had been able to tap ‘a wellspring of popular faith in government that flowed from Americans’ personal experience of federal relief during the Depression and federal leadership in guiding the nation to victory in two world wars.’¹⁰⁵ Without that wellspring, Democratic liberals faced a bleak future. The answer, for many, was to be found in a reassertion of congressional prerogatives, which had been steadily bleeding away to the executive since the beginning of the twentieth century. This process had begun well before Watergate came to dominate discourse in political Washington, as a Republican White House faced off against a Democratic Congress, each looking to assert that theirs was the superior mandate. At

¹⁰² In Sabato’s account, ‘watchdog journalism’ degenerates into ‘junkyard dog journalism’ after 1974, which he defines as ‘harsh, aggressive, and intrusive’ reporting in which all aspects of a politician’s private life becomes ‘fair game for scrutiny.’ Larry Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics* (New York and Toronto, 1991), 25-6.

¹⁰³ Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (New York, 2005), 221.

¹⁰⁴ Sanford J. Ungar, “Bleak House: Frustrations on Capitol Hill,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1977.

¹⁰⁵ G. Calvin Mackenzie, Robert Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s* (New York, 2008), 7.

the beginning of his second term, with a thumping personal victory that had done little for his party's congressional wing, Nixon began signalling his intention to pursue more aggressively conservative policies. His new Cabinet, noted the *New York Times*, signalled 'a White House retreat from progressive social action,' as did the president's description of many welfare programmes as 'all fat, too bloated' and his attacks on 'permissiveness' in civil liberties and criminal justice.¹⁰⁶ The conciliatory and pragmatic Nixon of 1968-72, it seemed, was being jettisoned in favour of a more hard-line approach.

Democratic fears of a more aggressively conservative Nixon second term meshed with growing disquiet over the president's aggrandisement of executive power, encroaching in particular on Congress's role in determining budgetary priorities and upon its war powers. Domestically, congressional Democrats were especially incensed by Nixon's habit of 'impounding' congressionally appropriated funds for federal programs.¹⁰⁷ Senator Sam Ervin, Jr., the 'simple country lawyer' who would find fame as the chair of the congressional committee investigating Watergate, denounced impoundment as 'contemptuous of the role of Congress in our tripartite system.'¹⁰⁸ By March, the notoriously temperate Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield, was warning that the issue of executive privilege 'may be approaching a crisis stage.'¹⁰⁹ In 1973, historian and presidential advisor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published *The Imperial Presidency*, which aimed to put some theoretical meat on the

¹⁰⁶ Editorial, "Mr. Nixon's Game Plan," *NYT*, December 18, 1972.

¹⁰⁷ As Gareth Davies has pointed out, the impoundment of appropriated funds was not a strategy that had begun with Nixon. Both Kennedy and Johnson had done it, for instance, and more frequently. Though partisanship explains some of the congressional opprobrium, what set Nixon's use of the power apart was the considerably larger sums he impounded and the fact that he used it to effectively defund entire programmes, rather than simply shrinking them. Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence, KS, 2007), 98.

¹⁰⁸ "An Introspective and Angry Congress Begins Its Work," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report (CQWR)*, January 6, 1973.

¹⁰⁹ James M. Naughton, "Nixon-Congress Battle," *NYT*, March 14, 1973.

bones of these complaints. Though the trend of the twentieth century had been towards ‘presidential primacy,’ said Schlesinger, this had lurched in recent times towards ‘presidential supremacy,’ which produced ‘a conception of presidential power so spacious and peremptory as to imply a radical transformation of the traditional polity.’ Under President Nixon, Schlesinger contended, the presidency had so outstripped its constitutional limits as to be a practically revolutionary entity. A Kennedy partisan, Schlesinger acknowledged his own role in nurturing ‘the presidential mystique.’ Indeed, Schlesinger favoured vigorous presidential leadership to overcome the potential for inaction encouraged by a constitution that ‘institutionalized conflict’ and promoted inertia.¹¹⁰

As James Sundquist has written, the enhanced powers of the modern presidency were not ‘wrested by self-seeking chief executives from a struggling but ultimately yielding Congress,’ but rather by ‘mutual consent, for the shifts were made pursuant to law, and the Congress wrote and passed the laws.’¹¹¹ Now Congress was being confronted with the consequences of that dereliction. Nixon neatly encapsulated his expansive definition of executive power in 1977, when he regaled the British interviewer David Frost with his theory that, ‘when the president does it ... That means it is not illegal.’¹¹² Yet even before evidence of law-breaking by the Nixon administration came to light, Democratic congressional majorities found themselves facing a president who impounded funds that they had appropriated and who claimed the right to unilaterally conduct a war in Indochina. The stirrings of the Watergate investigation only emboldened an already bullish Congress looking to reclaim some of those prerogatives that had been ceded to the president. Against that backdrop,

¹¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston, 1989), viii, ix, viii.

¹¹¹ James L. Sundquist, *The Decline and Resurgence of Congress* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 155.

¹¹² David Frost, Bob Zelnick, *Frost/Nixon* (London, 2007), 262.

Congress and the White House spent much of 1973-74 snarling at each other across the capital.

In late 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Act, over a presidential veto, in order to reclaim some of its foreign policy prerogatives. The act required the president to notify Congress within forty-eight hours of the deployment of American forces to any action, and then to seek further congressional authorisation within sixty days for that military action to continue. In July 1974, Congress followed up with the Congressional Budget Control and Impoundment Act, which clarified the process by which Congress formulated a budget and established the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to assist in doing so.¹¹³ Against a weakening Nixon, Congress was mounting a challenge to the president's role as the prime mover in the legislative process. For the pre-1977 Democratic Party, this outcome was fairly agreeable. Let the Republicans control the White House; the Democrats would control the political agenda. And they seemed well placed, institutionally at least, to attempt this. In August 1974, the month Nixon resigned, Gallup recorded its highest approval ratings for Congress in months. Forty-seven percent of respondents approved of the way Congress was 'handling its job.'¹¹⁴ This was hardly an overwhelming endorsement, but, considered within a broader crisis of authority afflicting the U.S., it was certainly encouraging.

¹¹³ Despite this, from the outset the House and Senate Budget Committees were suspicious of encroachments by the CBO on their turf. When Dr. Alice Rivlin became the CBO's first director, Dr. William Capron, of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, advised her to move slowly in building the staff and observe a 'flat rule' not to accept any staff member solely on House or Senate recommendation. Such internal conflicts undermined Congress's effectiveness against the executive. Letter, Dr. William Capron to Alice Rivlin, February 25, 1975, papers of Alice M. Rivlin, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress (LOC), Box 2.

¹¹⁴ Gallup Poll (AIPO), Aug, 1974. Retrieved Aug-19-2013 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:4032/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

In the November 1974 elections, the Democrats would register some of their greatest successes since the heyday of Lyndon Johnson. As this chapter will show, the party made gains at all sub-presidential levels of government and in all regions of the country. Moreover, the class of '74 would represent one of the most significant generational shifts in Congress's history. The new legislators – young, media-savvy, ambitious, impatient, and with their own distinct sensibility – would enter an institution that was becoming increasingly jealous of its own prerogatives and determined to assert itself as the first branch of government once more. They would immediately join forces with a movement that had been agitating to reform the Congress for decades, effectively guaranteeing it final victory by 1975. After its humiliation in 1972, the Democratic Party appeared to be staging a remarkable comeback. Yet by 1975, even with this sudden arrival of Democratic talent into Congress, the party would find itself struggling with how to reformulate liberalism to grapple with the challenges of the 1970s and adapt to the post-New Deal order. Before the glow of victory had faded, the Democrats were struggling with the inherent limitations of Congress as an arena for refashioning a party's public philosophy, and with the new barriers that their reforms had put in the way of that task.

'Watergate Babies'

Before November's earthquake, there were tremors. In January 1974, six senior House Republicans, who would likely have occupied leadership positions or committee chairs in the event of a GOP takeover, announced their plans to retire.¹¹⁵ Their pessimism was borne out as the year unfolded. In all there were seven special elections

¹¹⁵ David S. Broder, "6 Senior House Republicans to Retire," *WP*, Jan 1, 1974.

in 1974. All were in traditionally Republican seats, and in all but one the Democratic candidate emerged triumphant.¹¹⁶ In February, Richard F. Vander Veen, a corporate lawyer and former chair of the Michigan Fifth District Democratic Party, won the special election to fill the House seat vacated by Vice President Gerald Ford, beating the latter's handpicked successor. Vander Veen had sought to make the special election a referendum on Richard Nixon's continuation in office, and upon his victory declared that the president had 'lost the moral right to govern.' Vander Veen was the first Democrat elected to Congress from Michigan's 5th congressional district since 1912. Senator Robert Griffin, Republican from Michigan and Minority Whip, admitted that it was 'something of a disaster' for the Michigan GOP. Senator Mark Hatfield, liberal Republican of Oregon, echoed Griffin: 'The signal is pretty clear that Watergate has infected the entire scene. No Republican can be considered safe this year.'¹¹⁷ In another special election, John Burton, the younger brother of the House panjandrum Phillip Burton, was elected in California's 6th district. The Republican National Committee (RNC) had invested next to nothing in the seat and Burton's opponent gloomily told the *New York Times* that he would be 'lucky' to get 25 percent of the vote.¹¹⁸

For a brief moment, the arrival of President Gerald Ford seemed to offer the Republicans a hope of navigating their way out of the morass. To the dismay of many Democrats, Ford enjoyed considerable public goodwill when he entered the White

¹¹⁶ Christopher Lydon, "Democrat Favored to Win House Seat in San Francisco Area in Special Election Tuesday," *NYT*, Jun 3, 1974.

¹¹⁷ Vander Veen was re-elected to a full term in November, 1974, but lost his seat to Republican Harold S. Sawyer in 1976. "Michigan Democrat Wins In Voting for Ford's Seat," *NYT*, February 19, 1974; Mary Russell, "VanderVeen Calls Victory a Signal For Nixon Ouster," *WP*, February 22, 1974; "Republicans Fear of Watergate," *Chicago Defender*, February 26, 1974.

¹¹⁸ Christopher Lydon, "Democrat Favored to Win House Seat in San Francisco Area in Special Election Tuesday," *NYT*, Jun 3, 1974.

House. He was affable, forthright, and popular on Capitol Hill. Indeed it was for these very qualities, combined with the expectation of an uncontroversial congressional confirmation, that he was tapped by Nixon to succeed the disgraced Vice President Agnew. Unlike Nixon and Agnew, Ford was, at least initially, a much less effective fundraising tool for Democrats. Satirists might have portrayed the new president as slow-witted and clumsy, but at least that meant he was unlikely to be fomenting criminal conspiracies in the Oval Office. Ford squandered much of the goodwill he had banked when, almost one month to the day after Nixon's resignation, the president issued a 'full, free and absolute pardon' to his predecessor for 'all offenses ... which he ... has committed or may have committed or taken part in' during his presidency.¹¹⁹ However necessary Ford believed the pardon was to bring a definitive end to the 'long national nightmare,' it proved wildly unpopular. Senator Abraham Ribicoff, Democrat of Connecticut, accused Ford of casting 'great doubt on the principle that all persons are equal before the law.'¹²⁰ Many Americans were suspicious of the pardon's breadth and accusations of a quid pro quo soon began to circulate. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* spoke for many when it asked, 'Is Ford Protecting Nixon?' The *New York Times* chastised Ford for an 'act of monumental folly' that had 'wiped out the era of good feelings that he himself had inaugurated.'¹²¹

In October, Ford appeared before the House Judiciary Committee to answer questions on the pardon, the first chief executive to do so since Lincoln. A fortnight earlier, Congress had reduced the \$850,000 allocated to manage Nixon's transition

¹¹⁹ "Text of President's Pardon of Nixon," WP, September 9, 1974.

¹²⁰ Letter, Abraham Ribicoff to constituents, September 20, 1974, papers of Abraham Ribicoff, LOC, Box 394.

¹²¹ Richard Dudman, "Is Ford Protecting Nixon," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 17, 1974, offprint in the papers of John F. Osborne, LOC, Box 42; Editorial, "Mr. Ford's Folly," NYT, September 15, 1974.

expenses to \$200,000.¹²² ‘No President could ever agree to allow the counsel to the President to go down and testify before a committee,’ Nixon had declared bullishly at a press conference in March 1973.¹²³ Now a president had gone *personally* to Congress, effectively as a supplicant. Ford appeared for two hours, and he was received with warm praise and civility. The only really harsh line of questioning came from New York Democrat Elizabeth Holtzmann who made reference to the nation’s ‘dark suspicions’ that President Ford had cut some sort of ‘deal’ with Nixon.¹²⁴ Ultimately, the significance of the pardon would recede – by 1976 it was apparently no barrier to Ford nearly repelling the ostentatiously righteous Jimmy Carter in a presidential election – but in late 1974 public outrage at being cheated of catharsis was still fresh. At the beginning of October, the pollster Louis Harris told the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee that ‘anyone who tries to get out politically this fall and defend that pardon in any part of this country, North or South, is almost literally going to have his head handed to him.’¹²⁵ With Ford’s apparent political suicide attempt, and the nation’s continued economic travails, one journalist noted that the ‘free wheeling [*sic*] euphoria of the Democrats’ was rising once more.¹²⁶ For the first time in years, it was good to be a Democrat again.

‘The Republicans are mounting major threats to continued Democratic control of Alaska and Maine,’ wrote David Broder in early October. ‘But in between those two states, there is a very big country that looks Democratic in election ’74.’¹²⁷ On the

¹²² “In The People’s House,” *NYT*, October 6, 1974.

¹²³ Naughton, “Nixon-Congress Battle.”

¹²⁴ Haynes Johnson, “Ford’s Historic Visit: Questions Remain,” *WP*, October 18, 1974; James M. Naughton, “History Played Out On Familiar Stage,” *NYT*, October 18, 1974.

¹²⁵ Julian E. Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform and Its Consequences, 1948-2000* (Cambridge, MA, and New York, 2004), 158.

¹²⁶ Marquis Childs, “Euphoria Among the Democrats,” *WP*, October 8, 1974.

¹²⁷ David S. Broder, “Election ’74: The Year Of the Democrats,” *WP*, October 6, 1974.

campaign trail, President Ford warned of a possible ‘legislative dictatorship’ by the Democratic Party.¹²⁸ His warnings went unheeded. In November, the Democratic Party recorded its biggest wins since 1964. The party made a net gain of 49 seats in the House of Representatives and four in the Senate. With 291 seats to the GOP’s 144, the Democrats now commanded a technically veto-proof majority in the House. The last time Democrats had done this well in the House, LBJ had been in the White House and Gerald Ford had been the frustrated minority leader. Reforms to the cloture rules at the beginning of 1975 would likewise make their 60-seat Senate majority at least theoretically capable of overruling a presidential veto. Democratic success was also reflected at the sub-congressional level. For instance, the Democrats gained four governorships, taking their total to 36 against the Republicans’ 13.¹²⁹

More than the swelling majorities, the sheer size of the incoming Democratic class drew the attention of the press. In January 1975, 75 new Democratic representatives and eight new Democratic senators took their seats. It was the largest class since 1948. Fifteen of the 75 were from districts that had not elected a Democratic representative since 1945. Three of those were the first Democrats to represent their district in the twentieth century and a further three were the first Democrats elected in their district since its creation. The press were fascinated with the Class of ’74. Countless articles and profiles exploring their cultural and demographic similarities appeared. ‘The stories solidified the perception of a cohesive generation,’ writes Julian Zelizer, ‘as opposed to a disparate group who were brought in because of local concerns.’¹³⁰ They swiftly acquired a nickname: the ‘Watergate

¹²⁸ Christopher Lydon, “The Awful Arithmetic,” *NYT*, April 21, 1974, 213.

¹²⁹ “1974 Elections: A Major Sweep for the Democrats,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (CQA), Vol. 30, 1974, 839-40.

¹³⁰ Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 163.

Babies.’ In a 1984 retrospective, *Congressional Quarterly* acknowledged that while the ‘Watergate Babies’ had received more attention than they actually deserved, there were ‘certain features,’ beyond their size, that explain why they proved so irresistible to the media.¹³¹

Most noteworthy was their youth. The 94th Congress was the youngest since the Second World War. Eighty-seven members (or one-fifth) of the House were under 40 when the Congress convened. Six new House members were under 30, including Thomas Downey of New York who, at twenty-five years old, only just cleared the age requirement for incoming representatives. Downey, a former Suffolk County legislator, had graduated from law school and won a seat in Congress in the same year. For the first time since World War II, the average age of the House dropped below 50. A similar, though less dramatic, shift occurred in the notoriously venerable Senate. Though the average age remained largely static, the upper chamber welcomed 11 new members, eight of whom were in their 30s or 40s. The youngest member, thirty-four-year-old Patrick Leahy, the first Democrat elected to the Senate from Vermont, was young enough to be the grandson of his predecessor, 82-year-old George D. Aiken. Leahy, the youngest senator in Vermont’s history, had been less than a year old when Aiken first arrived on Capitol Hill.¹³²

As arresting as the new members’ youth was their relative political inexperience. Of the 75 new House members, almost half – 31 in total – had never held elective office before. Many had not followed the conventional career path for new congresspersons: serving in state legislatures or similar institutions, guided by

¹³¹ Diane Granat, “Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies?” *CQWR*, March 3, 1984.

¹³² “New Congress Is Youngest Since World War II,” *CQA*, Vol. 30, 1974, 852-3.

state party machines. There were some extreme manifestations of this. Bob Edgar, for instance, a United Methodist minister from suburban Philadelphia and United Protestant Chaplain at Drexel University, had been politicised by Nixon's dismissal of special prosecutor Archibald Cox in October, 1973. Until that point, he had never even attended a political meeting. 'I literally looked up the word Democrat in the phone book,' Edgar recalled. Having located the state party, he ran successfully as its candidate in Pennsylvania's 7th congressional district, becoming the first Democrat to represent the seat in 36 years and only the second that century.¹³³ In Indiana's 2nd congressional district, Republican incumbent Earl F. Landgrebe – a three-term congressman who had declared that he would stand by Nixon 'if he and I have to be taken out of this building and shot' – fell to Democrat Floyd J. Fithian, a history professor at Purdue University.¹³⁴

The class reflected the nation's evolving demographics in other ways. All fifteen black incumbents in the House were re-elected, and they increased their caucus by one.¹³⁵ Though the Senate would remain all-male until 1979, the 94th Congress would see a record 18 women members, fourteen of whom were Democrats (though this still gave half the population control of some 4.1 percent of the seats available in the House). All female House incumbents who sought re-election, twelve in total, retained their seats. In the aftermath, Frances Parenthold, chairwoman of the National Women's Political Caucus, dubbed 1974 'the year of the breakthrough for women.'

¹³³ Edgar would be re-elected five times, retiring in 1987 to mount an unsuccessful Senate run as the longest-serving Democrat from the district. Granat, "Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies?"

¹³⁴ Fithian had been Landgrebe's opponent in 1972, losing in the general election by almost 10 points. In 1974, he won 61 percent to Landgrebe's 38 percent. Fithian was the first Democrat to represent the district since 1935. James M. Naughton, "Senate and House Margins Are Substantially Enlarged," *NYT*, November 6, 1974.

¹³⁵ The Senate continued to boast only one African-American member, liberal Republican Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, who would lose his seat to Democrat Paul Tsongas in 1978. No other black American would serve in the upper chamber until 1993.

Minority ethnic groups also made advancements. California, for instance, elected its first Japanese American representative, Norman Y. Mineta, the former mayor of San Jose who had spent several years in a U.S. internment camp during the Second World War.¹³⁶

Though the class took its name from the Watergate scandal, the issues upon which many of its members had campaigned centred on the flagging economy as much as the corrupt political system. Here Democrats were on safe territory. In 1974, the intellectual foundations of post-war liberalism had yet to feel the full devastating impact of stagflation. Since the New Deal, Democrats had won elections as the guarantors of the average American's economic stability. This shared commitment had held together a diverse and fractious political coalition through similarly turbulent times. It had apparently been eclipsed by cultural issues towards the end of the 1960s, but now oil shocks and recession brought it decisively back to the top of voter consciousness. The resurgence of economic issues, noted David Broder, had 'brought signs of increased Democratic cohesion.'¹³⁷ This gave the Democrats particular appeal in the rising suburbs where newly prosperous workers felt economic insecurity most sharply. Twenty-one of the 49 Democratic gains in the House had been in districts with majority suburban populations.¹³⁸ '[T]he new blue-collar suburbs,' observed *Congressional Quarterly*, 'are made up largely of middle-income families with newly acquired houses and jobs vulnerable to an economic slowdown. These voters are often

¹³⁶ While the Senate remained an all-male body, the 94th Congress saw a record 18 women serving in the House. "New Congress Is Youngest Since World War II," *CQA*.

¹³⁷ Broder, "Election '74: The Year Of the Democrats."

¹³⁸ Lily Geismer, in her recent study of politically conscious residents of Boston's Route 128 suburbs, has shown how crucial highly-educated white-collar suburbanites in high tech jobs have become to the Democratic Party since the 1970s, with their priorities and their prejudices reflected in the national party's agenda. Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2015).

unionized, working in such places as automobile plants around Detroit or aerospace plants near Los Angeles. They are often registered Democrats or from a Democratic background.’¹³⁹ It seemed that these voters, who had been driven into Nixon’s arms in 1972, were coming home.

Biographical analysis of the Watergate Babies reveals not only the differences with previous generations of Democratic congresspersons, but also some noteworthy similarities across the entire class, regardless of region. Unsurprisingly, Democrats did best in their traditional stomping grounds. Of the 75 new Democrats elected to the House of Representatives, 44 were from the Northeast or Midwest. In Massachusetts’ 5th congressional district a 33-year-old lawyer and city councillor, Paul E. Tsongas, defeated first-term Republican Paul W. Cronin. The son of an immigrant Greek dry cleaner, Tsongas would emerge, largely by design, as one of leading intellectual lights of the class of ’74.¹⁴⁰ He was a graduate of Dartmouth, the Yale School of Law, and Harvard’s Kennedy School. Like his fellow Watergate Baby, Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, Tsongas was a former Peace Corps volunteer who had spent time in both Ethiopia and the West Indies before embarking on his political career. Returning to the United States, Tsongas was elected to the Lowell City Council in 1969, moving on to become a county commissioner, before jumping into the congressional race in 1974. Tsongas campaigned as a representative of the wisdom to be found in ‘the homes of the American people,’ and sought to portray Cronin as a tool of corporate elites who was ‘insensitive and unmoved by the abuses of the [Nixon] Administration.’¹⁴¹ The 5th district was solidly Democratic in November 1974 (44 percent of registered voters

¹³⁹ “Suburbs and the South: Democratic Gold Mines,” *CQA*, Vol. 30, 1974, 854.

¹⁴⁰ Tsongas for Senate Leaflet, 1978, Paul E. Tsongas (PET) Congressional Collection, Center for Lowell History (CLH), University of Massachusetts, Lowell, Box 51B.

¹⁴¹ “Tsongas Runs for Congress in the 5th District,” *Boston Globe*, May 23, 1974.

according to the *Boston Globe*, compared to 18 percent Republican and 38 percent independent), but had not elected a Democratic representative since 1895.¹⁴² Nonetheless, Tsongas won handily, defeating Cronin by a staggering 21 points.

One of the biggest celebrity members of the class of '74 was former astronaut John H. Glenn, elected to fill one of Ohio's Senate seats having never previously held elective office. Once a combat pilot in the Marine Corps, Glenn had joined NASA in 1959, where he became the first American to orbit the earth and the fifth human being in space.¹⁴³ Glenn's career, wrote Evans and Novak, was 'unique in the post-Watergate politics of mass voter disillusionment: A national hero, unencumbered with the ideological baggage that has fragmented the Democratic Party, who seems eminently acceptable to blue-collar hard-hats and left-of-center intellectuals.' A GOP leader in the state complained that Glenn was drawing in Republican voters 'without half trying.'¹⁴⁴ Glenn had made morality a key issue of his primary campaign against real estate millionaire Howard Metzenbaum, attacking his opponent for his use of tax shelters. A bumper sticker, disavowed by the Glenn campaign, was circulated purporting to advertise, 'Nixon/Metzenbaum – Tax Consultants.' The genius of Glenn's campaign, exulted one of his aides after that primary victory, was 'to put together a good political operation and have him come off as a nonpolitician.'¹⁴⁵ Before he had even won his Senate seat, reported a *Washington Post* correspondent, 'fanciful crystal ball gazers [were] predicting a 1976 ticket of John Glenn for president, [and New York gubernatorial candidate] Hugh Carey for vice president.' If

¹⁴² "A Tight Tsongas-Cronin Race," *Boston Globe*, November 4, 1974.

¹⁴³ Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Senators on the Campaign Trail: The Politics of Representation* (Norman, OK, 1996), 22-31.

¹⁴⁴ Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, "John Glenn's Political Orbit," *WP*, September 14, 1974.

¹⁴⁵ William E. Farrell, "Victory By Glenn Linked to Image," *NYT*, May 9, 1974; Jules Witcover, "Metzenbaum-Glenn Race Under Nixon Shadow," *WP*, May 5, 1974.

that ticket sounded ‘like science fiction,’ well ‘anything is possible in the age of television.’¹⁴⁶

Though the Democratic Party enjoyed its strongest gains in the Northeast and Midwest, it could boast of advances in all of the nation’s sections. Though only 16 of the new Democrats in the House were from the South, the region was much better represented in the upper chamber, with four of the eight new senators hailing from below the Mason-Dixon Line. ‘Democrats Put Halt to Republican Momentum in South,’ declared the *Washington Post*.¹⁴⁷ Democrats had captured two Southern Senate seats from Republican incumbents and made a net gain of five House seats in the region. If the monolithic Southern-fried Democracy was dead, this did not necessarily mean that the region would march *en bloc* into the Republican column. After a protracted and difficult labour, perhaps a new Democratic South was being born. Moreover, many of the Democrats winning races across the South looked remarkably like their colleagues in other regions. For the Catholic conservative-turned-liberal commentator Garry Wills, the defining feature of the 1974 ‘mini-convention’ had been the fear of a Dixiecrat secession and ‘the Northern liberal’s hope that a Southerner will come along who talks just like the *New York Times*, a man to lead his benighted neighbors into civilization.’¹⁴⁸ The New South Democrats offered the prospect that the Southern bolt could be averted.

Four years earlier, during the 1970 midterms, several Southern governors had apparently broken the race-baiting Dixiecrat mould, showing that Democrats who ran as trustworthy populists, eschewed racial demagoguery, and finessed the issue of

¹⁴⁶ Marquis Childs, “Euphoria Among the Democrats,” *WP*, October 8, 1974.

¹⁴⁷ Mary Russell, “Democrats Put Halt to Republican Momentum in South,” *WP*, November 6, 1974.

¹⁴⁸ Garry Wills, *Lead Time: A Journalist’s Education* (Boston and New York, 2004), 193.

desegregation could put together winning coalitions.¹⁴⁹ In part, these moderates were motivated by political calculation. The Voting Rights Act meant that blacks were now an electoral bloc that Southern whites could no longer exclude or ignore. However, most also embraced the moral case for civil rights and the need for the old Confederacy to transcend its racial history. One such moderate populist was Georgia's governor, Jimmy Carter. *Time* magazine had put Carter on its cover in 1971, feting the Georgian as one of a new generation of Southern moderates. 'Soft voiced, assured, looking eerily like John Kennedy from certain angles,' it gushed, Carter was 'as contradictory as Georgia itself, but determined to resolve some of its paradoxes.' He and like-minded Dixie colleagues, the story continued, were 'assembling a caucus to be reckoned with at convention time.'¹⁵⁰ By 1974, nurturing his own presidential ambitions, Carter had successfully lobbied to become the Democratic National Committee's campaign chairman for the upcoming congressional and gubernatorial campaigns.¹⁵¹

Others pursued the congressional route. In Arkansas, Dale Bumpers, one of Jimmy Carter's gubernatorial contemporaries, won the Democratic Senate primary contest against J. William Fulbright, a hero to many liberals for his principled stance against the Vietnam War. Fulbright, however, had served in the Senate since 1945 and had a less than spotless record on civil rights, both of which had been factors in Bumpers' decision to mount a challenge. Fulbright had been a signatory to the Southern Manifesto in 1956, which pledged staunch resistance to desegregation

¹⁴⁹ Sanders reaches this conclusion after profiling four Southern gubernatorial candidates – Dale Bumpers of Arkansas, Reubin Askew of Florida, John West of South Carolina, and Jimmy Carter of Georgia. Randy Sanders, *Mighty Peculiar Elections: The New South Gubernatorial Campaigns of 1970 and the Changing Politics of Race* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2007).

¹⁵⁰ Cover Headline, "Dixie Whistles A Different Tune," "The Nation: A New Day A'Coming In The South," *Time*, May 31, 1971.

¹⁵¹ Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency* (New York, 1977), 117-8.

efforts. Anxious to demonstrate his integrity, Bumpers promised that he would accept out-of-state contributions only from family members and former classmates. When falsely accused by a Fulbright supporter of mishandling his official expense accounts, Bumpers had the records spread out on the dining room table of the governor's mansion and invited any interested constituents to inspect them for as long as they pleased.¹⁵² Bumpers was not an isolated case. Florida's newly elected senator was Richard Stone, a folksy Miami resident who mixed impromptu performances of the harmonica and the spoons on the campaign trail with denunciations of the 'oil ransom' and the 'high interest ransom' as the primary causes of inflation. Stone also boasted of having removed the door to his office while serving as Florida's Secretary of State, a post to which he was elected in 1970, in a flamboyant demonstration of his commitment to open government.¹⁵³

Populist reforming Democrats enjoyed similar triumphs out West. For those who hailed the emergence of a new species of liberal, few states returned more encouraging results than Colorado. In a remarkable sweep, the Democratic Party took every top state-wide office, with the exception of Secretary of State. The party won that year's contested Senate seat and shifted the balance of the state's delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives in their favour, three Democrats to two Republicans. The pugnacious environmentalist Richard Lamm, who had walked the state during the campaign to protest the prohibitively high cost of running for office, was elected as governor. Majorities in the state House of Representatives and on the Board of Regents were flipped, and the Republican margin in the state senate was reduced. *The New Republic's* Paul Wieck reported that an influx of retired couples and activists into

¹⁵² Dale Bumpers, *The Best Lawyer in a One-Lawyer Town: A Memoir* (New York, 2003), 235, 238.

See also, Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (New York, 1995), 654-71.

¹⁵³ Russell, "Democrats Put Halt to Republican Momentum in South."

the state had given these candidates ample raw material, but what mattered more was the tone and issue agendas of the campaigns they ran. In common with Watergate Babies nationwide, all had run aggressively populist campaigns, and many placed environmentalism at the core of their pitches. Many also came from non-traditional political backgrounds. The new state treasurer, Sam Brown, for example, had been a youth organiser for McCarthy in 1968 and a coordinator in the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam movement. ‘There’s a new breed of Democrats here,’ wrote Wieck in a pair of sentences that could have stood as a commentary on the election as a whole, ‘issue-minded, young, aggressive, [and] adept at organization. They’re going to be heard from.’¹⁵⁴

The newest senator from Colorado, Gary Hart, was in many respects an archetypal Watergate Baby. The serious-minded son of devout Nazarene parents, young Hart had intended to make a career in the clergy before the presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy turned him towards earthly concerns. He transferred from Yale Divinity to Law School, and set himself up in law practice in Denver after graduation. In 1971 he was plucked by George McGovern to manage the senator’s longshot candidacy for the White House. Subsequently Hart was often at pains to point out (and in particular during his first bid for office) that his role in the McGovern campaign was concerned more with strategy than issue formulation.¹⁵⁵ Hart was a key figure in assembling the diverse grassroots coalition – which he dubbed ‘the McGovern army’ – that would win the presidential nomination for the senator.¹⁵⁶ A firm belief in mass civic participation as a restorative tonic for the beleaguered

¹⁵⁴ Paul R. Wieck, “How They Won In Colorado,” *TNR*, November 23, 1974, 8.

¹⁵⁵ Letter, Gary Hart to Mr. J. J. Hofmeister, July 9, 1974, papers of Gary W. Hart (GH), University of Colorado, Boulder (UCB), Box 53.

¹⁵⁶ Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment*, 44, 154; David S. Broder, “Hart Sheds ’72 Image,” *WP*, September 8, 1974.

republic would define Hart's politics. After McGovern's defeat, Hart wrote, in ten weeks, a memoir of the campaign, *Right from the Start*, in which he conducted his own autopsy. The problem, he reflected, was that 'the fount of specific proposals and programs was running dry ... by 1972, American liberalism was near bankruptcy.' The Democratic Party was in need of new thinking and new leadership.¹⁵⁷

Alongside this nebulous call for new leaders, Hart made trust in government and public officials central to his 1974 campaign. 'We must make the restoration of public confidence in government the highest order of public business.' He pledged an 'open and honest' campaign, promising to fully disclose all donations from and financial dealings with contributors and not to accept money from 'special interests.' He charged his opponent, Peter Dominick, with supporting 'an untouchable and undemocratic political aristocracy.'¹⁵⁸ Castigating political elites was just one component of a broader populism that undergirded Hart's campaign. He took aim at private conglomerates that he accused of taking advantage of the hard-pressed American consumer. 'Why Do The Big Oil Companies Want To Stop Gary Hart?' asked one campaign flier.¹⁵⁹ In this, Hart was echoing the class-based politics of the New Deal. However, Hart's populism was also directed at calcified federal bureaucracies as frequently as at commercial monopolies. One stump speech, titled 'Now It's Our Turn,' ended with a rousing call to arms:

The time is here for all of us to rise up and take our country back from the power-hungry corrupters, the fat cats and special interest boys, the inter-locked institutional interests, the comfortable, complacent, backward-looking, out-

¹⁵⁷ Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 286; *Right from the Start* (1973) quoted in Gary Hart, *The Thunder and the Sunshine: Four Seasons in a Burnished Life* (Golden, CO, 2010), 22.

¹⁵⁸ Letter, 'Dear Friend', Hart for Senate 1974, November 12, 1973, GH papers UCB, Box 53.

¹⁵⁹ Campaign flier, Hart for Senate 1974, undated, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

dated old men, many of whom inhabit the United States Senate like a private club. Now it's our turn!¹⁶⁰

Hart used his campaign to critique orthodox Democratic liberalism and to offer his own revisions. He was articulating more systematically a sentiment shared in some form by many of the Watergate Babies. This puzzled those who had not expected such apostasy from McGovern's onetime campaign manager. Several commentators noted Hart's efforts to distance himself from his former boss, much to the consternation of his opponent. 'Expecting to run against a junior George McGovern whom he could label a big spender,' noted a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, 'the conservative Senator [Dominick] is nonplused [sic] as Mr. Hart joins him in denouncing big government.'¹⁶¹ Hart's stump speech bore the title, 'The End of the New Deal.' The approach to national problems since the end of the Second World War, the candidate told audiences across the state, had been defined by the intellectual parameters of the New Deal. There had been 'little creative thinking,' merely a continual recourse to bureaucratic solutions to a diverse array of social and economic problems. 'The pragmatism of the New Deal has become doctrine – if there is a problem, create an agency and throw money at the problem.' The Democratic Party had to rediscover, argued Hart, the experimental pragmatism that had defined Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.¹⁶²

With this infusion of Democratic talent, *Congressional Quarterly* confidently predicted that the 94th Congress would be noticeably more liberal than its

¹⁶⁰ Speech, GH, "Now It's Our Turn," delivered at Costigan-Cervi Democratic Club, April 9, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

¹⁶¹ Norman C. Miller, "The Transformation of Gary Hart," *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), October 28, 1974. See also, Broder, "Hart Sheds '72 Image."

¹⁶² GH, "The End of the New Deal," Remarks at the University of Denver, September 25, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 54.

predecessor.¹⁶³ In some senses this was certainly true. The Watergate Babies were profoundly influenced by counterculture-inflected Sixties liberalism. They were, in the main, sensitive to minority rights, champions of the consumer, environmentally conscious, and dovish on foreign policy. In other instances, they explicitly rejected the liberal doctrines of their forebears. Days before the election, David Broder reported a remark of Gary Hart's that Broder felt neatly summarised the incoming class, but which would land Hart in hot water before he had even arrived in Washington: 'We're not a bunch of little Hubert Humphreys.'¹⁶⁴ In December, Hart wrote to Humphrey to apologise for clumsiness of the language used, explaining that he had merely been trying to affirm that the incoming legislators would be a diverse and independent-minded cohort.¹⁶⁵ This was disingenuous, though, as was revealed by another letter to a supporter who had been troubled by his apparent disrespect. 'I believe the New Deal philosophy of a dominant federal government did much good for tens of millions of people. But that does not mean we ... must worship it forever.'¹⁶⁶ In this, Hart exemplified a shared belief among many younger Democrats that New Deal/Great Society liberalism was defunct and that a replacement was needed. In this, at least, they were entirely in agreement with the mobilising ranks of New Right activist groups.

Many felt the disappointments of the Johnson years keenly. The Great Society, as Eric Alterman and Kevin Mattson have put it, 'articulated a fundamental faith of 1960s liberalism: America had entered a new, potentially perpetual cycle of economic abundance, and that abundance could be deployed to ensure the creation of a fairer and

¹⁶³ "1974 Elections: A Major Sweep for the Democrats," *CQA*, Vol. 30, 1974, 839.

¹⁶⁴ David S. Broder, "Big Majority of Big Spenders," *WP*, November 3, 1974.

¹⁶⁵ Letter, Hart to Hubert Humphrey, December 5, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

¹⁶⁶ Letter, Hart to William McCormick Blair, January 3, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

more equal society without any segment of society being asked to endure significant sacrifice.¹⁶⁷ Lighting the White House Christmas tree in 1964, President Johnson had declared, with characteristic modesty, ‘These are the most hopeful times since Christ was born in Bethlehem.’¹⁶⁸ By November 1974 – with the nation having endured war, urban rioting, once unthinkable economic turbulence, political scandal, and the resignation of a president – this assessment must have seemed like a perverse joke. The Watergate Babies, recalled Congressman James Florio, had been ‘burned by Great Society programs ... [W]e were naïve in believing that the creation of these programs was going to enable us to address these problems. We had to be smarter and less naïve about what government can do.’¹⁶⁹ If the besetting sin of liberalism since the Great Society was what Daniel Patrick Moynihan dubbed ‘the malaise of overpromising,’ the next generation of liberals would consciously move in the opposite direction, restoring trust in government by the managing of expectations.¹⁷⁰ The advocates of hard-headed, pragmatic liberalism – a liberalism of limits better suited to a chastened nation – had arrived in Washington.

This wariness of federal remedies to the nation’s ills drew the ire of many old guard Democrats. One such was Senator Henry Jackson, who within two years would be grounding his own presidential campaign in New Deal statism. ‘I don’t buy the idea that because something is big it’s bad,’ he told audiences at campaign events. Jackson enjoyed claiming that he was the only candidate in the 1976 race willing to call himself a ‘liberal.’¹⁷¹ By contrast, many of the Watergate Babies eschewed

¹⁶⁷ Eric Alterman, Kevin Mattson, *The Cause: The Fight For American Liberalism from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (New York, 2012), 186.

¹⁶⁸ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ William Schneider, “JFK’s Children: The Class of ’74,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1989.

¹⁷⁰ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Coping: Essays on the Practice of Government* (New York, 1973), 27.

¹⁷¹ Robert G. Kaufman, *Henry M. Jackson: A Life in Politics* (Seattle and London, 2000), 313, 329.

conventional political labels. Those that they did, reluctantly, adopt stressed pragmatism above ideological commitments. Paul Tsongas preferred to characterise his politics as ‘compassionate realism’ while Hart opted for the rather more convoluted ‘Prairie Populist Jeffersonian democracy.’¹⁷² Most sought to define themselves in relation to the supposed doctrinaire liberals whose naïve schemes had damaged the credo. As Tsongas would later recall, ‘A lot of us were instinctively more reformers than liberals. Watergate was tailor-made for that instinct.’¹⁷³

The ‘Watergate Babies’ brought with them a distinctive sensibility. To a large extent this was grounded in culture. Unlike older Democrats, the defining experiences of their childhoods had not been depression and world war but rather prosperity and Cold War. It was Tim Wirth, newly elected representative from Colorado, perhaps better than any other Watergate Baby, who encapsulated the generational and cultural shift that the class of ’74 represented: ‘JFK was our first vote, and we went through Vietnam. The others came of age during World War II and revered Ike. We are accustomed to television ... We’re part of the supermarket age, the quick fix, and the fast shot.’¹⁷⁴ Most had come to maturity during the political and social upheavals of the 1960s. Steven Gillon is hardly alone among historians in understanding the upheavals of the 1960s as something akin to a civil war which ‘produced a generation that was scarred by the memory of the struggle, deeply divided over its meaning, and determined to win a long-term fight for the hearts and minds of the American people.’¹⁷⁵ The rise of assorted civil rights movements, the disappointments of the

¹⁷² Randall Rothenberg, *The Neoliberals: Creating the New American Politics* (New York, 1984), 22.

¹⁷³ Schneider, “JFK’s Children.”

¹⁷⁴ Ungar, “Bleak House.”

¹⁷⁵ Steven M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry that Defined a Generation* (New York, 2008), 9. See also, Maurice Isserman, Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of*

Great Society, and the traumas of Vietnam defined their political identities. Their anti-authority, reformist instincts made the Watergate Babies natural allies of the congressional reform movement. However, they would struggle to create a unifying political agenda to take advantage of those reforms in the aftermath. Many would not see any pressing need to even try.

More Democratic – In Both Senses: Toppling the Committee Barons

From the first, the Watergate Babies exhibited a remarkable cohesion. Before they had even been sworn in, the class had hired their own office near the Capitol and begun taking on staff.¹⁷⁶ They were also much more aggressive than previous generations. Sam Rayburn, the convivial Texas pol who had served as Speaker from 1947-49 and 1953-55, would famously advise new members, ‘To get along, go along.’¹⁷⁷ However, quietly working their way up congressional hierarchies held little appeal for the new legislators. Such an uncontroversial career path cut across the class’s revolutionary spirit. As California representative George Miller put it, ‘We came here to take the Bastille.’¹⁷⁸ Many new members shared the outlook of Michigan’s Bob Carr, who professed no real passion for a life in professional politics. ‘If I was a one-term member of Congress, that was fine with me’ he recalled. ‘I was young and brash and was not looking for a long-term political career. I wanted to get something done.’¹⁷⁹

the 1960s (3rd ed., New York and Oxford, 2008) and Mark H. Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York, 2006).

¹⁷⁶ Granat, “Whatever Happened To The Watergate Babies?”

¹⁷⁷ Mackenzie, Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 38.

¹⁷⁸ Schneider, “JFK’s Children.”

¹⁷⁹ M. Robert Carr, interview with the author, via Skype, March 14, 2013.

The first thing to get done was the reform of Congress itself. This was by no means a new issue. Since the New Deal, liberals had been frustrated by the ability of Republicans and conservative Southerners to exploit the legislature's ossified institutional architecture to derail their legislative agendas. In 1965, Richard Bolling, the liberal congressman from Missouri, was moved to publish *House Out Of Order*, a diatribe against the legislative inertia that resulted from the essentially unrepresentative nature of Congress. As far as Bolling was concerned, reform was too great a burden to be borne by 'a few enlightened and energetic Members.' Decades of venality and parochialism had corrupted the legislative apparatus beyond the point of internal rejuvenation, and only a tide of public outrage could cleanse the Congress.¹⁸⁰ By 1974, it seemed that tide was about to hit D.C. According to New York congressman Richard Ottinger, 'the Watergate fallout [meant that] everyone – whether liberal or conservative – felt they were here to do congressional reform.'¹⁸¹ Bruce Wolpe, a staffer for Congressman Henry Waxman, recalled that some new members were so keen to demonstrate their commitment to open government that, like Richard Stone, they had their office doors removed.¹⁸² Reforming Congress to make it more responsive to its membership, and therefore to the will of the American people, was the first step towards the re-emergence of Congress as the prime mover in the constitutional system. 'I think the last election means the buck stops here,' Carl Albert told the new members upon being re-elected as Speaker in the organisational caucus of the 94th Congress.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Richard Bolling, *House Out Of Order* (New York, 1965), 221.

¹⁸¹ Granat, "Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies?"

¹⁸² Bruce Wolpe, interview with the author, Washington, D.C., January 20, 2012.

¹⁸³ Minutes of the Democratic Caucus for the Organization of the 94th Congress, December 2, 1974, papers of the House Democratic Caucus (HDC), LOC, Box 4.

Liberal reformers nursed a particular grievance against the seniority system, the convention that said that committee chairmanships would be apportioned based solely on length of service. Because the South was effectively a one-party state for much of the twentieth century, conservative Dixiecrats exercised an effective veto power on the national party's ambitions. 'When Will the Old Men of Congress Be Forced to Quit?' the acerbic columnist and investigative journalist Jack Anderson had asked in 1970. Cataloguing some of the more egregious examples of Congressional infirmity, Anderson wrote that the seniority system guaranteed that Congress was 'dominated by old men who march in slow cadence behind the nation.'¹⁸⁴ In forcing these old men out, Democratic reformers could count on burgeoning single issue pressure groups for welcome support and unwelcome scrutiny. For instance, Common Cause, the liberal watchdog organisation that had been founded in 1970, conducted an 'Open Up The System' campaign in advance of November's elections, sending questionnaires to incumbent and prospective representatives in order to gauge their position on a variety of reform issues, and then publicising the results. When the dust cleared, it had secured pledges of support from a majority of congresspersons on nearly all of its major issues. 'Pat yourselves on the back CC members,' began its last Washington Report of the year.¹⁸⁵

The reformers' first target was the House Ways and Means Committee, which exercised control over committee assignments, and was presided over by the fearsome Arkansan, Wilbur D. Mills. Mills, once the 'steering wheel of the House' and the 'second most powerful man in America,' had helmed the Ways and Means Committee

¹⁸⁴ Jack Anderson, "When Will the Old Men of Congress Be Forced to Quit?" *Parade*, April 26, 1970, offprint in the papers of Patsy T. Mink, LOC, Box 679.

¹⁸⁵ Common Cause, Report from Washington, Vol. 5, No. 2, December 1974-January 1975, in the Mink papers, LOC, Box 680.

since 1958. In 1968, Mills had all but singlehandedly forced Lyndon Johnson to accept deep cuts to key Great Society programmes in exchange for a tax surcharge to finance the Vietnam War.¹⁸⁶ Understandably, Democratic reformers and their extra-congressional allies approached the confrontation with some disquiet. They were fortunate that Mills obliged them with a spectacular personal implosion that proved as fitting a symbol of the end of the committee era as any that the 1970s produced. On October 9, 1974, U.S. Park Police pulled over a limousine driving without lights. Inside they discovered an intoxicated Mills, bleeding from his nose and cheek. Also in the car was Annabelle Battistella, a stripper who went by the stage name 'Fanne Foxe, the Argentine Firecracker.' Startled by the official presence, Battistella, who was sporting facial bruises, leapt from the car and had to be fished out of the Tidal Basin, having botched her escape. A television cameraman who had chanced to hear the police reports arrived on the scene in time to record the congressman's arrest. Mills was humiliated and political Washington was stunned.¹⁸⁷ Yet Mills clung on. A few weeks later, he was narrowly re-elected. Had the scandal ended there, he could well have survived.

However, on the evening of November 30, days before the organisational caucus was scheduled to meet, at a Boston club where Foxe was performing, journalists were astonished when Mills staggered onto the stage. He followed this up with an impromptu press conference in Foxe's dressing room, where he called her 'my little ole Argentine hillbilly' and pledged to help her to a career in the movies.¹⁸⁸ When the Caucus did meet on December 2, Ways and Means was stripped of its power

¹⁸⁶ Peter C. Stuart, "Mills's Authority Wanes In Congress," *Christian Science Monitor (CSM)*, December 4, 1974.

¹⁸⁷ Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 159.

¹⁸⁸ John Jacobs, *A Rage for Justice: The Passion and Politics of Phillip Burton* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), 262.

to make committee appointments. The Caucus voted to relocate its Committee on Committees to the Steering and Policy Committee, which consisted of the Speaker, the House Majority Leader, the Caucus Chair, twelve regional representatives, and nine additional members chosen by the Speaker. This committee would make recommendations which the caucus would then ratify or modify. Ways and Means was also enlarged from 25 to 37 members.¹⁸⁹ Soon afterwards, Carl Albert announced that Mills would lose his chairmanship in the 94th Congress.¹⁹⁰ A Herblock cartoon produced in response showed a figure marked 'Reform Democrats' tugging a royal robe from Mills' shoulders while the chairman protested, 'Wait! Let Go – Not That Kind Of Strip Routine.'¹⁹¹

Other scalps would soon follow. Having denuded Mills, the class of '74 invited committee chairmen expecting reappointment to be quizzed in closed sessions. Some did not react prudently to the supposed disrespect of being summoned before their juniors. Edward Hébert of Louisiana, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, began one answer with, 'Okay, boys and girls. Let me tell you what it's like around here.'¹⁹² When the Caucus reconvened in January, he was removed, along with William Poage and Wright Patman of Texas, chairmen of the House Agriculture Committee and the House Banking and Currency Committee respectively.¹⁹³ A furious Hébert appeared on NBC's *The Today Show* to fume, 'Common Cause is running Congress. Who elected them?'¹⁹⁴ However, not every chairman that Common Cause

¹⁸⁹ Caucus Minutes, December 2, 1974, HDC papers, LOC, Box 4.

¹⁹⁰ Mary Russell, "Mills Will Lose Chairmanship, Albert Confirms," *WP*, December 5, 1974.

¹⁹¹ Herblock cartoon, 1974, papers of Phillip Burton (PB), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (UCalB), Carton 12.

¹⁹² Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 268.

¹⁹³ Hearings before the Caucus on the Organization of the 94th Congress, January 16, 1975, HDC papers, LOC, Box 5.

¹⁹⁴ Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 171.

had marked out for retirement was removed. One who survived the cull was Ohio's Wayne Hays, the 63-year-old chair of the House Administration Committee, and a particular target of good government organisations' anger. Hays had reportedly impressed the younger members during his interview, but he also enjoyed support of Phillip Burton, the newly elected caucus chairman. During the election Hays had been chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and Burton had been head of the Democratic Study Group, and both had directed significant funds to Democratic challengers. Those challengers now discovered that the chits were being cashed. Furthermore, many were grateful to Hays for, as one unnamed representative put it, 'talk[ing] back to Common Cause and Ralph Nader, who screech every time we get a new allowance and call our recesses "vacations."' He takes a lot of heat for us, and we appreciate it.¹⁹⁵

More reforms followed the deposition of the committee barons. In one particularly potent symbolic gesture, for example, the Democratic Caucus dissolved the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was largely defunct by this point in any case.¹⁹⁶ Alongside the dethroning of the chairmen, the caucus's most significant reform was to vote to increase the resources and staff members available to individual congresspersons. This combined with a rapid proliferation of subcommittees as reformers sought to decentralise power and democratise the institution. By 1984, for example, 30 of the 37 remaining 'Watergate Babies' in the House of Representatives were subcommittee chairs.¹⁹⁷ Mo Udall, the liberal Democrat from Arizona, once joked that if he ever failed to recognise a fellow

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹⁶ Hearings before the Caucus on the Organisation of the 94th Congress, January 13, 1975, HDC papers, LOC, Box 5.

¹⁹⁷ Granat, "Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies?"

congressman, he would greet him as ‘Mr. Chairman.’¹⁹⁸ By 1988, political scientist Burdett Loomis was writing that this expansion of resources and legislative positions had ‘produced a new style of policy-based activism that emphasizes both a serious consideration of issues and a fresh approach to the traditional rules of the game.’¹⁹⁹ These reforms, Loomis continued, had facilitated the emergence of ‘policy entrepreneurs,’ legislators who were able to develop substantial issue portfolios using Congress’s decentralised structures and surfeit of additional resources, as well as a media context that favoured such publicity-hungry types. Not everyone was so complimentary, however. By 1977, Illinois representative John Anderson would complain that, ‘The House less and less addresses itself to the great issues of policy. Everybody’s got a little subcommittee, and everything is terribly fragmented. We’ve become a body of tinkers.’²⁰⁰

Similar changes were underway in the Senate. One day after the House’s chairman cull, the upper chamber voted to select committee heads by secret ballot, after nomination by the Steering Committee. If a minimum of 20 percent of Democrats opposed a particular nominee, another secret ballot would be taken. Moreover, individual senators were given the right to hire three staffers to report to them on the work of their committees. Previously, such clerical assistance had been within the gift of the chairman. As in the House, the net effect was to augment the average senator as a legislative entrepreneur. The tendency of senators to adopt ‘an activist style based on a full exploitation of senatorial prerogatives’ had been increasingly commonplace

¹⁹⁸ Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr., William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O’Neill* (New York, 1987), 283-84.

¹⁹⁹ Loomis, *The New American Politician*, 4.

²⁰⁰ Ungar, “Bleak House.”

since the 1960s and these reforms only accelerated that process.²⁰¹ However, the principal target of liberal resentment in the Senate was the filibuster. In 1950, Senator Humphrey had even gone so far as to condemn the filibuster as ‘an evil.’²⁰² Democrats had warmed to it since discovering its utility as a tool to frustrate Nixon’s legislative ambitions, but it remained a liberal bugaboo. In 1975, it was the subject of one of the fiercest confrontations of the legislative session. Humphrey’s protégé and fellow Minnesotan, Walter Mondale, along with Kansas Republican James B. Pearson proposed a reform that would allow a simple majority to invoke cloture. After a vicious tussle between reformers and institutionalists, the Senate embraced a resolution reducing the number of senators required to break a filibuster from two-thirds to three-fifths.²⁰³ By happy coincidence, this meant that the Democrats were now in possession of a filibuster proof majority in the Senate, a fact that caused no little trepidation to the Ford administration.

What Next?

What motivated this brash reformism? Certainly the distrust of government that the Watergate Babies brought with them was a major factor. For all their scepticism, they remained Democrats, essentially committed to the ameliorative capacities of the federal government. Deeply attuned to their constituents’ disillusionment, they understood the necessity of some form of institutional purification. ‘People are increasingly alienated by the distance and bigness of the giant institutions in our

²⁰¹ Barbara Sinclair, “Congressional Reform,” in Julian E. Zelizer (ed.), *The American Congress: The Building of Democracy* (Boston, 2004), 630.

²⁰² Hubert H. Humphrey, “Notes and Memoranda: The Senate On Trial,” *American Political Science Review*, 44:3 (September, 1950), 651.

²⁰³ Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 173-5. See also, Walter F. Mondale, Dave Hage, *The Good Fight: A Life in Liberal Politics* (New York, 2010), 111-134

society,’ wrote Tim Wirth in one of his first constituent newsletters. ‘I hope that some of the current lack of faith in government can be dispelled by fostering more citizen participation in public affairs.’²⁰⁴ However, political calculation also played a part. Some older members understood it as the aggressive pursuit of high profiles by uneasy Democrats in marginal districts. This problem was particularly pressing in the House, where the number of potential rivals for media attention and the brevity of the electoral terms would effectively concentrate the mind. Neal Smith, first elected to the House of Representatives from Iowa’s 4th congressional district in 1958, complained that the new members, ‘decided the most important thing in the world was to get re-elected, no matter what. The day they hit here they started campaigning for the next election instead of helping legislate.’²⁰⁵ In February 1975, George Miller and Toby Moffett organised a weekend retreat for the class. Moffett estimated that some eighty percent of the class were in attendance. After smashing the committee system and augmented the caucus, the purpose of the retreat was to devise future legislative strategies. Moffett was surprised when ‘conversation turned immediately to incumbency protection. That’s what the weekend was spent on ... There were workshops on issues, but those were not nearly as popular. Everybody wanted to know how to get re-elected.’²⁰⁶ Hardly surprising, given how many members of the class had won in historically Republican-leaning districts. The high water could not last indefinitely.

Herein lies the essential problem that confronted the Watergate Babies as they surveyed the post-reform Congress. For all their cultural similarities, their populist

²⁰⁴ ‘The Wirth Washington Letter,’ No. 2, December, 1975, in the Timothy E. Wirth (TEW) papers, UCB, Box 2.

²⁰⁵ Granat, “Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies?”

²⁰⁶ Schneider, “JFK’s Children.”

attacks on a collection of corrupt elites, and their shared insistence on the need to find new solutions for the 1970s, there was precious little agreement over how to proceed and few attempts to approach systematically the question of just what a 'liberalism of limits' might look like. In this the class of '74 presented a stark contrast to the group of Democrats who had made up the last generational shift within Congress, the class of 1948. Superficially, there were striking similarities between the two classes. In 1946, it had seemed a foregone conclusion that 1948 would be a Republican year. In the 1946 midterm congressional elections, the Republican Party regained control of both the House and the Senate for the first time since 1932, and was blithely confident that in new president Harry S. Truman it had found an opponent who could be swatted aside with comparative ease. However, in a historic electoral upset, Truman held the White House, and the Democrats recaptured the House and Senate. As in 1974, these elections saw the injection into Congress of a group of young, ambitious, and emphatically liberal politicians. Their fervour and disdain for congressional institutions earned them the nickname 'bomb-throwers.'²⁰⁷ In his memoirs, Harry McPherson, then assistant to Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, had disdainfully summarised 'bomb-throwing' Illinois Senator Paul Douglas, and indeed the whole class, as 'a liberal Saint George [fighting] against the vested-interest dragon.'²⁰⁸

The 'bomb-throwers' were united in the belief that the most dramatically liberal legislative moves were being strangled by the conservative coalition within Congress, comprised of Southern Democrats and Republicans. They raged that these reactionaries, though numerically superior, did not command the loyalty of the American electorate, who had voted overwhelmingly for liberal reform. The fact that

²⁰⁷ Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 34.

²⁰⁸ Harry McPherson, *A Political Education* (Boston, 1972), 30.

the people had put Truman back into office was surely evidence enough that they expected the 'Fair Deal' to be enacted. Liberal conviction was only strengthened as they watched a recalcitrant Congress kill or castrate major components of the 'Fair Deal.' The legislative agenda, the liberals realised, was in the hands of those who understood the arcane procedures of Capitol Hill. In response, these 'bomb-throwers' began the guerrilla war against the institutional weaponry wielded by the conservative coalition that would see final victory at the beginning of 1975.²⁰⁹

Like the Watergate Babies over two decades later, the 'bomb-throwers' entered Congress at a moment of existential crisis for liberalism. The stalling of New Deal reformism after its mid-1930s heyday, and then its eclipse by the imperatives of war in the Pacific and Western Europe, induced a profound feeling of drift in congressional Democrats by VJ day. The death of Franklin Roosevelt some months earlier had only exacerbated that. The Democratic Party found itself confronted with a disturbing question: what happens now? Roosevelt was dead, the major architecture of the New Deal was in place, and the loss of an imminent national emergency, alongside a recalcitrant Southern bloc, made further ambitious extensions of the federal prerogative unlikely. What was there to do now other than wait for an increasingly confident Republican Party to supplant them? The answer was to be found, according to many allied intellectuals, in a recalibration of liberalism's priorities. This would be best expressed some years later by Arthur Schlesinger who, in a 1956 article for *The Reporter*, summarised a credo he called 'qualitative liberalism,' which was to be understood as distinct from the 'quantitative liberalism' of the New Deal. The evils that the latter had been thought up to combat, most notably widespread and pervasive

²⁰⁹ Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 34.

economic distress, had been largely vanquished. The new liberalism must turn its attention to 'quality of life' issues, such as clean air and water, a better transport infrastructure, urban regeneration, health care and various other 'social justice' concerns. Liberals of the 1950s must fight 'for individual dignity, identity, and fulfillment [*sic*] in a mass society.'²¹⁰

In some senses, the Schlesingerian prescriptions were rather evanescent. Guaranteeing a secure home or a living wage are comparatively easy undertakings when set against the problem of formulating public policy that can ensure 'identity' or 'fulfillment.' Nonetheless, this doctrinal update proved a vital lodestar for congressional Democrats during the Eisenhower years, when they could conceive of themselves as custodians of a legacy of unfinished business awaiting the return of a forceful Democratic president to offer legislative leadership. This shared ideological agenda – rooted in the New and Fair Deals and encompassing healthcare reform, civil rights legislation, federal aid to education, and the restraining of the nuclear arms race – would become the foundation stone of the New Frontier and the Great Society around a decade and a half later. Likewise, the extra-congressional interest groups that sustained them – the ACLU, Americans for Democratic Action, and the National Association of Colored People – had agendas that went beyond institutional reform. By contrast, the 'Watergate Babies' were supported largely by public advocacy groups that pursued reform for its own sake, most notably Common Cause. These aims were no doubt laudable, but they masked a failure to grapple with the problem of what these bumper Democratic majorities would do once freed from the shackles imposed on them by the conservative coalition.

²¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The Future of Liberalism: I. The Challenge of Abundance," *The Reporter* (May 3, 1956).

Despite their self-confident iconoclasm, and their other shared social and cultural characteristics, the Watergate Babies arrived in Congress without a broadly agreed-upon legislative agenda, and would exhibit little inclination to establish one. Had the Republican challenge been more pressing at that moment, perhaps Democratic minds would have been concentrated on the problem. It may seem remarkable to modern eyes given events that were to come, but many Democrats felt that they could safely ignore the GOP. '[T]he Republicans were pathetic,' recalled Bruce Wolpe. 'After Watergate, they were nothing, they were beaten, they were cowed. They didn't have any ideas, the country wasn't listening to them. So we didn't have to pay any attention to them.'²¹¹ The reforms that the class of '74 helped enact erected additional barriers to those who sought to think seriously about the party's future. As will be shown in the next chapter, though the reformers had intended to strengthen congressional leaders, and thus the caucuses, the opening up of the committee system would prove to be by far the more lasting legacy.

The difficulties of mobilising the post-reform Congress were exemplified by the experience of Congressman Phillip Burton, a legislator whose ardent liberalism was matched only by his unsentimental pragmatism, and who had been a vital behind-the-scenes force in moulding the incoming class of 1974. Under President Ford, the indefatigable Burton would struggle to transform the House Democratic Caucus into an instrument of liberal reform to capitalise on the new spirit sweeping through the Congress. Burton would find his efforts frustrated by an intransigent veto-happy Ford and the difficulty of holding the post-reform Caucus together as new members sought

²¹¹ Bruce Wolpe, author interview.

to use the expanded resources and opportunities at their disposal to cultivate their own careers. Moreover, a substantial number of congressional Democrats never quite embraced the idea of their branch's supremacy over the executive. Fighting Nixon was one matter, but with him removed from office much of the energy drained away. Many were content to wait for their party's victory in the 1976 presidential election and then, with a Democrat in the White House, to react to his initiatives. With reform accomplished, the congressional party was simply unable to agree on a future agenda.²¹² For a host of reasons, institutional and political, the Congress would not be the engine of a post-Watergate Democratic revival.

²¹² "Congressional Government: Can It Happen?" *CQWR*, June 28, 1975.

2. Phillip Burton and the Failed Mobilisation of the House Democratic Caucus

The Caucus of the House of Representatives had once been the most potent entity in the Congress. At the turn of the twentieth century, still an era of congressional government, the notorious Republican Speaker Joseph Cannon exercised such control over the House that his opponents warned of the threat of ‘King Caucus.’²¹³ In the final weeks of the 1974 campaign, Ford had stumped the country conjuring images of a return to those bad old days and warning of a coming ‘legislative dictatorship.’ This time, however, the Democrats would be running the show. A ‘runaway Congress’ with the ‘wrong kind’ of members, said the president, would jeopardise the administration’s foreign policy and even peace itself. Instead of an ‘imperial presidency,’ Ford now lamented an ‘imperilled presidency.’²¹⁴ House Republicans sounded similar warnings. John Anderson of Illinois warned of ‘the trend toward what ... has [been] termed “congressional government” and ... the re-emergence of “King Caucus.”’²¹⁵ The GOP had good reason to worry and Ford’s partisan attacks on Congress reflected not only rising Democratic confidence, but also the growing sense within the congressional Democratic Party, and in particular the House, that Congress should assert its constitutional right to set the legislative agenda for the nation.

An inherently majoritarian body, the House was theoretically better placed than the Senate to give some unity and purpose to the congressional Democratic Party. The reforms of 1975, detailed in the last chapter, had strengthened the Caucus – the conference of all Democratic members – against the conservative-leaning committees,

²¹³ See Robert V. Remini, *The House: The History of the House of Representatives* (New York, 2006), chs 11-12.

²¹⁴ Philip Shabecoff, “Ford Warns G.O.P. On Rivals’ Sweep,” *NYT*, October 17, 1974; Philip Shabecoff, “Ford Says a ‘Runaway Congress’ Would Harm Peace,” *NYT*, October 30, 1974.

²¹⁵ Mary Russell, “GOP Fears Return of ‘King Caucus’ in House Next Year,” *WP*, July 29, 1974.

who had throttled progressive legislation for decades. The beefed-up Caucus would be able to assume the legislative powers that had previously been reserved to the committees and give the House a more unified voice on matters of policy. Though similar reform movements were afoot in the Senate, there was no consistent drive to strengthen either the party leadership or the Conference. Senators remained essentially loyal to the anti-majoritarian ethos of the upper chamber and power continued to reside in the committees.

The speed and determination with which the newly-expanded Democratic majorities had moved to enact those reforms unsettled the White House. ‘It was a little startling to see how the Democrats marched in lock step,’ said one presidential aide.²¹⁶ Ford – a former House Minority Leader whose highest ambition had once been to become Speaker – had made efforts to mollify the legislature. Three days into his presidency, Ford made his first address to a joint session of Congress and declared that, ‘part of my heart will always be here on Capitol Hill. I know well the co-equal role of the Congress in our constitutional process.’ He assured the assembled members, ‘I do not want a honeymoon with you. I want a good marriage.’²¹⁷ The change from the bellicosity of Nixon to the conciliation of Ford reflected the different political styles of the two presidents, but also revealed just how dramatically the political climate had shifted between 1972 and 1974.

At the centre of Democratic efforts to strengthen the legislative branch, which it controlled, against the executive, which it did not, was a congressman from California who had almost no national profile or leadership position as the 1970s

²¹⁶ “Congressional Government: Can It Happen?” *CQWR*, June 28, 1975.

²¹⁷ “Transcript of President Ford’s Address to Joint Session of Congress and the Nation,” *NYT*, August 13, 1974.

began: Phillip Burton. Tall, burly, and permanently dishevelled, Burton cut an unmistakeable figure in the corridors of the House. He chain-smoked unfiltered cigarettes, womanised occasionally, and drank to excess. A staffer for Rep. Henry Waxman, Bruce Wolpe, recalled that the congressman would keep a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka in an office freezer for Burton. ‘Phil would come in at the end of the day at 6 just to talk to him. And he would have half a bottle of vodka before going on his next rounds. And they would just talk and plot, and plot and talk.’ Burton’s biographer paints a vivid picture of his eccentric personal behaviour:

He towered over his fellow politicians in hallway encounters, thumping his finger on their chests, spitting saliva as he shouted, consuming, as one witness put it, “their very oxygen.” He ate enormous portions of prime rib, pasta, and Dover sole with such unrepentant gusto that dinner companions said they needed an umbrella to protect their clothes. He did not think twice about spearing the chicken off the plate of a stranger seated next to him at an elegant dinner party, of taking columnist Jack Anderson, a religiously observant Mormon, on a late-night tour of San Francisco’s strip joints, of calling Lady Bird Johnson, whom he barely knew, “Babe,” or of trailing pillows from meeting to meeting to ease the pain of his haemorrhoids.²¹⁸

Not since Lyndon Johnson had a politician wielded his vulgarity as such an effective political instrument. ‘He’s got the personality of a Brillo pad,’ joked Arizona’s Mo Udall. ‘But he gets a lot done.’²¹⁹

An unabashed liberal and a keen student of power politics, Burton had been an enthusiastic supporter of the congressional reform movement since arriving in the House in 1965. Throughout the 1970s, Burton schemed and manoeuvred to strengthen the Caucus and to ensure a leadership role for himself within it. He passed through the chairmanship of the Democratic Study Group (a legislative service organisation

²¹⁸ Jacobs, *A Rage for Justice*, xx.

²¹⁹ John A. Farrell, *Tip O’Neill and the Democratic Century* (Boston, New York, and London, 2001), 388.

created as an informal whip for liberals), to the chairmanship of the Caucus itself before finally mounting a campaign for House Majority Leader, so as to embed himself in the body's leadership and place himself in pole position to one day become Speaker. If there was to be a congressional dictatorship, as Ford had warned, there was no one better placed or more able to play its *Il Duce* than Phillip Burton.

Yet Burton's efforts failed. Even with a huge and nominally veto-proof majority, with the arrival of a fairly cohesive class of reform-minded legislators, with the mechanisms of Congress more favourable to liberalism than they had been in decades, with an ambitious and talented leader in the figure of Phillip Burton, and facing a president for whom no one had yet cast a single vote, the House signally failed to enact anything approximating a coherent liberal agenda in the interregnum between Nixon's resignation and Jimmy Carter's inauguration. That so talented and determined a figure as Burton was unable to mobilise the House Caucus in the service of liberalism reveals much about the congressional Democratic Party at mid-decade and also the institutional and political barriers faced by the legislative branch when it sought to supplant the executive as the prime mover in U.S. politics.

'The Burton Machine'

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1926, the teenage Burton had relocated to San Francisco with his family while in high school. A graduate of the University of Southern California and the Golden Gate Law School, Burton enrolled in the Navy's V-12 programme during World War II and served as an air force lawyer during the Korean War. Neither commitment took him outside California. In 1953, Burton married Sala

Galant Lipschultz and embarked on a decades-long career in Democratic politics.²²⁰ Burton would rely on his more emollient wife – later referring to her as ‘the popular Burton’ – as a sounding board and co-conspirator. When he died suddenly in 1983, she succeeded him as representative. Within a year of his marriage, he had launched his first, unsuccessful, bid for a seat in the California State Assembly. Two years later, in 1956, Burton embarked on his second campaign for an Assembly seat, this time defeating a Republican incumbent – nicknamed ‘the unbeatable Tommy Maloney’ – by drawing on neglected black and Chinese-American voters. In the Assembly, in characteristic fashion, Burton amassed both an impressive record of liberal legislation and a power base that rivalled that of the redoubtable Assembly Speaker, Jesse Unruh.²²¹ He supported Cesar Chavez and the predominantly Hispanic United Farm Workers (UFW) years before they became a *cause célèbre* for national Democrats.²²²

In 1964, having been given responsibility for a redistricting plan in the Bay Area after a court-ordered reapportionment, Burton won a special election to the House of Representatives from a district, the 5th, that he himself had designed. With uncharacteristic bravado for a freshman, Burton immediately antagonised President Johnson, then at the height of his power, by supporting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s credential challenge at the 1964 convention and then, a year later, becoming one of only three representatives to vote against funding for the Vietnam War. Burton’s early and vocal opposition to the war in Vietnam would stand him in good stead with the Watergate Babies. By 1966, the conservative broadcaster Fulton Lewis Jr. was denouncing Burton as one of a group of California-based ‘radical

²²⁰ Marjorie Hunter, “A California Democrat Delivers Votes in the House,” *NYT*, May 23, 1975.

²²¹ Hunter, “A California Democrat Delivers Votes in the House.” For more on Unruh, see Bill Boyarsky, *Big Daddy: Jesse Unruh and the Art of Power Politics* (Berkeley, 2008) and Lou Cannon, *Ronnie and Jesse: A Political Odyssey* (Garden City, NY, 1969).

²²² Telegram, Phillip Burton to Cesar Chavez, March 8, 1968, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 10.

leftists' and 'peaceniks.'²²³ In Congress, with a solidly Democratic constituency as his bedrock, Burton swiftly established a reputation as both an unsentimental pragmatist and a fiercely principled liberal.

Burton was the hard-nosed wheeler-dealer to the point of parody. Yet his politicking was in the service of an ambitious liberal agenda. He crafted legislation that enforced new protections against black lung disease for miners, and increased compensation benefits for those already stricken. He engineered the raising of the minimum wage and the extension of food stamps to striking farm workers. He helped cobble together the Supplementary Security Income (SSI) programme, which increased the income of many elderly and disabled welfare recipients, from the wreckage of the Family Assistance Plan. He was instrumental in the creation of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, over 80,000 protected acres encircling the San Francisco Bay.²²⁴

This record was not amassed single-handedly, but it was a product of Burton's keen understanding of legislative procedure and ability to assemble coalitions – by persuasion, inducement, and coercion if necessary. Despite an undimmed reputation as one of the most liberal members of the Caucus, he maintained good relations with conservative Southern Democrats, delivering liberal votes for agricultural subsidies in exchange for their votes on liberal welfare bills. Southern votes were key to the passage of the black-lung bill, for instance, and Burton secured them by killing liberal-

²²³ Fulton Lewis, Jr., "Calif. Democrats Nominate Peaceniks For Congress," *Human Events*, July 2, 1966, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 10.

²²⁴ Hunter, "A California Democrat Delivers Votes in the House"; Michael Barone, "Phillip Burton, 1926-1983," *WP*, April 12, 1983; Carl M. Cannon, "Wheeler-Dealer for the Powerless," *WP*, April 17, 1983.

backed legislation to reduce cotton subsidies.²²⁵

His skill as a coalition-builder was on display in his San Francisco district, which habitually returned him to Congress with smashing margins. Burton's constituency was a mosaic. Constantly growing throughout his career, it incorporated trade unions, African Americans, Hispanics, Chinese communities, environmental groups, and gay rights activists. Strikingly for a Democrat in 1970s, Burton was able to hold together a large and fractious coalition, composed of partners with historically poor relationships. The glue was Burton's ability to deliver concrete achievements on the issues that these groups cared about. Journalists would often refer to Burton as having constructed an old-fashioned urban political 'machine' in Northern California.²²⁶ His 1972 re-election campaign, for instance, drew endorsements from the AFL-CIO's COPE, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the Union Labor Party, the UFW, conservation groups like San Francisco Tomorrow, the ADA, the Latin American Veterans' Association, the Filipino American Political Association, the Japanese-American Citizens' League, Common Cause, Wilbur Mills, and the scourge of the New Politics liberals, Senator Henry Jackson.²²⁷ Burton had been a key supporter of Cesar Chavez and the UFW during the grape boycotts and he was a member of the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club, which sought to mobilise San Francisco's gay population.²²⁸

²²⁵ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, xxii.

²²⁶ W.E. Barnes, "The 'Burton Machine' Myth," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 13, 1982, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 11.

²²⁷ 'Dear fellow Democrat' letter from PB, n.d.; Telegram, Larry Itliong to PB, May 6, 1972; 'Dear fellow San Franciscan' letter from PB, May 1972; Letter, Wilbur Mills to Agar Jaicks, March 27, 1972; Letter, Henry M. Jackson to Agar Jaicks, March 31, 1972, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 3.

²²⁸ Telegram, Cesar Chavez to PB, April 25, 1972, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 3; Martin F. Nolan, "A Coalition on the Coast," *Boston Globe*, May 30, 1972, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 3.

The solidity of Burton's district, and the depth and breadth of his personal constituency, allowed him to extend himself on behalf of politicians in tougher races and to pursue an ambitious reform agenda. Abrasive and disdainful of tradition, Burton exhibited a determination throughout his career to bend the House, and any organisation within it to which he belonged, to his priorities. Depending on how much sympathy one had for Burton, this marked him out either as an innovative and restless liberal champion or a reckless, egotistical opportunist. The first organisation within the House he would seek to rejuvenate and it was the Democratic Study Group (DSG), an informal whip organisation for liberal Democrats that had become increasingly listless as a campaigning body since its zenith in the 1950s.

One 'Identity Crisis' Among Many: The Democratic Study Group

Founded in 1959, the DSG had been born out of the frustrations of Truman's Fair Deal and the cosy stagnation of the Eisenhower years, and following significant Democratic gains in the congressional elections of 1958.²²⁹ The DSG would become one of the most formidable weapons congressional liberals had at their disposal, developing the legislative agenda that would underpin the New Frontier and the Great Society. Confronting a new Republican president in 1969, in the year of the organisation's tenth anniversary, new DSG chair Donald Fraser declared that there was 'a real need for this kind of operation in the House.' And yet, as staff director Richard Conlon noted, the Group faced a difficult readjustment: 'The glue that held [the DSG] together

²²⁹ Dominic Sandbrook, *Eugene McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism* (New York, 2004), 76-79.

– Medicare, civil rights and the cluster of other Democratic issues – is gone now. The liberals this year are casting about for new issues.’²³⁰

In a 1974 interview, Conlon gave his account of the bind the DSG had found itself in under Nixon. In late 1968, with President-elect Nixon preparing for his inauguration, outgoing chair James O’Hara had convened a series of meetings to discuss strategies for dealing with ‘a tough, effective, hard-nosed [Republican] administration’ which would be ‘hostile or at best apathetic to preserving many of the programs that had been enacted during the Kennedy-Johnson years.’ A number of proposals were entertained, including an open DSG challenge to the leadership and DSG-backed candidates for committee positions. It became apparent that congressional reform was the issue dominating most of the discussions. LBJ’s huge mandate had left him free to disregard the conservative coalition within Congress, at least for a few crucial years, but by the late 1960s, with Democratic majorities diminished and a Republican in the White House, liberal Democrats found themselves at an institutional disadvantage.

O’Hara began informally polling representatives (he reportedly contacted 100 by telephone) and discovered shocking ignorance of the House rules. Most members canvassed believed that seniority had been officially codified or had some constitutional basis. O’Hara concluded that the DSG’s highest priority ought to be in meeting this education deficit with the intention of building a pro-reform coalition in the House.²³¹ Having settled on its post-Great Society mission – House reform – the DSG began pushing to democratise the House’s antiquated structures and procedures,

²³⁰ Political Report, “Democratic Study Group Shifts Role in 91st Congress, October 10, 1969, papers of the Democratic Study Group (DSG), LOC, Part II, Box 1.

²³¹ Interview with. Conlon, 7/5/74, DSG papers, LOC, Part II, Box 2.

laying the foundations for the institutional revolution that would climax with the arrival of the Watergate Babies. Burton would be at the heart of these endeavours. But what were the aims of reform? For the most part, DSG liberals avoided the question. The greatest hope of Richard Conlon – described by John Jacobs as ‘one of the most important House staffers of the post-war era’ – was that the DSG should become ‘a vehicle for discussion ventilation in terms of the issues.’ He prized the group’s reputation as an impartial research tool above all else: ‘170-plus members of the Democratic Study Group [who] pay that \$100 a year dues don’t do it because they’re committed liberals. They do it because they’re getting damn good services that they can’t get any place else and ... that’s what keeps them there.’²³²

Over the next half decade, the DSG fought to revise the seniority system and strengthen the Caucus. Allied with emerging public interest groups – most notably Common Cause, founded in 1970 by John W. Gardner, a Republican who had served as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) under LBJ – the DSG mounted a succession of offensives to chip away at the autocratic power of the committee chairs. They enjoyed some success: in 1970, a committee was established to recommend ways that committee chairs could be made ‘more responsive to the Caucus and the House leadership’; in early 1971, the Caucus approved a resolution giving it the formal power to approve committee chairmen (a power that it would struggle to wield until 1975); a Steering and Policy Committee was created in 1972 to set legislative priorities for the Caucus. Yet there were also some significant reversals: a proposal to impose a 70-year age limit on committee chairs was defeated; a liberal-backed effort to strip the 72-year old South Carolinian John C. McMillan of the

²³² Ibid.; Jacobs, *A Rage for Justice*, 222.

chairmanship of the Committee on the District of Columbia, which the DSG had advanced as a test case, was decisively defeated; and an effort to place DSG chairman Donald Fraser on the Ways and Means Committee failed.²³³

By 1969, Burton was establishing himself as a force within the DSG. Much of its membership overlapped with the anti-Vietnam war contingent in the House, and Burton soon muscled his way onto the Executive Committee. Almost immediately, he began ‘fatten[ing it] with his handpicked recruits.’²³⁴ It was a pattern that would recur throughout his career. In February 1971, Burton announced his intention of pursuing the chairmanship when incumbent, Don Fraser, retired. This represented a significant break in tradition for the still relatively young organisation. Protocol had it that a nominating committee would select a slate of officers who would then be ratified unanimously. Now a contest was almost inevitable.²³⁵ Burton’s intervention was unprecedented and entirely predictable. He had chafed against the wait-your-turn traditions of the House since his arrival. As a member of the Interior Committee, he had made himself a persistent nuisance to Chairman Wayne Aspinall, disrespecting him during sessions and scheming to bring liberal allies onto the committee.²³⁶ The DSG’s nominating committee split, 7-7, between Burton and his opponent, fellow Californian and DSG secretary, James Corman. Both names went forward to a DSG-wide election on March 9.²³⁷

²³³ “Uprising on Capitol Hill,” *NYT*, February 18, 1970; “Rebellion in the House,” *NYT*, March 22, 1970; Marjorie Hunter, “House Democrats Uphold Seniority by 30-Vote Margin,” *NYT*, February 4, 1971; “The Stifling Hand of Seniority,” *Washington Post-Times Herald (WP-TH)*, January 11, 1971; Mary Russell, “Revolt on Capitol Hill,” *WP*, February 4, 1976.

²³⁴ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 229.

²³⁵ “Battle Looms In Democratic Study Group,” *WP-TH*, February 23, 1971.

²³⁶ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 220.

²³⁷ “Study Unit Split on Chief,” *WP-TH*, February 25, 1971.

Bespectacled and dapper, Corman was a former Marine and Los Angeles city councillor, and had served in Congress since 1961. From a seat on the Judiciary Committee, he had helped steer the 1964 Civil Rights Act to passage.²³⁸ He had been effectively recruited by the anti-Burton faction within the DSG, who were motivated by a mixture of personal hostility and genuine concern over Burton's abrasiveness and uncompromising liberalism. Burton's campaign consisted mostly of convincing new members, and conservative southerners for whom he had done favours, to take up membership and in the DSG-wide vote, Burton defeated Corman handily, 73 votes to 48. Immediately following his election, Burton told the meeting that it had the 'opportunity and obligation to lay the basis for the defeat of the Republican administration.'²³⁹ The House of Representatives, wrote reporter Lou Cannon, had rarely been perceived as a motor of liberal reform, and the DSG, 'the voice of liberal policy in the House,' had acquired its own establishment that was suspicious of boat-rockers. 'Institutions, like people, tend to radicalism in youth and conservatism in old age.' The election of the hard-charging Burton as DSG chair, a marked contrast to his predecessor Fraser, could change all that. Cannon concluded, 'A new day may be dawning for liberals in the House.'²⁴⁰

Initially, it seemed it was. 'Almost overnight the DSG became an important center of House activities,' wrote Burton's biographer, 'the engine of reform and the instrument of Burton's power.' Burton instituted daily strategy sessions, lubricated with large quantities of vodka, to which he invited representatives of various reform and good government groups, including Common Cause and the National Committee

²³⁸ Myrna Oliver, "James C. Corman; 10-Term Valley Congressman Championed Civil Rights, Welfare Legislation," *Los Angeles Times (LAT)*, January 3, 2001.

²³⁹ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 229; "Democratic Study Group Elects Burton," *WP-TH*, March 10, 1971.

²⁴⁰ Lou Cannon, "Burton Will Spark Liberals," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 15, 1971, clipping in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 10.

for an Effective Congress. In these sessions Burton and his allies schemed to advance the reform agenda, a prerequisite for the passage of the legislation that was so dear to him. His major success was in drafting and passing a bundle of reforms that allowed for a secret-ballot Caucus vote on every chairman, guaranteed every freshman Democrat would receive at least one major committee assignment, and prohibited members of the Ways and Means, Rules, or Appropriations Committees from holding other assignments. By early 1973, two Nixon aides wrote to the president that the ‘ultra-liberal’ DSG was at the forefront of a Democratic effort to ‘McGoverniz[e] the House.’²⁴¹ Yet the DSG was ultimately only a waystation for Burton, who had far grander ambitions.

This is obvious from his most significant innovation: the extent to which he involved the DSG in election financing. Having first ‘Burtonized’ the DSG, he now sought to use the DSG to ‘Burtonize’ the House. In 1972, the DSG raised some \$200,000 for its candidates and reached out to others who struggled to receive funds from the organs of the party establishment.²⁴² Burton later concluded that, effective as this had been, too little had been done to target non-incumbents. Bob Carr, who would receive Burton’s largesse during his successful 1974 bid to represent a Michigan district after being overlooked during a failed 1972 effort, later recalled, that Burton ‘publicly stated at a meeting where I was present that he wished that he had listened to [Carr’s appeals for financial assistance] because he felt that had we been targeted in ’72, we would have won.’²⁴³ An ad placed by the DSG Campaign Fund (‘the political arm of the Democratic Study Group’) in the *New York Times* in September 1974 boasted, ‘[i]n 1972, according to a Common Cause survey, DSG gave a greater share

²⁴¹ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 230-31, 241-7; Farrell, *Tip O’Neill*, 394.

²⁴² Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 233.

²⁴³ M. Robert Carr, author interview.

of its funds to non-incumbent candidates than any other Democratic, labor or liberal group. This year virtually all DSG funds will go to progressive **non-incumbent** [*sic*] candidates in close races.²⁴⁴

Even after moving on to pastures new, Burton continued to use the Group for his own ends. Spotting earlier than most how the Watergate scandal could be exploited for Democratic gain in 1974, Burton resolved to use the DSG to swell and shape the House Caucus. Coordinating with labour unions and old ally Rep. Wayne Hays, then head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), Burton directed DSG money to challengers. Through Hays, Burton also exercised considerable influence over the DCCC's \$200,000 campaign budget, almost half of which was sent to non-incumbents. 'Many thanks for your splendid DSG contribution,' wrote Colorado's Tim Wirth to Burton in July. '[M]ost welcome at a time of some real cash bind [*sic*]!²⁴⁵ Burton personally campaigned in over 40 districts.²⁴⁶

Other candidates reached out to Burton in search of support. Terry Moshenko, co-chairman of Mark Hannaford's campaign for California's 38th district, wrote to Burton in July on behalf of his candidate. With Burton's re-election 'assured,' Moshenko wrote, it was hoped that he would 'assist other Democratic candidates in more difficult, yet promising, races,' with fundraising initiatives, 'early money,' and other forms of non-financial support. A day earlier Jim Lloyd, the candidate for California's Republican-leaning 35th district, had sent Burton a form reply to a supportive telegram, annotated with the message, 'I'll really need your help. I've

²⁴⁴ Democratic Study Group ad, *NYT*, September 15, 1974.

²⁴⁵ Letter, Tim Wirth to PB, July 15, 1974, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 4.

²⁴⁶ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 252-4; Gerald R. Rosen, "The Most Powerful Man in Congress?" *Dun's Review*, Offprint in the DSG papers, LOC, Part II, Box 2.

placed your name on the mailing list. Also, I'll be in Wash D.C. within the next 3 weeks. I'll let you know!'²⁴⁷ Both Hannaford and Lloyd were non-incumbents and both would go on to win their elections.

By 1973, the year Burton stepped down, the DSG was influential in a way that it had not been since the early 1960s. It was, claimed one headline, 'Now [the] Dominant House Power.'²⁴⁸ The previous November, to general shock and excitement and at Burton's invitation, William 'Fishbait' Miller, the House doorkeeper and 'long a symbol of Dixiecrat power in the House' had made an unprecedented appearance at the DSG's freshman orientation session, and spent several hours helping to pass out briefing papers, loudly praising the group's research activities, and glad-handing with new members.²⁴⁹ Miller's attendance was a powerful reminder of the successes the DSG had enjoyed in bringing committee chairs (who Miller had formerly counted among his patrons) under the control of the Caucus. However, the DSG would soon be eclipsed by the arrival of the Watergate Babies.

Though he had set his sights on bigger game, Burton continued to exercise considerable influence within the DSG. He had cultivated a loyal faction in the executive committee and the membership at large. Even by 1979, the Burton faction was regarded with some suspicion by the House Democratic leadership. 'There's still a little bit of paranoia,' remarked then chair Abner Mikva, a Burton ally, 'that we're

²⁴⁷ Letter, Terry M. Moshenko to PB, July 18, 1974; Letter, Jim Lloyd to PB, July 17, 1974, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 4.

²⁴⁸ "Demo Study Group Now Dominant House Power," *The Evansville Courier*, Clipping in the DSG papers, LOC, Part II, Box 26.

²⁴⁹ "Visit From 'Fishbait' Sets Liberals Buzzing," *Greensboro Daily News*, November 24, 1972, offprint in the DSG papers, Part II, Box 26; Richard L. Lyons, "House Dixie Bloc Losing Clout," *WP*, February 15, 1973.

being masterminded by Phil.²⁵⁰ Nonetheless, few successor chairs shared Burton's single-minded obsession with instrumentalizing the DSG and without his attention the group sank into malaise. By the end of the decade, *Congressional Quarterly* was reporting on 'The DSG's Identity Crisis.' Once 'on the cutting edge of social and congressional reform' the DSG now spent 'most of its time these days cranking out impartial research papers.'²⁵¹ A post-mortem of the Group, published by *The Nation* in 1981, quoted liberal New York representative Richard Ottinger (admittedly not an impartial observer, having been defeated in the 1978 chairmanship election) dismissing the DSG as 'moribund' as 'a vehicle for producing change.'²⁵²

In some ways, this was how influential members of the group preferred the situation. In June 1977, Conlon had managed a review into the DSG's role within the House. It concluded that the Group's primary mission had become to provide members 'with accurate, comprehensive, objective and reliable research on legislation.' It sought to 'brief' not 'lobby' members. The DSG membership had embraced this shift. A recent poll found that over 90 percent of members 'overwhelmingly rejected the suggestion that DSG place less emphasis on research and become more involved in pursuit of specific legislative objectives as in the past.'²⁵³ With Burton's focus elsewhere, the DSG slid towards non-partisanship, depriving House liberals of a vital tool for formulating policy, buttressing their own ranks, and maintaining discipline. In mid-1977, Conlon wrote to Bill Hansel in the DNC's Campaign Services Office. 'Please do not list the Democratic Study Group in

²⁵⁰ Mary Russell, "Liberal House Democrat Contest: Loyalist vs. Independent," *WP*, February 26, 1979.

²⁵¹ Richard E. Cohen, "The DSG's Identity Crisis," *CQWR*, January 27, 1979.

²⁵² Saul B. Shapiro, "Picking Up the Pieces: Whatever Became of the DSG?" *The Nation*, August 8-15, 1981.

²⁵³ Statement of Richard P. Conlon, Task Force on Work Management House Commission on Administrative Review, June 1, 1977, DSG papers, LOC, Part II, Box 3.

the DNC Campaign Source Book,’ ran his letter. ‘The DSG is not a campaign organization.’²⁵⁴

To Play The King: The Caucus Chairmanship

In the aftermath of the bonfire of the committee chairmen in early 1975, and the concomitant strengthening of Caucus power, the Watergate Babies, and indeed the whole Caucus, were left confronting the question of what should happen next. The American people had returned huge Democratic majorities to a Congress that now faced a Republican president for whom no one had voted.²⁵⁵ In light of both the powers granted to it by the Constitution and the newly assertive spirit apparently sweeping through Congress, the House was well-placed to drive forward an ambitious legislative agenda. Moreover, it was undoubtedly the case that the House had seen the more dramatic institutional reforms after the 1974 elections. The *Washington Post* editorial was emphatic on that point:

There is no question that a revolution has occurred. The seniority system as the rigid, inviolable operating framework of the House has been destroyed ... The essence of the change is that the caucus has become both formally and actually the source of power and the ultimate instrument of discipline for all House Democrats.²⁵⁶

If the Caucus was to truly become ‘the source of power and the ultimate instrument of discipline’ for the Democratic Party in the House, then it needed direction. Burton was determined to provide it. The polls had barely closed in November before he announced his candidacy for the Caucus chairmanship. Key

²⁵⁴ Letter, Richard Conlon to Bill Hansel, July 18, 1977, DSG papers, LOC, Part II, Box 50.

²⁵⁵ With apologies to the good people of Michigan’s 5th congressional district, who returned Ford to the House for 12 consecutive terms.

²⁵⁶ “The Democratic Caucus in Command,” *WP*, Jan 20, 1975.

House allies, including freshmen like Henry Waxman and George Miller (both fellow Californians), were recruited as part of a ‘buddy system’ to take soundings of Caucus members.²⁵⁷ Many new members were already familiar with, and grateful to, Burton for directing funds to their campaigns or making personal appearances in their districts. Burton could likewise count on the support of vital activist groups. After Burton’s retirement as DSG chair, Common Cause had publicly commended Burton for his leadership in the reform efforts and chair John Gardner wrote to Burton to offer his personal thanks and congratulations.²⁵⁸

Burton’s opponent for the chairmanship was fellow Californian, Bernice F. ‘Bernie’ Sisk. A Texan by birth, Sisk had represented California’s 12th and then 16th districts since 1955. Some fifteen years older, he had twice Burton’s seniority and had won a position on the Rules Committee after its expansion in 1961. He and the ultraliberal Burton had clashed on numerous issues, at both state and national level. The hawkish Sisk was a leading defender of the Vietnam War and an opponent of the UFW-organised grape boycott. He attracted support from those discomfited by Burton’s ambitions and disrespect for House traditions. Deputy Whip and Sisk backer Jim Wright found Burton’s aggressive campaigning, and in particular his pursuit of support from new members, distasteful. ‘That had never been done before,’ he said. ‘People saw this as unbecoming. This should be an office that was bestowed rather than sought.’²⁵⁹ For the Watergate Babies, however, such niceties were features of the old, cosy politics. Even Sisk sensed the way that wind was blowing and promised that there would ‘be a place for a more active and aggressive Caucus’ in the next

²⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 257.

²⁵⁸ Common Cause press release, March 1, 1973; Letter, John W. Gardner to PB, March 2, 1973, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 11.

²⁵⁹ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 259.

Congress.²⁶⁰

Burton's becoming Caucus chairman, wrote the *Wall Street Journal's* John Pierson ominously, would represent 'the first time in the memory of man that a real liberal with a taste for power and ability to exercise it will have gained a position of leadership in the House.' If that were to happen, Pierson added, there was every chance that Burton would move to fill the 'power vacuum' created by Speaker Carl Albert's 'reluctance to lead and from the gradual decline of the authority of committee chairmen.' Asked directly, Burton demurred, claiming that he would never compel any member to vote contrary to their conscience.²⁶¹ Pierson's divinations would soon be put to the test.

When the Caucus convened on December 2 to select its officers, Burton defeated Sisk by 162 to 111 votes. The overwhelming majority of the freshmen sided with him. The assertive spirit of the body was clear from this organising meeting. Re-elected Speaker Albert told the Caucus that the nation faced, 'a crisis in the economy, an energy crisis. We have had a moral crisis. We have had a crisis of confidence such as this country has never known before. It is up to you and to me to respond to the crises.'²⁶² 'It's self-evident the winds of change have arrived at the House,' Burton told the press after the vote. 'My election is a product of the electorate's decision in November.' The Caucus, he continued, would 'provide the leadership with enough additional tools to encourage cooperation from the sometimes recalcitrant committee chairmen.' Others were anxious about the new chairman. Burton's defeated opponent, Rep. Sisk, warned that 'We may be in for a real rough session which could cause

²⁶⁰ John Pierson, "A New Boss for House Democrats?" *WSJ*, November 29, 1974.

²⁶¹ Pierson, "A New Boss for House Democrats?"

²⁶² Caucus minutes, December 2, 1974, HDC papers, LOC, Box 4.

damage to the country and the Democrats in 1976 ... [The American people] don't want to see us flying off into the wild blue yonder in too many innovations and spending schemes.'²⁶³

Observers, friendly and unfriendly, were struck by the increased potency of the Democratic Congress, and in particular the House, and uncertain as to how it would utilise its new power. Columnist William Safire started the year cautioning against the 'Great Congressional Cultural Revolution.' Within months he was complaining that it was as if Nixon's opponent had won the presidential election of 1972: "'McGovernment" is upon us.'²⁶⁴ Others were more optimistic. A 1975 cartoon by *Roll Call* cartoonist Jim Orton depicted the Democratic Caucus as a gargantuan baby gnawing on a bar it had wrenched from its undersized cot and eyeing two nervous figures identified as 'Dem. Leadership.' One was remarking to the other, 'Uh – growing right up, isn't he?' Orton sent the cartoon to Burton with the cheery inscription, 'Best wishes and keep eating your spinach.'²⁶⁵

The first significant flexing of Caucus muscle on an issue of policy came in March with a resolution to oppose any additional military aid for Cambodia and South Vietnam. As so many new representatives had campaigned as opponents of further Asian adventurism, and as the war powers had been an issue of such contention with Nixon, this resolution was an obvious place to start. New York's Rep. Bella Abzug had been the leader of the anti-war movement in the House. On her first day as a congresswoman, in 1971, she introduced a resolution calling for the immediate

²⁶³ Mary Russell, "Burton Wins; Mills Set Back," *WP*, December 3, 1974.

²⁶⁴ William Safire, "Too Big a Majority," *NYT*, January 23, 1975; William Safire, "Reagan vs. 'McGovernment,'" *NYT*, March 31, 1975.

²⁶⁵ Jim Orton cartoon, April 1, 1975, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 12.

withdrawal of all American troops.²⁶⁶ By the mid-1970s, she was clearly identified as part of the militant anti-war left. Consequently, newly-elected Rep. Bob Carr of Michigan was tapped by the anti-war congressional faction to put the measure to the Caucus. Carr recalled that, 'Bella knew that she was just so controversial, that she had just burned so many bridges with others, that she couldn't ... be the author of the resolution.' Coming from a freshman member, the resolution would carry much greater symbolic authority. For his part, Carr claimed to have been comfortable with the risk: 'If I was a one term member of Congress, that was fine with me. I was young and brash and was not looking for a long-term political career.'²⁶⁷

'Somewhere along the line,' according to Carr, the resolution was 'sanctioned' by Burton. '[I]t could not have happened without the approval of Phil Burton.'²⁶⁸ The resolution offered, at a special Caucus meeting convened on March 12th, declared that it was 'the sense of the Democratic Caucus that we firmly oppose the approval of any further military assistance to South Vietnam or to Cambodia in Fiscal Year 1975.' Speaking in support, Carr told the Caucus that the resolution 'is imperative, it is timely, the time is now.' The Congress had a duty to show that the responsibility for foreign policy rested not only with the White House and the executive branch. Democrats had been warned that the world would be watching to test America's commitment. 'Well, the whole world is watching, not to test our commitment, but to test our sanity.'²⁶⁹ After a heated debate, the resolution was approved decisively, 189-

²⁶⁶ Lacey Fosburgh, "Antiwar Rally Draws 300 Here; Mrs. Abzug Urges No Letdown In Effort," *NYT*, October 16, 1970; "Capitol Peace Group Is Met by Mrs. Abzug," *NYT*, May 13, 1971; "Bella Abzug," *NYT*, April 1, 1998.

²⁶⁷ M. Robert Carr, author interview.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ Hearings, Special Democratic Caucus for Consideration of Resolution Opposing Further Military Assistance to Cambodia and Vietnam, and Resolution Supporting the Emergency Employment Appropriations Act of 1975, March 12, 1975, HDC papers, LOC, Box 6.

49 votes.

Both Albert and Burton announced that this ‘sense of the caucus’ resolution indicated that the House would almost certainly not approve any further requests for aid.²⁷⁰ Some House members responded with fury. The Caucus had directed the House how to vote on an issue of policy before the relevant committee – in this case the House International Relations Committee – had been able to consider testimony from administration officials.²⁷¹ Discontent with this use of the Caucus had been on display in the debate over Carr’s defunding resolution. Wisconsin representative David Obey – a liberal reformer, and future DSG chair, who had opposed defence funding for Vietnam and Cambodia – distilled the hostility: ‘Jerry Ford is going to be able to run to the newspapers and be able to say, “Look at that. Those Democrats are playing partisan politics on Cambodia. They voted in a secret caucus to bind their members on Cambodia.”’

Thomas Morgan, Pennsylvania congressman and chair of the Committee on International Relations, echoed Obey’s concerns: ‘It does not make sense to me for the Caucus to try to take over the functions of the Legislative Committee. If the committee system does not work, that is another matter, but when the committees do their jobs and when you have a cooperative chairman like the guy you are looking at, then why should the Caucus try to upstage us?’²⁷² Even ardent reformer Richard Bolling declared publicly that he hated to see ‘the caucus function pitted against the committee function’ and that he hoped ‘the present management ... does not make the mistake of

²⁷⁰ John W. Finney, “House Democrats Opposed, 189-49, to Cambodian Aid,” *NYT*, March 13, 1975.

²⁷¹ Between 1974 and 1978, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs was renamed the Committee on International Relations. Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 274.

²⁷² Hearings, Special Democratic Caucus, Cambodia/Vietnam resolution, March 12, 1975, HDC papers, LOC, Box 6.

destroying the caucus before it's a year old.'²⁷³ Younger members were inclined to be dismissive of such concerns. Carr was among those who felt that the Caucus should be used as an outlet for ambitious but frustrated freshmen. 'The committee system is fine, but it doesn't always help us,' he remarked. 'The House needs a mechanism to proceed on an issue with much greater swiftness.'²⁷⁴

Burton understood the concerns, telling the freshmen, 'Some people were steamed. We have to lay off using the caucus for a while.'²⁷⁵ However, mere weeks after the passage of Carr's resolution, Burton was menacing the administration again. In late March, Burton was part of a group of congressmen, Democrats and Republicans, invited to a 'three-course candlelit dinner' at Vice President Nelson Rockefeller's Washington, D.C. mansion. Burton reportedly made 'an impassioned plea' to Rockefeller for White House cooperation with Congress, before warning that he 'had the votes' to override presidential vetoes of anti-recession spending bills then under consideration.²⁷⁶ The sense was growing in the Ford administration that Burton was the real power in the House.²⁷⁷

'The first few months of this Congress,' boasted Burton's constituency newsletter in May 1975, 'have been the most productive opening period of any Congress since World War II.'²⁷⁸ However, by the middle of 1975 it seemed the Caucus was stalling. The most potent symbol of the Democratic House's impotence

²⁷³ David S. Broder, "The Rule of 'King Caucus,'" *WP*, March 19, 1975.

²⁷⁴ 'House Democrats: Dispute Over Caucus Role,' *CQWR*, May 3, 1975.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Burton was one of four Democrats who attended. He chose the other three: Abner Mikva, Don Fraser, and Thomas Foley. Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, "A Warning About Vetoes," *WP*, March 30, 1975.

²⁷⁷ Marjorie Hunter, "A California Democrat Delivers the Votes in the House," May 23, 1975.

²⁷⁸ Phillip Burton newsletter, n.d., PB papers, UCalB, Carton 11.

was the defeat, on June 4, of the motion to override Ford's veto of the Emergency Employment Appropriation Act, a \$5.3 billion stimulus bill that the president had rejected as wasteful and inflationary.²⁷⁹ Appealing for support in the special Caucus meeting before the vote, Majority Leader Tip O'Neill told the assembled members that he hoped all Democrats would hold together on principle: 'This is a bill that deals with the ideals that we believe in, jobs, wages and the incentive to get this economy moving ... I hope today we will all vote in the Democratic manner.'²⁸⁰ Albert took the unusual step of vacating the Speaker's chair so that he could argue for the bill from the floor, 'plead[ing]' with the House 'with all the urgency that I have in my body ... to show that we are the legislative body of this Nation.' Speaking for the bill, Burton denounced Ford's veto as 'ill-advised' and made an appeal for Republican support that was half plea and half threat: 'I would hope that when the totals on this bill are tallied that no one will be able to say that the Republican Party is the party of the cruel, the heartless, and the indifferent.'²⁸¹ To no avail, however. The Democrats won the vote, 277 to 145, but fell five short of the majority needed to overturn the veto.

Later that month, a motion to override Ford's veto of a housing subsidy bill fell 16 short of the two-thirds needed. Albert again took to the floor to denounce the President for designating 'Pennsylvania Avenue as a one-way street with veto barricades against the overwhelming majority in every instance.' Nonetheless, the inflated Democratic Caucus was supposed to have been able to batter through those barricades. In this instance, 35 Democrats joined with the Republicans to uphold the veto. This was Ford's fourth victory in veto-override confrontations with the

²⁷⁹ Veto of the Emergency Employment Appropriation Act, 1975, June 2, 1975, Congressional Serial Set, Vol. No. 13109-3, Session Vol. No. 1-3, 94th Congress, 1st Session, H.Doc. 169.

²⁸⁰ Minutes, Special Democratic Caucus, HDC papers, LOC, Box 6; Nancy Hicks, "House Fails to Override Veto of Bills to Add Jobs," *NYT*, June 5, 1975.

²⁸¹ *Congressional Record – House*, 121:13, June 4, 1975, 16863, 16869.

Congress.²⁸² The veto was Ford's most effective legislative weapon, and he wielded it often. Indeed, relative to time in office, Ford ranks fourth for the frequency with which he deployed his veto.²⁸³ The press response to such stalemate was excoriating. 'Ah, how June's reality has melted the optimisms of January!' wrote playwright and columnist Larry L. King. 'Democrats, given opportunities to gladden the ghost of Franklin Roosevelt, have been unable to get together on their major schemes.' In the same month, the *New York Times* editorial denounced both President Ford and the Democratic Congress for 'Governing by Posture.'²⁸⁴

The failure to override these vetoes was infuriating for those members who had expected the Caucus to seize the legislative initiative in the 94th Congress. Some, younger members in particular, blamed the leadership for failing to ensure unity. Budget Committee chair Brock Adams recommended that the Caucus take punitive action against defectors, such as stripping them of seniority. Burton publicly cautioned against 'unleashing frustrations inward' and told members that they had to 'search for more carrots than sticks.' Mo Udall, though he still hoped for more 'vigorous' leadership, was equally circumspect: 'You can't tell 289 [sic] independent Democrats to jump through a hoop. The whole thrust of reform was for independence and more individual intent. If they campaigned against an increase in the gas tax, no amount of brilliant leadership can make them vote for it.'²⁸⁵ Ultimately it was foolish to expect members to vote against their districts, and thus against their own political careers.

²⁸² Richard L. Lyons, "Veto of Housing Subsidy Bill Upheld," *WP*, June 26, 1975; Richard L. Madden, "Housing Bill Veto Upheld In House on 268-157 Tally," *NYT*, June 26, 1975.

²⁸³ A. James Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change: The Nixon and Ford Administrations* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 323.

²⁸⁴ Larry L. King, "Congress Gums It Up," *NYT*, Jun 15, 1975; "Governing by Posture," *NYT*, June 30, 1975.

²⁸⁵ Richard L. Lyons, "Vetoes Frustrate Democrats," *WP*, June 17, 1975.

David Broder came to a similar conclusion, writing that the House was ‘floundering’ because it was ‘dominated by junior members so insecure about their political futures that they cannot see any issue in terms that reach beyond the next election ... No one can lead men and women who refuse to be led.’²⁸⁶ Given the unprecedented size of the freshman class, and the fact that so many members had won in marginal districts in a year when the Republican brand was peculiarly toxic, such anxieties were understandable. House Democrats could hardly expect the GOP to obligingly offer up a new Watergate every few years. Moreover, all things considered, the Democratic Caucus was remarkably cohesive. Veto-override resolutions almost always failed to pass by a handful of votes. With the total Caucus only just clearing the magic two-thirds threshold, even a small rebellion could scupper the House Democrats’ grand schemes. In this context, the much-feted ‘veto-proof majority’ was as much a liability as an advantage, raising expectations of a congressional party facing a president who used his veto power as a bargaining tool.

Nonetheless, the Caucus did struggle to clear the legitimacy hurdle, dogged constantly by accusations that it should not be used as an instrument of policy. This was characteristic of Burton’s career. His successes were qualified by the manner in which he exploited House institutions to achieve them. He had forced the first contested election for Caucus chairman in decades and made the chairmanship more prominent than it had ever been. Yet Burton understood that every bold use of the Caucus antagonised both committee chairs and the existing leadership and invited backlash. His power base would be much more secure if he could penetrate the leadership hierarchy and guide House Caucus activities from a post where he would be

²⁸⁶ David Broder, “Why Congress Is Floundering,” WP, August 13, 1975.

expected to direct policy. In 1976, when the retirement of Speaker Albert prompted a leadership reshuffle that left the post of Majority Leader vacant, he got his chance.

Counting Votes: The House Majority Leadership Election, 1976

Of the Watergate Babies who sought re-election in 1976, all but two were returned to Congress, defying predictions that their election had been an aberration caused by the febrile political atmosphere of 1974. Reviewing the returns from the 1976 elections, *Congressional Quarterly* psephologist Rhodes Cook concluded that while the Republican Party remained formidable in presidential races, at the state and local level it was ‘badly eroded.’ Steven Stockmeyer, executive director of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee (RCCC), noted morosely that, ‘Another showing like 1974 or 1976 would be close to fatal.’ By contrast, Paul Pendergast, executive director of the DCCC was upbeat: ‘The Democratic Party around the country is healthier and bigger [than the GOP] and we have more talent to draw upon.’²⁸⁷ Democratic congressional majorities had rarely proved so durable. The majorities elected alongside LBJ in 1964, for instance, had all but been wiped out by 1966 when the Great Society ran headlong into urban riots and the Vietnam War. Moreover, few Democrats felt that they owed their election to President-elect Jimmy Carter. Indeed, in light of the fact that Carter ran behind many congressional Democrats in their districts along with the fact that he had apparently squandered a large lead over Ford, congressional Democrats could be forgiven for thinking that Carter owed his election

²⁸⁷ Rhodes Cook, “1976 Election Showed Erosion of GOP Base,” *CQWR*, March 19, 1977

to the reverse coattails effect that they had provided.²⁸⁸ To that extent, the 1976 election only strengthened the reformers' case for legislative leadership.

Roll Call journalist Myron Struck reported that, having broken the congressional reform logjam, the class of '74 – then making overtures to the freshmen of the 95th Congress – now had the opportunity to reshape the House leadership in their image, if they could remain unified: 'Their relative ability to engender a spirit of cohesiveness is in their individual abilities to project a low-keyed concern for issues-oriented "progressive" ideas and "possibilities." But their first serious test may be in the race for House Majority Leader.'²⁸⁹ As early as June 1975, it was being reported that freshmen Democrats were threatening open rebellion against the House leadership in light of Congress's tepid legislative record. The possibility of a resolution of no confidence in Albert was under discussion. Bob Carr had gone so far as to publicly demand that the Speaker resign. Albert was, said Carr, 'not dynamic, [not] a strong personality, and [not] energetic in forming a leadership figure around which the party can rally.'²⁹⁰ The attempts to force Albert into premature retirement failed (Carr would later publicly regret his impetuosity), but relations between the Watergate Babies and the leadership remained cool. By contrast, Burton was as close as the class came to having its own leader.

²⁸⁸ According to Nigel Bowles, whereas Carter won 50.1 percent of the popular vote, victorious Democrats averaged 56.2 percent in House races and 54.4 percent in Senate races. House Democrats ran ahead of Carter by between 4 and 9 percentage points in every region of the country. Nigel Bowles, *The White House and Capitol Hill: The Politics of Presidential Persuasion* (Oxford, 1987), 190-91.

²⁸⁹ Myron Struck, "As It Strikes Struck," *Roll Call*, November 18, 1976, clipping in the PB papers, USC, Carton 13

²⁹⁰ "Albert May Face A Revolt In the House," *NYT*, June 14, 1976; "Albert to Get Bid For 'Party Unity,'" *NYT*, June 18, 1975.

In June 1976, with the Democratic Party poised to reclaim the two elected branches for the first time that decade, Albert announced his retirement. The speakership would almost certainly pass to Albert's deputy, Majority Leader O'Neill, who was unlikely to face any serious opposition. The real race, then, was to replace O'Neill. Shortly after the announcement, Albert effectively endorsed O'Neill ('I'm recommending that he will make a great Speaker'), but delicately declined to endorse any candidate in the majority leader's race. He did not believe, he added, that a 'really great liberal' would emerge to lead the 95th Congress.²⁹¹ From the off, however, Burton was the presumed front-runner. Of the declared candidates, only he had won a caucus-wide election.

The other candidates, at least initially, were John J. McFall, representative from California and majority whip, and Richard Bolling, Missouri congressman and elder statesman of the congressional reform movement. As majority whip, tradition had it that McFall would succeed O'Neill. He was a former lawyer who had represented a district that neighbored Burton's in northern California since the 1950s. McFall and Burton had gone head-to-head for the whip's position in early 1973, with the former winning out, a feat he hoped to replicate. He was damaged, however, by the 'Koreagate' scandal, revelations that he had accepted thousands of dollars in gifts from a South Korean businessman, Tongsun Park, who was apparently a front for influence-buying by Korean officials. McFall was decent and well-liked, but thought by some, as one member put it, as 'just too nice to get things done.' This was not a vice that the prickly and aloof Bolling shared. Bolling was a senior member of the

²⁹¹ As he claimed in the interview that Burton was 'a lot more moderate than he appears to be,' the remark is a lot less of a rebuke than it might at first appear. "Albert Is Hailed in House; Drive for Key Posts Is On," *NYT*, June 8, 1976; Lois Romano, "Interview with Albert," *Roll Call*, June 17, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB Carton 13.

Rules Committee, a former academic, and, according to the *New York Times*, ‘the Democrats’ best parliamentarian and legislative theoretician.’ A onetime protégé of Sam Rayburn, Bolling had emerged as a formidable intellectual and legislator within the congressional reform movement, publishing, among other works, *House Out of Order* in 1965 in an effort to transform it into a public cause. He had been central to all manner of institutional reforms, and reform efforts, within the House, and had challenged Albert for the majority leadership in 1962. However, though Bolling was generally respected, he was also regarded as arrogant.²⁹²

Over McFall and Bolling, Burton was confident that he had the edge, telling a San Francisco Chamber of Commerce delegation before Albert had even resigned that he would be the next majority leader. His allies boasted of the number of solid commitments he had received. ‘That’s an old tactic of Burton’s,’ countered McFall. ‘It’s a pattern of his to say, “I’ve got all the votes. Everyone else can go home.”’²⁹³ In the Senate, a similar reshuffle was underway at the top. With the incumbent Mike Mansfield retiring, Hubert Humphrey had announced his intention to pursue the majority leadership.²⁹⁴ ‘[M]ost Democratic insiders agree,’ wrote Albert Hunt in the *Wall Street Journal*, ‘that if Rep. Burton wins in the House and Sen. Humphrey wins in the Senate, the outlook is for a more assertive Legislative branch.’ These two elections, thus, would ‘determine the disposition of the new Congress and its relationship with the Carter administration.’²⁹⁵

²⁹² Richard D. Lyons, “Leadership of House: Struggle Involves Ideology and Legislation,” *NYT*, March 31, 1976; David Broder, “The House Contest: Four Personalities,” *WP*, December 1, 1976; Richard W. Bolling, *House Out of Order* (New York, 1965).

²⁹³ “Phillip Burton Says He’ll Be Demo Leader,” *S.F. Examiner*, May 27, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13; Mary Russell, “The Struggle,” *WP*, June 6, 1976.

²⁹⁴ “Humphrey Will Seek Leadership,” *WP*, Jun 18, 1976.

²⁹⁵ Albert R. Hunt, “Two Close Democratic Leadership Fights Could Decide New Congress’s Disposition,” *WSJ*, November 19, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

No one was more dismayed by Burton's frontrunner status than the man who was to succeed Albert: Thomas P. 'Tip' O'Neill. Burton and O'Neill's mutual antipathy is in some respects surprising. Both were on the liberal wing of the caucus. Both drew accusations of excessive partisanship from House Republicans. Both had credibility with younger members, in large part because they had been early opponents of the Vietnam War and supporters of Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign. O'Neill's infamous dictum, 'All politics is local,' found near perfect expression in Burton's careful husbanding of his San Francisco constituency. Burton had publicly supported O'Neill's bid for the majority leadership in 1972, after the death of Hale Boggs, and O'Neill would later praise Burton as the 'most abiding Democrat' he had ever known.²⁹⁶

Yet beneath the superficial comity, a deep rivalry had been intensifying between the two men throughout the 1970s. It dated to 1972 when DSG chairman Burton had made his first bid for a place in the Democratic leadership, in the elections precipitated by Majority Leader Hale Boggs' disappearance in a light aircraft over Alaska. Burton almost immediately announced his interest in succeeding O'Neill as majority whip.²⁹⁷ As the whip's post was still within the gift of the Leader, Burton understood that this was easier said than done. O'Neill and Burton had been involved in an altercation at a California fundraiser only a few months earlier, which had climaxed in Burton challenging O'Neill to a fight.²⁹⁸ O'Neill was hardly warm to the idea of having the volatile Californian as his deputy and had in fact told presumptive Speaker Albert that Burton was 'crazy.' O'Neill successfully obstructed a Burton-led

²⁹⁶ Letter, Tip O'Neill to PB, n.d., PB papers, UCalB, Carton 10; Farrell, *Tip O'Neill*, 390

²⁹⁷ Mary Russell, "House Leader Race Narrowed to Two," *WP-TH*, November 17, 1972.

²⁹⁸ Jacobs, *Rage for Justice*, 237-8.

Caucus resolution to make the whip's post elective and promoted McFall instead.²⁹⁹

From here, the animosity between the two men continued to fester.

The feud was more than a matter of clashing egos. There was a more substantive dispute between the two men, though it seemed more often strategic. Despite overlapping policy concerns, O'Neill was far more institutionally-minded than Burton. He had greater respect for the House's traditions. California congressman Tony Coelho – who had worked for Bernie Sisk from 1965 until he succeeded to his seat in 1978 – summarised the differences between O'Neill and Burton: 'I don't think Tip ever got out ahead of the team too much. Burton wanted to educate. Burton wanted to convince ... [O'Neill] wanted to lead the troops, and help you accomplish things as opposed to having his own ideas of what needed to be done.'³⁰⁰ As the likelihood of a clash increased, O'Neill and Burton sniped at each other through the press. Questioned about possible intra-leadership tensions, Burton remarked, 'I can work with O'Neill. Ask him whether he can work with me.' O'Neill replied soon afterwards with a terse, 'I can work with anyone.'³⁰¹ An O'Neill-Burton double act seemed to promise near open warfare within the ranks of the Democratic leadership.

In an effort to derail the Burton locomotive, O'Neill and his allies cast around for a suitable log. They settled on Jim Wright of Texas. A ten-term veteran of the House, Wright was a liberal by his state's standards. He had declined to sign the 'Southern Manifesto,' circulated during his freshman term, and had voted for the 1957 Civil Rights Act. He never won his Texas seat with less than 60 percent of the vote.

²⁹⁹ Marjorie Hunter, "Democratic Bloc Seek to End Appointment of House Whip," *NYT*, December 30, 1972; Minutes, Caucus Meeting, January 2, 1973, in HDC papers, Box 3.

³⁰⁰ Farrell, *Tip O'Neill*, 435.

³⁰¹ Bruce F. Freed, "Albert Retirement Promises Leadership Fight," *CQ*, June 12, 1976.

He had served on the Public Works Committee since his first term, distinguishing himself as a diligent and competent legislator, and was in line to become its chairman in the 95th Congress. In contrast to the often obnoxious and divisive Burton, Wright was, one reporter said, ‘Mr. Nice Guy, spelled in capital letters. It’s virtually impossible to find a representative who has ever had a run-in with him.’ In 1972, Wright had published *You and Your Congressman* which, in contrast to Bolling’s excoriating polemics, was a gently laudatory defence of both his institution and his colleagues.³⁰² He was solicitous of his House colleagues in other ways, using his position on Public Works to steer infrastructure projects towards potential allies. Acknowledged as a fine orator, he was often sought out by other members as a campaigner.³⁰³ Despite his late entry into the race, Wright brought formidable advantages with him, not the least of which was his membership of the large Texas delegation. Wright announced his candidacy in late July. The role of the majority leader, he said in his announcement, was to be ‘advocate, conciliator, occasional innovator. Part evangelist, part parish priest, and every now and then, part prophet.’³⁰⁴

Burton’s objectionable legislative style and poor working relationship with O’Neill were significant obstacles to his leadership ambitions. An additional weakness was his association with Rep. Wayne Hays, the committee chair whom Burton had helped shield from the Watergate Babies’ cull in early 1975, and who was, by mid-1976, embroiled in one of the worst congressional scandals of the decade. In May 1976, the *Washington Post* reported that Hays was keeping a young female clerk on his payroll, Elizabeth Ray, solely to offer him sexual favours. Ray – a one-time Miss

³⁰² Daniel Rapoport, “Wright: No Unkind Words,” WP, January 3, 1977.

³⁰³ John M. Barry, *The Ambition and the Power* (New York, 1989), 11-12

³⁰⁴ Bruce I. Oppenheimer, Robert L. Peabody, “The House Majority Leadership Contest, 1976,” prepared for the American Political Science Association, September 1-4, 1977, 34, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

Virginia, former waitress and stewardess, and aspiring actress – told the *Post* that she had never been asked to do any Congress-related work and appeared in the Capitol Hill office for only a few hours a week: ‘I can’t type. I can’t file. I can’t even answer the phone.’³⁰⁵

Initially, Hays denied the allegations, dismissing Ray as an ‘extremely sick young woman’ and accusing the *Post* of pursuing ‘a political vendetta.’ Within days, however, Hays had reversed course, conceding the affair and referring himself to the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct. The Justice Department and the FBI both embarked on their own investigations and a federal grand jury was impanelled to begin hearing testimony.³⁰⁶ The scandal had been compounded by the considerable power that Hays wielded as chair of the House Administration Committee. This position gave Hays enormous power over the things congressional offices depended on day-to-day: stationery allowances, office space, telephones, mail franking, travel expenses, and even air conditioning. Control of much of these privileges had come about as a direct result of Hays’ efforts to expand the Administration Committee ‘from an obscure housekeeping agency into one of the most heavily staffed committees in the House.’³⁰⁷

Cantankerous and penny-pinching, Hays was not shy about wielding his power. Hays’ influence was augmented by his simultaneous chairmanship of the DCCC, a fact that drew the ire of several reform groups. In effect, Hays controlled a significant proportion of the resources that members would receive first as they sought

³⁰⁵ Marion Clark, Rudy Maxa, “Closed-Session Romance on the Hill,” *WP*, May 23, 1976.

³⁰⁶ “Rep. Hays Defers Trip, Denies Aide’s Accusation,” *NYT*, May 24, 1976; Lucinda Franks, “Hays, in Reversal, Admits Affair With Staff Member,” *NYT*, May 26, 1976.

³⁰⁷ Laurence Stern, Walter Pineus, “Wayne Hays’ Power Base: Political IOUs,” *WP*, June 8, 1976

office and then as they occupied it. ‘Allowing Hays to chair both the Campaign Committee and the House Administration Committee,’ charged Fred Wertheimer, chair of Common Cause, ‘remains a scandal the Democrats have to deal with.’ It was, said Wertheimer, ‘the worst possible conflict of interest.’ Hays, in turn, sneeringly dismissed the organisation as ‘Common Curse.’³⁰⁸ By contrast, Burton’s congressional reform efforts meant that he was embraced as an ally by public advocacy groups like Common Cause.³⁰⁹ The Hays affair placed those relationships under strain.

Almost immediately, House Democrats began agitating for Hays’ removal, with some pressing for a special Caucus meeting. By early June, O’Neill was demanding that Hays temporarily relinquish his committee chairmanships until the federal investigations had concluded. A week later, the Democratic National Congressional Committee voted unanimously to remove Hays as chair.³¹⁰ The next day, Hays was hospitalised following an overdose of sleeping medication, which he later claimed was accidental.³¹¹ By the end of the month, he had resigned his chairmanship and the Caucus had approved a recommendation from the Steering and Policy Committee to return some of the powers that had accrued to the Administration Committee to the full House.³¹² In August, Hays announced his retirement, citing both

³⁰⁸ Mary Russell, “Hays Rebuffs Albert, Keeps Campaign Post,” *WP*, January 30, 1975; T.R. Reid, “Changing the Guard at Common Cause,” *WP*, May 15, 1977

³⁰⁹ Common Cause Press Release, “Common Cause Lauds Burton’s Leadership on Congressional Reform,” March 1, 1973, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 11. Letter, John W. Gardner to Burton, March 6, 1975, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 10.

³¹⁰ Richard D. Lyons, “O’Neill Bids Hays Give Up His House Chairmanships,” *NYT*, June 3, 1976; Richard D. Lyons, “Democrats Remove Hays As Head of Campaign Unit,” *NYT*, June 10, 1976.

³¹¹ Lucinda Franks, “Hays’s Pill Dose Called 10 Times Usual,” *NYT*, June 12, 1976; “Hays Terms Overdose of Pills a Mishap, Not Suicide Attempt,” *NYT*, July 4, 1976.

³¹² “Hays Resignation of Chairmanship Accepted By House,” *NYT*, June 22, 1976; Minutes, Democratic Caucus, Regular Meeting, June 23, 1976, HDC papers, LOC, Box 7.

health concerns and ongoing press ‘harassment,’ before resigning his seat entirely in September.³¹³

As the scandal intensified, Hays had found himself with few defenders. Tensions had been running high between Hays and the leadership for some time. Despite pressure from Albert and O’Neill, Hays had refused to step aside as chair of the DCCC in January 1975. Hays blamed O’Neill for the Steering and Policy Committee recommendation to oust him from his chairmanship (repudiated, thanks to Burton, by the Caucus).³¹⁴ Hays could count on little support from the rank-and-file. Well before the scandal had broken, the Watergate Babies had come in for significant criticism for their failure to remove Hays in the broader chairman cull. The *Washington Post* had been more forgiving than some, but even it had criticised the ‘self-styled congressional reformers’ for seeking ‘to reallocate power within a system, rather than to remake the system itself.’ Removing Hays would have been ‘the first step to dismantling the internal spoils system of the House.’³¹⁵

Pressure came from both the right as well as the left. The House GOP seized on the issue enthusiastically, and Republican members took to referring to the scandal as a ‘Democratic Watergate.’ Minority Leader John Rhodes condemned it as ‘a black-eye on the whole Congress.’ President Ford, during a television interview, said both he and the nation were ‘disturb[ed]’ by the allegations.³¹⁶ ‘If I were a Democratic congressman, I’d sleep nervously,’ said Minnesota Republican Bill Frenzel. ‘The

³¹³ Mary Russell, “Hays To Retire; He Cites Health, ‘Harassment,’” *WP*, August 14, 1976.

³¹⁴ Mary Russell, “Hays Rebuffs Albert, Keeps Campaign Post,” *WP*, January 30, 1975

³¹⁵ “The Trouble With Mr. Hays,” *WP*, January 22, 1975

³¹⁶ Myron Struck, “House GOP Making Issue of Hays-Ray Fray,” *Roll Call*, June 17, 1976; “Ford Says Hays Case Disturbs Him and Nation,” *NYT*, June 5, 1976.

majority has written the rules and runs the Congress. They've got to clean up the nest.'³¹⁷

Throughout Hays' prolonged public disgrace, Burton could do little to protect his old ally. He did take steps, however, to try and insulate himself from the scandal. For instance, in keeping with the mood of transparency, he produced a memorandum detailing his current assets and tax rates dating back to 1971. 'As Majority Leader,' he added, 'it would be my intention to file such statements annually.'³¹⁸ However, the scandal wounded him. Cartoonist Herblock depicted Burton as the proprietor of 'Wheeler-Dealer Phil Burton's Congressional Used Cars' who, having already been responsible for a write-off marked 'The Wayne Hays: A Burton Special,' offers his ragged and bruised customer – 'House Democrats' – the reassurance, 'You lucky fellow – I just happen to have **another** great buy for you.' The second car, leaking fluid and with a wonky front bumper, was marked 'The Burton Leadership Deal.'³¹⁹

The calculation shifted in early November when Jimmy Carter won the presidency. Had Ford been narrowly returned to office – an eminently plausible outcome by November 1976 – then a noisy and aggressive partisan, to whip the ranks and override vetoes, might have made for a more appealing candidate. As it was, with a Democratic president-elect, the familiar paradigm of executive leadership in setting legislative priorities began to reassert itself. In that context, Burton struck an inclusive note, declaring in a newspaper interview that he hoped Carter would work with Congress as he pursued his reform agenda, paying attention to the membership as a

³¹⁷ Bruce F. Freed, "Democrats Fear Fallout From Hays Affair," *CQWR*, May 29, 1976

³¹⁸ PB, Memorandum, November 16, 1976, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 10.

³¹⁹ Herblock cartoon, *WP*, December 2, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

whole and not just the leaders: ‘This is a rich national resource. We hope it will be called upon.’³²⁰

Winning over the younger cohort was of vital importance. Burton was the youngest candidate in the race, and the most recently elected, and he had been cultivating relationships with many since his time at the DSG. Many felt they owed their congressional careers, at least in part, to Burton. He sought to nurture similar relationships with the new members. As usual, he flew to unfamiliar districts to campaign for new members and made sure he was the first congressman to welcome several to Washington.³²¹ The anti-Burton forces made similar overtures. O’Neill – along with Whip McFall and Deputy Whip John Brademas – organised the orientation for the 47 freshmen members, incurring the wrath of the DSG, which had traditionally been responsible for this. After tense negotiations, it was agreed that there would be two orientations. Doubtless, the House leadership was anxious to start moulding the new intake, but there remained an abiding suspicion that the DSG was in some senses still a proxy for Burton.³²² However late, the leadership was moving to isolate Burton. Nonetheless, his support with the Watergate Babies, nearly all of whom had been re-elected in 1976, remained solid. In the days before the Caucus met, 14 Democrats circulated a letter in support of Burton’s candidacy. Fully half of those who signed had been elected in 1974. No other ‘class’ had more than one member as a signatory.³²³

³²⁰ Tom Eastham, “Phil Burton –,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 14, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

³²¹ Richard L. Madden, “Carter’s Relationship With Congress May Depend On A Series of Leadership Battles Before He Takes Office,” *NYT*, Nov 13, 1976

³²² Walter Taylor, “Democrats’ Jockeying Includes Factional Recruiting of Freshman,” *Washington Star*, November 23, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

³²³ They were Michael T. Blouin (Iowa), William T. Brodhead (Michigan), Joseph L. Fisher (Virginia), James J. Florio (New Jersey), George Miller and Norman Y. Mineta (California), and Toby Moffett (Connecticut). “Dear Colleague” letter from Michael T. Blouin et al., December 2, 1976, PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

On December 6, the 296 members of the Democratic Caucus gathered on the floor of the House to elect their leaders for the upcoming Congress. In defiance of precedent, the Caucus voted to open its session to the public. To no-one's astonishment, O'Neill was elected unopposed as Speaker at the beginning of the session. During the two-hour, three-ballot election for House Majority Leader, the 'packed galleries oohed and ahed as the returns were announced one by one.'³²⁴ One hundred and forty nine votes were required for victory. Some observers had predicted that Burton would secure 130, perhaps even 140, in the first ballot.³²⁵ It was therefore something of a surprise when Burton received only 106 votes in the first round, in which McFall was eliminated. When Bolling was knocked out in the second ballot (in which Burton's support crept up to 107) it would have been reasonable to assume that the reformist Missourian's supporters would flood over to the remaining liberal in the race, Burton. This would be to underestimate the extent to which Burton could antagonise his ideological bedfellows.

In the third and final ballot, Bob Carr was one of Burton's tellers. He recalled the tense atmosphere in the Caucus towards the end of the count, when the four previous boxes had produced a tie, and he and Rep. Charlie Wilson of Texas, one of Wright's tellers, were alternately counting ballots:

It was Charlie and I counting the ballots. And he'd turn over one and I'd turn over one, and the clerks and everyone was watching this. It was like a very close sports match. And it came down, it literally came down, to the last ballot turned over. And Charlie turned it over, and it was for Jim Wright.³²⁶

³²⁴ Tom Eastham, John Hall, "Why Burton Lost House Battle," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 7, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

³²⁵ Myron Struck, "Survey Shows Burton Ahead In House Majority Leader Race," *Roll Call*, December 9, 1976; Leo Rennerts, "Burton is Favorite In Majority Leader Race In House," *Sacramento Bee*, December 5, 1976, offprints in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

³²⁶ M. Robert Carr, author interview.

Burton lost by 147 votes to Wright's 148.³²⁷ The implications of the result were obvious to observers. O'Neill's deputy would now not be the 'tough, activist, ambitious Burton pushing O'Neill, pushing the House, pushing Jimmy Carter,' but 'a comfortable man with a soothing voice who sees his role as a builder of bridges between North and South, conservatives and liberals.'³²⁸ 'Given a choice of four office-seekers,' wrote Jerry terHorst, former press secretary to President Ford, '[House Democrats] chose not to rush in where angels fear to tread.'³²⁹ In the Senate, Humphrey had suffered a similar fate, losing the Majority Leadership to Robert C. Byrd. In each case, the more activist liberal had lost to an institutionally conservative Southerner.

Publicly, Burton was upbeat. 'If you'd have predicted two years ago that I'd become majority leader, someone would have taken you off to an institution,' he said afterwards. 'But I came within one vote of making it and I did it without waiting around to become the consensus candidate who spent years in one appointed House post after another, waiting for my turn to lead.'³³⁰ Nonetheless, this was the first election Burton had lost since 1954 and it proved a significant setback. His defeat was due to a combination of factors: O'Neill's opposition, the Hays scandal, Wright's Southern support, and his own abrasive personality. Indeed, the very qualities that made him such an effective legislator may well have doomed him in the leadership

³²⁷ Eastham, Hall, "Why Burton Lost House Battle."

³²⁸ Richard L. Lyons, "Soothing Bridge-Builder," *WP*, December 7, 1976.

³²⁹ J. F. terHorst, "The House Is A Bit Shaky," *LAT*, December 14, 1976, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

³³⁰ John Fogarty, "Burton: No Relaxing, No Regrets," *WP*, January 3, 1977.

election. ‘One word frequently heard in reference to Burton,’ reported one post-mortem, ‘was “instability.”’³³¹

One anonymous Democratic congressman told the *San Francisco Examiner* that Carter might have played an indirect role in Burton’s defeat: ‘There was a feeling that he would be in disharmony with the new administration as well as with the new speaker. The Carter people thought he might not work well with them.’³³² There was no indication that Carter took an active role in blocking Burton, but in such a tight race the undisguised suspicions of the President-elect’s staff can hardly be discounted as a factor. If such considerations played a role in members’ calculations, then it is clear that deference to the executive remained a tenacious force in Congress even after Watergate. One of the more illustrative remarks came from Senator John Glenn, who observed in June, ‘The outcome may depend on who is elected President. Will we need an articulate spokesman for the loyal Democratic opposition to a Republican President, or will we need a legislative mechanic to work with a Democratic president.’³³³ A similar orthodoxy prevailed in the House. Had Ford been elected, there would have been a far stronger case for taking a punt on Burton.

‘Liberalism’s Legislative Genius’

Burton did not entirely abandon his leadership ambitions after his maddeningly close 1976 defeat. By early 1978, Burton was intimating that he would challenge Wright for the majority leader’s post again after that year’s midterms. ‘I certainly don’t expect to

³³¹ Eastham, Hall, “Why Burton Lost In House Battle.”

³³² Reg Murphy, “Carter’s Role In Burton’s Loss,” *S.F. Examiner*, December 12, 1978, offprint in the PB papers, UCalB, Carton 13.

³³³ Spencer Rich, “Ideologies Will Clash in Senate Leader Race,” *WP*, June 11, 1976.

wait until next century,' he told inquisitive journalists.³³⁴ That challenge never materialised, however. By 1980, the Reagan landslide had put the House Democratic majority on the back foot and by 1983, at the moment that a congressional fightback to the Reagan revolution had begun in earnest, Burton was dead.

The Watergate Babies, under Burton's leadership, had failed to transform the Caucus into an instrument of policy. Clearly, the Babies faced serious opposition from the institutionally-minded in the House, especially those who felt that the Caucus should not usurp functions properly exercised by the committees. However, the class had their own internal weaknesses. For all their cultural similarities, their populist attacks on a collection of corrupt elites, and their shared insistence on the need to find new solutions for the 1970s, there was precious little agreement over how to proceed and few attempts to systematically define these solutions. Clannish and fiercely protective of their independence, the Watergate Babies were not inclined to, for instance, colonise the DSG and renovate it as a tool for advancing their own legislative objectives.

Class cohesion, at least in ideological terms, broke down relatively quickly. Regular meetings ended for the Watergate Babies in 1979. By 1984, reported *Congressional Quarterly*, 'the only time the members get together formally is for their annual Christmas party – and that event is organized by their wives.' It had persisted as long as it had, recalled Toby Moffett, 'partly out of nostalgia and partly out of fear of being swallowed up by the institution.'³³⁵ This disintegration was accelerated by the imperatives of re-election. Indeed, some older members understood the noisy

³³⁴ Philip Shabecoff, "Rep. Burton Held Likely to Seek House Leader's Fort," *NYT*, February 23, 1978.

³³⁵ Granat, "Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies?"

reformism of their younger colleagues as the aggressive pursuit of high profiles by uneasy Democrats in marginal districts. The problem was far more pressing in the House, of course, where the number of potential rivals for media attention and the brevity of the electoral terms concentrated the mind.

In the pursuit of re-election, it was the proliferation of subcommittees and the expansion of the resources available to individual members that was most welcome. This flowering of subcommittees meant that alongside the Caucus signally failing to mobilise was another story of liberal impulses diffusing throughout the House and finding legislative expression in more subtle, but no less potent, ways. Here, Burton's hand is evident and his legacy secure. The career of Congressman Henry Waxman of California provides an instructive case study. From almost the beginning of his political career, Waxman was drawn into the orbit of Phillip Burton. As Waxman moved from the Young Democrats to the California Assembly and then the House, Burton was an ally and mentor.³³⁶ Almost as soon as he arrived, as a result of Burton's intervention, Waxman was placed on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, an ambitious posting for a new representative.³³⁷ Burton continued to work with Waxman, and to help advance his career, for the rest of his life. On the same day Burton was defeated for majority leader, he successfully installed Waxman as the California delegation's representative on the Steering and Policy Committee, leapfrogging the more senior – and more conservative – Glenn Anderson.³³⁸

³³⁶ Henry Waxman, Joshua Green, *The Waxman Report: How Congress Really Works* (New York and Boston, 2009), 6.

³³⁷ Jacobs, *A Rage for Justice*, 261.

³³⁸ John Fogarty, "Burton: No Relaxing, No Regrets," *WP*, January 3, 1977.

When Waxman announced his retirement in January 2014, as the end of his twentieth consecutive term approached, the media response mixed elegy with panegyric.³³⁹ By general consensus, Waxman left an enviable legislative legacy.³⁴⁰ He had been a motive force in the Clean Air Act of 1990, the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act of 1990, the Food Quality and Protection Act of 1996, the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009, and latterly the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, popularly known as ‘Obamacare.’³⁴¹ He was, wrote the *Washington Post*’s Harold Myerson, ‘liberalism’s legislative genius.’³⁴² He had been called the ‘Democrats’ Eliot Ness’ and the ‘Scariest Guy in Washington.’ His facial hair had acquired its own nickname: the ‘mustache of justice.’³⁴³

Waxman was the archetypal, and one of the most successful, ‘legislative entrepreneurs’ described by Burdett Loomis and his career trajectory demonstrates the centrifugal forces that acted to splinter the Democratic Caucus even as institutional reforms supposedly made it easier to pursue a clearly liberal party agenda.

³³⁹ Henry Waxman, “Rep. Henry Waxman: The Reason I’m Leaving Congress,” *WP*, January 31, 2014; Ron Elving, “Congressman’s Exit Closes Book on ‘Watergate Babies,’” *It’s All Politics: Political News from NPR*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2014/01/30/269003155/congressmans-exit-closes-book-on-watergate-babies>, last accessed September 15, 2014.

³⁴⁰ Richard Simon, “Rep. Henry Waxman To Retire From Congress,” *LAT*, January 30, 2014; David Rogers, “Henry Waxman Hands Off The Torch,” *POLITICO*, February 10, 2014; David A. Graham, “Henry Waxman’s Retirement: A Bad Sign for House Democrats in 2014,” *The Atlantic*, January 30, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/henry-waxmans-retirement-a-bad-sign-for-house-democrats-in-2014/283476/>; Jonathan Cohn, “Farewell to Henry Waxman, a Liberal Hero,” *TNR*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116418/henry-waxman-retiring-heres-why-well-miss-him>, last accessed September 15, 2014.

³⁴¹ In Martha Derthick’s account of federal tobacco policy since the 1960s, the ‘liberal, tough, and resourceful’ Waxman emerges as the ‘leader of the opposition’ within Congress to Big Tobacco. Though critical of the pro-regulation forces, Derthick shows how Waxman was able to use his chairmanship of the House Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Health and the Environment to press the issue relentlessly. Martha A. Derthick, *Up in Smoke: From Legislation to Litigation in Tobacco Politics* (3rd ed., Washington, D.C., 2012), 19-21, 57-8, 114-15, 209.

³⁴² Harold Myerson, “Henry Waxman, Liberalism’s Legislative Genius,” *WP*, February 6, 2014.

³⁴³ David Corn, “Waxman: Democrats’ Eliot Ness,” *The Nation*, February 14, 2005; Ben McGrath, “The Scariest Guy in Washington,” *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2009.

Nonetheless, though seemingly a catastrophe at the time, the non-mobilisation of the Caucus did not leave liberalism supine in the face of New Right marauders, as later chapters will show. However, it is an irony that the class that burst into Congress with the intention of defenestrating the powerful conservative committee chairmen who had been gumming up liberal legislation for decades, ended up being most successful at advancing liberalism through the very committees and subcommittees they had arrived to destroy. Ford's 'legislative dictatorship' may not have materialised, but a more diffuse and atomised '(sub)committee government' certainly did. Burton's role in its creation and his influence in the form it took, though less dramatic, is no less certain.

At the same moment that Burton's hopes for an instrumentalized House Caucus were being dashed, elsewhere on Capitol Hill another group of Democrats were struggling to seize the legislative initiative. They focused not on transforming institutions but on the far more traditional means of policy leadership. Their goal was as radical as Burton's, however. Senators Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy shared Burton's faith in the affirmative powers of government. Their response to the crises and demolished certainties of the 1970s was to embrace national planning ideas and pursue the overhaul of the nation's political economy (through, respectively, full employment legislation and the enactment of national health insurance). They would likewise find their ambitions thwarted partly by an uncooperative president, but this time he would hail from the same party.

3. The National Planning Idea and the ‘New Deal That Never Happened’

In 1970, a pair of disaffected moderate Democrats, Ben Wattenberg and Richard Scammon, published *The Real Majority*, which they hoped would land on their party like a bucket of cold water. The book argued that while Democrats monopolised ‘the Economic Issue,’ the rising importance of what the authors called ‘the Social Issue’ (an umbrella term covering crime, urban unrest, student protests, and general moral decline) was distorting the traditional axes of American politics. On this issue, the Democrats were in danger of losing the nation’s socially conservative majority. According to this book, the bulk of the electorate, in contrast to the romantic expectations of New Politics activists, was ‘unyoung, unpoor, and unblack.’ The average American voter, wrote Scammon and Wattenberg, was not ‘a twenty-four-year-old instructor of political science at Yale University’ but rather ‘a forty-seven-year-old housewife from the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio whose husband is a machinist.’ Armed with a supposedly clear image of the actual centre of American politics, Scammon and Wattenberg recommended that the party must position itself to appeal to these socially conservative voters or risk electoral oblivion.³⁴⁴

Not everyone was impressed. One reviewer dismissed *The Real Majority* as ‘third-rate Machiavelli’ and compared reviewing it to ‘trying to use a smog-ball as a punching bag.’³⁴⁵ It would certainly be simplistic to assume that blue collar Americans were monolithically conservative, or that social or cultural conservatism would always trump economic concerns. As columnist Clayton Fritchley wrote, polls revealed that the average blue collar worker was ‘a mixed-up fellow politically ... he is against

³⁴⁴ Richard M. Scammon, Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, (New York, 1970), 21, 45-6, 70-1.

³⁴⁵ John Leonard, “Books of the Times: Third-Rate Machiavelli,” *NYT*, September 25, 1970.

school busing for desegregation ... [but] he is strongly for integration. He is patriotic, but he wants out of Vietnam. He wants tax relief, but he also wants better education, better health care, better environment, better housing.’³⁴⁶ Recent historiography has further revealed the contradictory political identity of the blue collar worker in the 1970s.³⁴⁷ As socialist intellectual Michael Harrington observed, in the 1970s working class America, like the rest of the nation, was moving ‘vigorously left, right, and center at the same time.’³⁴⁸

Nonetheless, an anti-liberal blue-collar backlash did exist. Nixon’s remarkable 1972 tallies among blue-collar workers, Catholics, and union families confirmed that much. Much of the literature on the subject has attributed this backlash to racial causes.³⁴⁹ Such historians argue that the footsoldiers of the ‘Silent Majority’ – and later the ‘Reagan Democrats’ – were disgruntled white opponents of busing and affirmative action, enraged that their tax dollars were going to improve the lot of African-Americans who responded by burning down the nation’s cities. The backlash is not reducible to racial tensions, but they were nonetheless present and potent. Historian Paul Frymer has argued convincingly that the seeds of this backlash were sown by Democratic legislators who had historically sought to enact progressive reforms without alienating white supremacist factions within their own coalition, and

³⁴⁶ Clayton Fritchey, “Mrs. Dayton, Meet Mr. Bunker,” *WP*, April 22, 1972.

³⁴⁷ Joe Merton, for instance, has demonstrated that ‘white ethnic’ identity politics were by no means as straightforwardly reactionary as some historians are inclined to assume. Joe Merton, “Rethinking the Politics of White Ethnicity in 1970s America,” *The Historical Journal*, 55:3 (2012), 731-756; Joe Merton, *‘Ethnic Power!’ The Rise and Fall of the Politics of White Ethnicity, 1964-1984*, unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2009.

³⁴⁸ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, 2010), 3.

³⁴⁹ See, for instance, Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge, LA, and London, 1996); Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, and London, 1992); and Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2006).

so created ‘developed a bifurcated system of power that assigned race and class problems to different spheres of government.’³⁵⁰ As economic conditions worsened towards the end of the 1960s, liberal reform seemed to become a zero-sum game, pitting whites against blacks in a competition for diminishing resources.

The nation’s economy hardly improved in the 1970s. In the immediate post-war era, Americans had grown accustomed to widespread prosperity.³⁵¹ In 1973, all the wheels seemed to fall off the American wagon simultaneously. That year, the Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed an oil embargo on the U.S. in retaliation for the latter’s support of Israel in the Yom Kippur war. The resulting ‘oil shock’ (at the time, the US imported over a third of the oil it consumed) touched off the recession of 1973-75. Recession was compounded by other factors. The US decision to exit the Bretton Woods system in 1971, which had fixed interest rates, led to an overvalued dollar and a persistent trade deficit. The nation’s manufacturing base was in terminal decline and its cities were gripped by fiscal crises and infrastructural decay. A second oil shock in 1979 would be another blow to an already weakened economy. The worst economic development of the decade was ‘stagflation’ – a combination of rising inflation and high unemployment, which liberal economists had once dismissed as impossible. Unemployment peaked at 9 percent in 1975, while inflation reached double digits by the end of the decade. Between 1972 and 1979, the after-tax pay packet of the average American worker

³⁵⁰ Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African-Americans, the Labor Movement, and the Decline of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2008), 2.

³⁵¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York 2003).

shrank by 6 percent. It seemed to many, as Edward Berkowitz has written, that the United States was ‘running out of gas.’³⁵²

Yet, this deteriorating economic climate also offered Democrats an opportunity to reinvigorate and expand the New Deal coalition and to drain the toxins that were enervating it. The animating impulse of the New Deal – a loose, unwieldy and often contradictory collection of reforms – had been ‘security.’ The welfare safety net that successive Democratic administrations had woven since the Depression was incomplete, but by the 1950s it undergirded a relatively prosperous middle class. This had been the foundation of mid-century Democratic supremacy.³⁵³ By the 1970s, unprecedented economic turbulence threatened those gains and eroded that promise of security. For some Democrats, therefore, it stood to reason that a re-embrace of the New Deal’s economic populism would win back anxious workers who, convinced that the Democratic Party was leaving them behind, had been induced to cast their ballots for Nixon. Demonstrating to those voters that the federal government was on their side and that they did not have to submit to a malfunctioning business cycle might bind them once again to the Democratic Party. Moreover, by pursuing what political scientist Theda Skocpol called ‘targeting within universalism,’ such policies would deepen the party’s commitment to minority rights, particularly the uplift of African-Americans, which remained both a moral and an electoral imperative.³⁵⁴

³⁵² Berkowitz, *Something Happened*, 53-6, 61-6; Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford, 2000), 154-65.

³⁵³ Kevin Boyle, “Twenty-Nine Helmets: Government Power and the Promise of Security,” in Steven Conn (ed.), *The Promote the General Welfare: The Case for Big Government* (New York, 2012), 97-8; Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 11-12.

³⁵⁴ Theda Skocpol, “Targeting Within Universalism: Politically Viable Policies to Combat Poverty in the United States,” in Christopher Jencks, Peter E. Petersen, *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C., 1991).

The exigencies of the moment, however, demanded a strategy beyond the *ad hoc* responses of the New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt's welfare and administrative state already existed, after all, and it was proving woefully underequipped to handle the economic shocks of the 1970s. The assumptions of the post-war consensus – that judicious and intermittent government interventions could keep the American economy stable and prosperous – were being brutally shredded by stagflation. An increasing number of intellectuals and policy-makers concluded that a shift towards a planned economy would be the inevitable outcome of the crisis. Such ideas had currency even among those who were wary of national planning. In 1973, sociologist Daniel Bell wrote of his conviction that 'we in America are moving away from a society based on a private-enterprise market system toward one in which the most important economic decisions will be made at the political level, in terms of consciously defined "goals" and "priorities"'.³⁵⁵

In national planning, some Democrats found not only the solution to the nation's woes, but the key to the reinvigoration of their party. The two policy battles explored in this chapter – for full employment legislation and for national health insurance – embodied these new intellectual currents. However, while in many respects radical departures from previous reform efforts, these measures were understood by their proponents as New Deal/Fair Deal liberalism's unfinished business. In his 1944 State of the Union, FDR had proposed a 'Second Bill of Rights.' With the end of the war approaching, the United States faced the twin challenges of 'winning a lasting peace and the establishment of an American standard of living

³⁵⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (Special anniversary ed.; New York, 1999 [orig. 1973]), 297-98. See also Otis L. Graham, *Towards a Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon* (New York, 1976); Eli Ginzberg (ed.), *Jobs for Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1976).

higher than ever before known.’ Among the eight rights outlined in the speech were ‘[t]he right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or mines of the nation’ and ‘[t]he right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health.’³⁵⁶ The notion that material security was the right of every American citizen would influence how the champions of full employment and national health insurance conducted their reform campaigns. In pursuing these measures, their supporters were not only honouring Roosevelt’s memory but also seeking to marry the ameliorative economics of the New Deal to the rights-based discourses of Sixties liberalism.

Leadership on these issues came from the Senate, and from two Senate grandees in particular: Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. Both were in some sense throwbacks to an earlier Democratic tradition. Each intended to demonstrate to their party that the New Deal tradition remained vital and could be used as the foundation of a Democratic majority, dislodging the GOP’s ephemeral cultural politics with good, old-fashioned bread-and-butter realities. It might seem curious that such ambitious liberal initiatives emerged from the Senate. After all, reporter William S. White had infamously described that body in 1957 as ‘the South’s unending revenge upon the North for Gettysburg.’³⁵⁷ Conservative southerners, protected by the seniority system and the Democratic stranglehold on the former states of the Confederacy, sat atop the Senate’s committees and gummed up liberal legislation. It was the congressional reforms at the beginning of the decade, combined with a changing media context, that empowered liberals like Humphrey and Kennedy. With access to additional resources and staff, the

³⁵⁶ Samuel I. Rosenman, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt: 1944-45, Victory and the Threshold of Peace* (New York, 1950), 40-1.

³⁵⁷ William S. White, *Citadel: The Story of the U.S. Senate* (New York, 1957), 68.

chairmanships of newly created subcommittees, and TV and print media looking to fill pages and broadcast time, senators found themselves with new powers to shape the policy agenda. Six-year terms, moreover, gave senators scope to develop a policy portfolio that House members – with terms only a third as long, increasingly victims of the permanent campaign – did not have the luxury to pursue. Senators also had the advantage of fewer institutional rivals. The average House member, alongside other disadvantages, had 434 competitors; a senator had only 99. Humphrey and Kennedy exploited these new advantages to the full in their pursuit of full employment legislation and reform of the national health care system.

These measures represented, to poach Jefferson Cowie's phrase, 'a New Deal that never happened.'³⁵⁸ They were an attempt to prioritise conventional distributive politics over more divisive cultural issues. They also underline that many historians have been mistaken in drawing so sharp a dichotomy between Sixties-era 'rights liberalism' and New Deal-style 'economic liberalism.' If anything, these two case studies show two decidedly old-fashioned Democrats seeking a new synthesis. The supporters of both full employment and national health insurance articulated their case in the language of rights consciousness, telling Americans that they had a 'right' to a job or to healthcare, and that they were entitled to expect the federal government to fulfil those rights. The rights movements of the 1960s had a profound impact on the shape of these policies. Early iterations of the full employment bill, for instance, anticipated that Americans would be able to enforce their right to a job through the courts.

³⁵⁸ Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 261.

Democrats who strove to launch a ‘New New Deal’ would find themselves confronting a president in Jimmy Carter who understood himself as the first Democratic executive of the post-New Deal order. Though Humphrey and Kennedy pushed for radical, comprehensive reforms, the Carter administration would only throw its support behind gradualist legislation that kept costs to a minimum. Carter resisted pressure from key Democratic blocs – most notably labour and African-American groups – for bolder action. As inflation edged out unemployment as the issue of greatest concern to American voters towards the end of the decade, the president became even more convinced of the need to rein in inflationary spending. The advocates of national planning schemes would find their ambitious legislative reforms gutted or frustrated by concerns over inflation, intensifying public mistrust of government, confusion among their allies, and opposition from business lobbyists.

‘Jobs, Jobs, Jobs’: Full Employment

‘We need a President that knows how to fight inflation without throwing people out of work. We need a government that believes in production and jobs, not vetoes and tight money. We need an administration that is determined to get America moving again, not content to rock it to sleep.’ It was October 6, 1975, and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota was addressing the AFL-CIO’s biennial convention in San Francisco. Humphrey’s forty-seven minute speech was interrupted frequently by laughter, applause, and cheers. When it ended the standing ovation lasted for close to a minute. The delegates crowded the senator as he tried to leave the hall, shaking his hand; women kissed him, and several of the men hugged him. It took Humphrey nearly half an hour to exit. ‘It really is too bad that Hubert’s not running,’ George

Meany, the ageing AFL-CIO chairman, remarked afterwards. The response to the other three speakers – Henry M. Jackson of Washington, Birch Bayh of Indiana, and Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, senators and presidential candidates all – was ‘courteous and approving,’ but easily eclipsed by the enthusiasm of Humphrey’s reception.³⁵⁹

By the mid-1970s, the relations between trade unions and the Democratic Party were at low ebb. In 1972, the AFL-CIO had actively campaigned against George McGovern in the primaries and then, for the first time in the organisation’s history, declined to endorse any candidate in the general election.³⁶⁰ As the economy tanked, unemployment rose, and wages stagnated, Democrats found themselves struggling to balance their commitment to eradicating racial inequality against their historical relationship with, and organisational dependency on, organised labour. ‘Hard times,’ as Judith Stein has written, ‘produced hard cases.’ When a plant had to lay off workers, for instance, management had to decide whether to observe the union-backed seniority principle (i.e. last hired, first fired) and thus obliterate gains in diversifying the workforce since the 1960s. Such cases brought the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund into public conflict with progressive unions, such as the United Steelworkers.³⁶¹ Younger Democrats, particularly New Politics supporters who had been politically awakened by the civil rights movement, were often disdainful of unions, viewing them as parochial and innately racist.

³⁵⁹ Damon Stetson, “4 Democratic Presidential Hopefuls Offer Economic Ideas at A.F.L.-C.I.O. Session,” *NYT*, October 7, 1975; “Humphrey Tells Labor His Ideas,” *CSM*, October 31, 1975.

³⁶⁰ Despite internal opposition, AFL-CIO President George Meany prevented the confederation from endorsing McGovern, claiming the Democrat was isolationist and antilabour, even going so far as to expel the members of the Colorado state labour council for defying him. Jack Anderson, “Meany’s Feud With George McGovern,” *WP*, July 8, 1972; Peter Milius, “Meany Ousts Unit Backing McGovern,” *WP*, September 21, 1972.

³⁶¹ Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2010), 140-41.

Even before the emergence of stagflation, African-Americans had been largely untouched by the long post-war boom, and they suffered disproportionately the effects of the decade's poisonous cocktail of economic maladies. In the aftermath of the 1973 Oil Shock, the energy expert Lenneal J. Henderson wrote that, 'The word *crisis*, as strong as it is, is too tame, too abstract, too *white* to capture the economic terror of a state of siege.'³⁶² Vernon Jordan, the president of the National Urban League, said that by any available measurements African-Americans were suffering through 'a major depression.'³⁶³ However, aggressive programmes of economic uplift targeted specifically at black and minority citizens, unquestionably necessary though they might be, were politically untenable in the context of an inflationary economy in which white voters, already resentful of their creeping tax burdens, would be expected to bear additional costs.

Humphrey had straddled these fault-lines for his entire career, as an ardent pro-labour Democrat and a fierce champion of African-American civil rights. 'Labor leaders loved Hubert,' recalled Walter Mondale. 'He spoke at all the conventions. He was always available to them when they came to town.'³⁶⁴ For Humphrey, organised labour was a vital participant in the vanguard of progressive reform efforts. He had also been at the forefront of efforts to transform a segregationist-dominated Democratic Party into the party of African-American civil rights. Humphrey had burst onto the national consciousness in 1948 when, as the reforming Minneapolis mayor seeking a Minnesota Senate seat, he had spoken at the national convention in favour of adding a pro-civil rights plank to the party's platform, exhorting his fellow Democrats

³⁶² Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle for Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2010), 353.

³⁶³ Thurber, *Politics of Equality*, 236.

³⁶⁴ Walter F. Mondale, interview with the author, Minneapolis, MN, April 21, 2010.

to 'get out of the shadow of state's rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.'³⁶⁵ The plank was adopted, prompting a walkout by furious Southern Democrats, who went on to form a temporary breakaway, the States' Rights Party, nominating Strom Thurmond for President. Humphrey won his seat and *Time* put an artist's rendering of Minnesota's newest senator, backed by a whirlwind, on its front cover.³⁶⁶

In the Senate, Humphrey built a record as one of the most reliably liberal legislators on Capitol Hill. His cheerfully determined advocacy of liberal causes – among them Medicare, the Peace Corps, and various civil rights initiatives – led to him being nicknamed the 'Happy Warrior.' The crowning achievement of his legislative career may have been his service as floor manager of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.³⁶⁷ He formed a strong working relationship with then-Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, serving as a conduit to the Senate's cadre of liberals.³⁶⁸ In 1964, with Johnson in the White House, Humphrey would be chosen to serve as vice president. Vice President Humphrey would prove an exuberant 'supersalesman for the Great Society' and, in spite of his initial misgivings, booster for the Vietnam War.³⁶⁹ He was, however, almost entirely excluded from policy-making. Humphrey's apparent impotence, combined with his willingness to offer enthusiastic public support for Johnson's more contentious policies (especially the Vietnam War) badly damaged his

³⁶⁵ Humphrey's early career is detailed in Jennifer Delton, *Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Minneapolis, MN, and London, 2002). See also, Gary W. Reichard, "Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey," *Minnesota History: The Quarterly of the Minnesota Historical Society*, 56:2 (Summer 1998), 50-67; Solberg, *Hubert Humphrey*, 174.

³⁶⁶ *Time*, January 17, 1949.

³⁶⁷ For a full account of the floor fight, see Robert Mann, *The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (San Diego, CA, and London, 1996).

³⁶⁸ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York, 2002), 439-62.

³⁶⁹ Erik van den Berg, "Supersalesman for the Great Society: Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, 1965-1969," *American Studies International*, 36:3, October 1998, 59-72.

reputation with those who had expected him to be a more forceful presence within the administration.

When Johnson declined to pursue renomination in 1968, Humphrey became the standard-bearer for the traditional Democratic coalition against the insurgent New Politics candidacies of Kennedy and McCarthy. As wounding as the attacks from fellow liberals were, however, the real threat to the Democratic coalition in 1968 came on Humphrey's right flank, embodied in the independent candidacy of George Wallace. He proved most adept at exploiting the issue of 'law and order,' a catch-all phrase that could stand in for any number of anxieties. Partly a racial dog whistle, the term 'law and order' also encapsulated an amorphous collection of working-class anxieties about crime, social collapse, and civil disorder that conservatives were parlaying into 'a powerful denunciation of the iniquities and inefficiencies of the liberal state.'³⁷⁰ Rather than try to out-demagogue Wallace, Humphrey sought to reconceptualise the problem as one of 'order and justice.' His solution to urban unrest was not only to demand more effective policing tactics, but to argue that the injustices and inequalities that triggered the unrest should be addressed.³⁷¹

Channelling the anxiety and social conservatism of many blue-collar whites, the Dixiecrat Wallace was an unexpected hit among Northern unionised workers.³⁷² Ultimately, the Wallace challenge would be fought off by the herculean efforts undertaken by union leadership on Humphrey's behalf. The AFL-CIO flooded its

³⁷⁰ Flamm, *Law and Order*, 68.

³⁷¹ Hubert Humphrey, Remarks at National Press Club Luncheon, Washington D.C., June 20, 1968, papers of Hubert H. Humphrey (HHH), Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS), St. Paul, MN, Box 150.F.13.8(F).

³⁷² Frank C. Porter, "Wallace Inroads Into Labor Ranks Feared: News Analysis Campaign '68," *WP*, September 4, 1968; Stephen Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 390.

affiliates with leaflets highlighting Wallace's anti-labour record in his own state and the United Auto Workers (UAW) invested more than 600 full-time staffers and \$500,000 to repel the Alabama governor. In that election, Jefferson Cowie has written, the Democratic Party was 'practically speaking, a labor party.'³⁷³ By election day, Wallace's support among Northern blue collar workers, which at its peak had stood at 21 percent, had been cut to 9 percent.³⁷⁴ The Democratic body would be forcefully reminded of its dependence on union muscle in 1972, when it failed to flex for McGovern.

The agonies of post-Great Society liberalism did little to dent Humphrey's faith in big government activism. The Depression had been his formative political experience and until the end of his life he cited the waste of human potential that he had witnessed as one of the principal motive forces in his politics. 'Why am I what I am on economics?' he told a reporter in 1977, a year before his death. 'I saw the Depression take ten years out of my father's life ... I have seen people who have just worked their hearts out and couldn't make it.'³⁷⁵ This set him apart from many younger Democrats, whose liberalism had been forged in a prosperous nation. Economic insecurity had been more than an abstract concern to Humphrey. The Depression had so imperilled the family's finances that he had been forced to drop out of the University of Minnesota to work in the family drugstore (he was eventually able to return when the business stabilised). He remained committed to the economic uplift of African-Americans as the only sure guarantor of racial equality. 'We can legislate civil rights until we fill the statute books,' he said in 1963, 'but until there are jobs

³⁷³ Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 83.

³⁷⁴ John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers during the Reuther Years, 1935-1980* (Detroit, 2004), 443-5.

³⁷⁵ James P. Gannon, "Humphrey's Passing Marks the Passing of a Political Era," *WSJ*, Jan 16, 1978.

which provide an opportunity for a man or woman to use their talents for constructive work, those rights will be in a sense only legal or theoretical rights.’³⁷⁶

Nonetheless, the Wallace backlash left an indelible mark on Humphrey, which was revealed in his bid to return to the Senate in 1970. In his announcement, he promised ‘leadership that will stand calmly, but firmly, for reason against chaos.’³⁷⁷ Ben Wattenberg was contracted as a campaign speechwriter and his influence soon became apparent.³⁷⁸ Humphrey’s public statements on ‘law and order’ were considerably more robust than they had been two years earlier. He set out to confront the issue head-on in a speech to the American Bar Association, “‘Liberalism’ and ‘Law and Order’: Must There Be A Conflict?”³⁷⁹ No, Humphrey concluded. Both liberals and ‘hard-hats’ favoured law and order. Nonetheless, he conceded that liberals had failed to get the political ‘atmospherics’ right: ‘They must let the hard-hats, Mr. and Mrs. Middle America, know that they understand what is bugging them.’³⁸⁰ He wrote to Lawrence O’Brien soon afterwards, that the speech had attracted ‘a little heat from some of my liberal friends, but most of the reaction is good.’³⁸¹

However, Humphrey’s newfound toughness on social issues was dwarfed by his continued enthusiasm for government interventions in the economy. He had seen, he said, ‘something I had hoped never to see again – the fear of loss of jobs,’ which he

³⁷⁶ Thurber, *Politics of Equality*, 4.

³⁷⁷ Hubert H. Humphrey, Announcement Statement, June 14, 1970, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.J.19.3B.

³⁷⁸ Ben Wattenberg, *Fighting Words: A Tale of How Liberals Created Neoconservatism* (New York, 2008), 77-94.

³⁷⁹ The speech’s theme and title, and the choice of venue, seem to have been Wattenberg’s idea. Senator Kennedy had been invited to speak at the ABA as well, Wattenberg told Humphrey, ‘so between the two of you there is bound to be good national press coverage.’ Memo, Wattenberg to HHH, July 24, 1970, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 148.A.12.6F.

³⁸⁰ HHH, “‘Liberalism’ and ‘Law and Order’: Must There Be A Conflict?” Remarks at the American Bar Association, St. Louis, August 11, 1970, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.J.18.6F.

³⁸¹ Letter, HHH to O’Brien, August 18, 1970, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.J.19.1B.

attributed to ‘the tragedy of government default on economic leadership.’³⁸² In a memo to his staff, circulated in June 1970, Humphrey outlined policy suggestions for an ‘upbeat’ campaign. These included, among others, a health insurance programme for children (‘Kiddicare’), a permanent youth opportunity programme, a national service programme, developing offshore shale oil deposits to finance an educational trust fund, and ‘develop[ing] the sea bed as means of international cooperation to provide a fund for the United Nations for economic development or for pollution control.’³⁸³ However much he trimmed under the influence of Wattenberg, Humphrey’s lodestar remained the New Deal.

Humphrey won both the DFL primary and the general election with little difficulty. As congressional seniority was contingent upon continuous service, Humphrey, former Senate whip and vice president, was subjected to the indignity of freshman status and given only minimal office space and staff.³⁸⁴ He won a place on the Joint Economic Committee (JEC), ‘because no one else wanted it,’ according to his biographer.³⁸⁵ Though it was not considered the juiciest plum in the Capitol orchard, Humphrey was able to turn the JEC – in part through his remarkable work ethic and enthusiasm for congressional politics – into an effective platform. Serving on the committee, he said later, was ‘like going to a super-graduate school.’³⁸⁶ By 1973, the *Washington Post* was applauding Humphrey’s ‘new lease on life’ and his ‘re-emergence as a spirited leader on Capitol Hill.’³⁸⁷ As the stagflation of the 1970s took

³⁸² HHH, Announcement Statement, June 14, 1970, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.J.19.3B.

³⁸³ Memo, HHH to Jack Chestnut, Norman Sherman, D.J. Leary, June 19, 1970, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.J.19.1B.

³⁸⁴ Iwan W. Morgan, “Hubert Humphrey’s Last Hurrah: The 1977 Senate Leadership Election and the Decline of the New Deal Tradition,” *Mid-America: An Historical Review*, 79:3 (Fall, 1997), 295.

³⁸⁵ Solberg, *Hubert Humphrey*, 424.

³⁸⁶ James R. Gaines, Bernice Buresh, ‘Hubert Gets A Leg Up,’ *Newsweek*, August 18, 1975

³⁸⁷ Clayton Fritchey, “Humphrey’s New Hurrah,” *WP-TH*, March 10, 1973.

hold, Humphrey began to move beyond the neo-Keynesianism of conventional post-war liberalism, embracing a theory of unemployment that stressed structural weaknesses within the economy. Humphrey's politics remained rooted in the New Deal, but over the course of a thirty-year career they had moved steadily in the direction of greater government involvement in the economy, to anticipate crises rather than simply react to them.³⁸⁸

In August 1974, Humphrey joined with Representative Augustus Hawkins of California's 21st (and later 29th) district, and the Congressional Black Caucus, as co-sponsor of the most ambitious full employment legislation since 1946. Louisiana-born, the African-American Hawkins had represented the California 21st since 1963, having previously served 14 terms in the State Assembly. Congressman Hawkins's constituency, which was demographically dominated by blacks and Latinos, encompassed Southern Los Angeles and the troubled neighbourhood of Watts, which had exploded into riots in 1965.³⁸⁹ Staunchly liberal, Hawkins positioned himself within the tradition of A. Philip Randolph, the co-organiser of the 1963 March on Washington for 'Jobs and Freedom,' in his belief that civil and economic rights were the prerequisites of social justice.³⁹⁰ The Humphrey-Hawkins bill enjoined the federal government to guarantee employment for all citizens over the age of 16. Though the preferred provider would be the private sector, those who remained without employment would be given public sector jobs in local government, financed from

³⁸⁸ Thurber, *Politics of Equality*, 10.

³⁸⁹ In 1974, Hawkins' district was 54 percent African-American (76 percent non-white including Hispanic and Japanese-American residents) with a median income of \$7,060. Eighteen percent of families lived on incomes below \$3,000. Michael Barone, Grant Ujifusa, Douglas Matthews, *The Almanac of American Politics, 1974* (London and Basingstoke, 1974), 102; Ward Sinclair, "Augustus F.: The Other, Unknown Half of Humphrey Hawkins," *WP*, February 1, 1978.

³⁹⁰ Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 269; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, 2003), 154, 157, 177; Sinclair, "Augustus F."

federal coffers. The most radical provision empowered those who found themselves without work to sue the government for injunctive relief and damages. This provision yoked the litigious rights-consciousness of '60s liberalism to the New Deal's preoccupation with material security.³⁹¹

The means by which full employment was to be achieved drew on national planning ideas, mixed with traditional Keynesianism. The president would be required to submit an annual full employment plan to Congress, setting targets for employment, national production, and purchasing power. Congress would have the power to review and revise that plan, and the federal budget and Federal Reserve's policies would have to be consistent with the finally agreed goals. The government would also be required to respond to economic distress with countercyclical measures such as increasing funding to state and local agencies, subsidising private firms to take on more employees, financing public jobs, and establishing special youth programmes. A permanent 'full employment office' would be created within the Department of Labor to offer training programmes, direct the unemployed towards jobs in the public and private sector, and maintain a 'jobs reservoir' for those that could not find work elsewhere.³⁹²

The bill's drafters had been driven, Hawkins said, 'out of sheer frustration with the disorderly management of our economic affairs to recognize the need for a coherent economic policy along the lines originally suggested in the Employment Act of 1946.' The pretence 'that such mismanaged policies are essential to maintain our freedom is sheer nonsense. This is as illogical as the assertion we must accept a

³⁹¹ Thurber, *Politics Of Equality*, 233-55.

³⁹² Editorial, "A Job for Everyone," *TNR*, March 27, 1976

recurring Watergate-type leadership failure as the price of democracy.’³⁹³ ‘[W]e, not the economists regardless of their competence, must decide what type of society we want,’ Hawkins told a conference at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center in Atlanta. ‘Then, we can direct the economists and our elected officials to construct an economy which will serve, not diminish our principles as a humane and socially just society.’³⁹⁴ By March 1974, as the Democratic resurgence seemed to be gaining momentum, Hawkins told a conference at Columbia University that ‘the winds of change are blowing towards liberalism’ and confidently predicted the passage of legislation to ‘facilitate and encourage the goal of full employment.’³⁹⁵

Alongside overhauling the nation’s political economy, the Humphrey-Hawkins bill was touted by its backers as a means to reassemble the Democratic majority through New Deal-style universalist economic reforms. In December 1972, at a civil rights symposium at the Johnson Presidential Library, Humphrey had declared ‘there just aren’t enough blacks, Chicanos, Indians, and Puerto Ricans to form an electoral majority.’³⁹⁶ The bill, Judith Stein has written, ‘simultaneously reinserted African American interests into mainstream economic policy making and advanced black and white working-class interests.’ It drew substantial support from civil rights groups and organised labour, but also from some more unexpected quarters. Many feminist groups, including the National Organisation for Women (NOW), lined up behind the bill. They did so in spite of the fact that, as Robert Self argues, debates over full

³⁹³ Augustus F. Hawkins, Speech before the Full Employment Conference, Hunter College, N.Y., February 15, 1975, papers of Augustus F. Hawkins (AFH), University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Department of Special Collections, Box 84.

³⁹⁴ AFH, “Full Employment: An Equal Opportunity,” Remarks at the Full Employment Conference, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center, Atlanta, Georgia, January 14, 1976, AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84.

³⁹⁵ AFH, highlights of address at Full Employment Conference, Urban Center, Columbia University, March 2, 1974, AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84.

³⁹⁶ John Herbers, “Civil Rights Leaders of the 1960’s Call Upon Nixon to Lead A New Movement,” *NYT*, December 12, 1972.

employment ‘revealed that neither conservatives nor most liberals had yet abandoned the male-breadwinner model of the economy.’ One early version of the bill, for instance, placed a cap on the ‘number of employed persons per household’ who could benefit, a provision that would certainly discriminate against women.³⁹⁷ The coalition behind Humphrey-Hawkins included New Politics liberals and old guard Democrats, contradicting the traditional image of a permanent conflict between those factions over mutually irreconcilable visions of liberalism.

The Ford administration was entirely unsympathetic to such a bill, dismissing it as ineffective and inflationary.³⁹⁸ However, like many of his colleagues, Humphrey was not waiting for the executive to take the lead. Congress, he told the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, ‘must assume more of the responsibility for managing the nation’s economy.’³⁹⁹ In December 1975, Humphrey was invited by Oxford University Press to review Otis Graham’s *Towards A Planned Society*, a history of the ‘national planning idea’ from FDR to Nixon.⁴⁰⁰ Humphrey was so impressed that he had the review inserted into the *Congressional Record*, commending Graham for so ‘vividly’ showing ‘that national planning should not be a partisan issue.’ He faulted Graham only for his portrayal of the Congress as ‘a demonic force that has interfered with the creation of a planning capacity in the Federal Government.’ In fact, many members ‘exhibit an increasing awareness of the need to set goals, to have a view that stretches beyond the reelection cycle, to foresee problems that will be upon us before we sometimes care to think, and to establish

³⁹⁷ Self, *All in the Family*, 325-26.

³⁹⁸ David S. Broder, “Jobs and the Government,” *WP*, September 1, 1975.

³⁹⁹ HHH, Testimony before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, August 15, 1974, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.G.1.3B.

⁴⁰⁰ Humphrey asked Dr. Norman Beckman, Acting Director of the Congressional Research Service, to prepare a draft review which the senator could put into ‘final “Humphrey” form’ before sending it to the editors. Letter, HHH to Norman Beckman, December 29, 1975, HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.G.1.3B.

ways to design and coordinate Federal policies and activities in a more rational [and] coherent way.⁴⁰¹

In 1975-76, utilising his chairmanship of the JEC, Humphrey was able to turn his legislative efforts into a public campaign. The committee toured some of the worst-hit cities in the nation, gathering testimony on urban economic woes. The first of these regional meetings was held in Chicago in October 1975. A month before, the Bureau of Labor Statistics had recorded an unemployment rate of 10.2 percent, around two points above the national rate (8.3 percent). Among Chicago blacks, the unemployment rate stood at 19.8 percent (rising to 36.4 percent when ‘discouraged workers’ and the underemployed were factored in).⁴⁰² ‘It is obvious to me,’ declared Humphrey in his opening remarks, ‘that the old economic rules no longer apply.’ Endorsements of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, or at least broad statements of support, came from academics, public officials, private citizens, and representatives from labour unions and activist organisations, including the NOW, the Chicago Urban League, and local chapters of the U.S. Steelworkers, the UAW, and the United Electrical Workers (UE).⁴⁰³ From Chicago, the Humphrey-Hawkins roadshow made appearances in New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Boston.

Humphrey’s publicity blitz aimed at transforming his bill into an election issue for 1976. He intended primarily that some version of the full employment bill would pass before November, to be greeted by a presidential veto, with which the

⁴⁰¹ HHH, “National Policy Planning: Roosevelt to Nixon,” *Congressional Record*, 122:27, March 1, 1976, offprint in the HHH papers, MNHS, Box 150.G.1.3B.

⁴⁰² James W. Compton, Executive Director of the Chicago Urban League, cited these statistics in his testimony to the JEC. “Jobs and Prices in Chicago,” Hearing before the Joint Economic Committee, 94th Congress, First session, *Congressional Serial Set*, October 20, 1975, 25.

⁴⁰³ “Jobs and Prices in Chicago,” Hearing before the Joint Economic Committee, 94th Congress, First session, *Congressional Serial Set*, October 20, 1975, 30-2, 24-30, 76-80, 85-8, 103-14.

Democratic candidate could beat Ford all the way to election day. Even without a congressional vote, however, regular reports from the JEC condemned the Ford administration, demanded action on unemployment, and ensured that attention would be paid to the Democratic alternatives. A March 1976 report, for instance, in response to the President's January Economic Report identified unemployment as the principal issue facing the nation, castigated the Ford administration and the Federal Reserve for 'misunderstanding and mismanagement' and declared America 'the victim of misguided policies.' It called for greater stimulative measures in response to the endemic crisis and condemned Ford's 1977 budget as 'so restrictive that it does not serve as a useful starting point for budget policy deliberations.'⁴⁰⁴ Later that year, the JEC's midterm review acknowledged that new initiatives would have to await the outcome of November's elections. However, the months until the next inauguration offered 'a valuable opportunity to develop and debate the new policies which are needed.'⁴⁰⁵

In 1976, according to Judith Stein, Humphrey was as 'the lone [presidential] candidate who stood for a clear alternative to Ford economics.' Though in fact he refused to formally declare himself a candidate (a second tilt at the nomination in 1972 had led to a series of rancorous primary fights with McGovern), he did make clear his receptivity to a convention draft. When *U.S. News and World Report* surveyed 162 DNC members in November 1975, 49 percent expected Humphrey to be the next

⁴⁰⁴ Report of the Joint Economic Committee on the January 1976 Economic Report of the President, 94th Congress, 2nd Session, S.Rpt. 690, *Congressional Serial Set*, March 10, 1976, 5-9.

⁴⁰⁵ Report of the Joint Economic Committee, the 1976 midyear review of the economy, 94th Congress, 2nd Session, S.Rpt. 1372, *Congressional Serial Set*, September 29, 1976, 3.

presidential nominee.⁴⁰⁶ Ford himself expected to face Humphrey in the election.⁴⁰⁷ Already suffering from the bladder cancer that would kill him in January 1978, Humphrey still commanded powerful residual loyalties among many segments of the party base. With the exception of Carter, all Democratic candidates endorsed Humphrey-Hawkins in some form. Lawrence Klein, co-ordinator of Carter's economic task force, told *Time* that it could become 'an albatross' but that he could 'envision no amendments that would make this a good bill'. Though he shied away from a solid commitment, Carter told journalists that, 3 percent full employment 'as a goal' was 'a good one'.⁴⁰⁸ One journalist wrote that Humphrey-Hawkins had become the 'current shibboleth of Democratic liberalism.'⁴⁰⁹

There was considerable activist pressure for the bill. In early 1975, a coalition of labour unions, religious and civil rights groups, and community organisations established the Full Employment Action Council (FEAC) to lobby legislators, co-chaired by Murray H. Finley of the Amalgamated Clothing Makers Union and Coretta Scott King, president of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center and King's widow.⁴¹⁰ However, the FEAC struggled to create a mass public campaign despite the tenaciously high unemployment rate. Trying to explain the absence of the politically-organised jobless, the socialist activist Michael Harrington concluded that 'when people get fired, they often lose contact with the unions, becoming dropouts rather

⁴⁰⁶ The figures are based on those respondents who opted to make such a prediction. Approximately one quarter declined. "Poll of Democratic Leaders – 'It Looks Like Humphrey'," *U.S. News and World Report (USN)*, November 17, 1975; Stein, *Pivotal Decade*, 130, 137.

⁴⁰⁷ In February 1976, Ford told reporters, 'I have said repeatedly ... that my good friend Hubert Humphrey will probably be the nominee.' U.S. Office of the Federal Register, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford, 1976-77: Book I – January 1 to April 9, 1976* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 478.

⁴⁰⁸ Leonard Silk, "Carter's Economics," *NYT*, July 14, 1976; W. Carl Biven, *Jimmy Carter's Economy: Policy in an Age of Limits* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), 33-34.

⁴⁰⁹ Melville J. Ulmer, 'Taking A Dim View Of Humphrey-Hawkins,' *TNR*, June 12, 1976.

⁴¹⁰ A. H. Raskin, "Jobless Benefits: Demand Strains Supply," *NYT*, January 26, 1975.

than militants.’ Those fortunate enough to retain employment were often too paralysed by insecurity to protest: ‘solidarity forever has less appeal than a bird in the hand.’⁴¹¹ A labour-backed march on Washington, D.C. in April 1976, for instance, drew only 1,500 participants.⁴¹²

Nonetheless, by mid-1976, the passage of some form of full employment legislation seemed increasingly likely. President Ford understood this, telling the Annual Convention of the National Chamber of Commerce in April 1976 that the proposals were ‘a vast election year boondoggle’ that would be halted by presidential veto if necessary.⁴¹³ That Ford felt moved to publicly clarify his opposition to the bill indicates that its passage had become a serious issue by 1976. Almost the entire Republican congressional caucus was united against it. In his testimony to the Chicago hearings, throughout which he had sparred genially with Chairman Humphrey, the economist Milton Friedman told the JEC that the nation’s economic problems ‘don’t arise from the absence of planning ... [but] from substituting planning by each of us separately in our behalf.’ Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur Burns told the Senate Banking Committee that the bill was ‘dangerous and inflationary.’⁴¹⁴

As the likelihood of a deadlocked convention receded, Humphrey explored options to ensure that full employment legislation remained a priority for the next, almost certainly Democratic, administration. He had set his eyes on the position of Majority Leader, left vacant by Mike Mansfield’s retirement, which would have given him direct influence over the legislation that reached the Senate floor. However,

⁴¹¹ Michael Harrington, ‘Two Cheers for Socialism,’ *Harper’s Monthly*, October, 1976, 70.

⁴¹² Alice Bonner, “1,500 in Job March on Capitol,” *WP*, April 4, 1976.

⁴¹³ Edward J. Walsh, “Ford Assails Hill’s Plans On Economy,” *WP*, April 27, 1976.

⁴¹⁴ “Jobs and Prices in Chicago,” 47; “Fed Cuts Money-Growth Target Slightly,” *NYT*, May 4, 1976.

Humphrey would lose decisively to West Virginia's Robert C. Byrd. Though Byrd was a conservative Southerner, Senate members were swayed by his cultivated reputation as a man who could run the Senate efficiently and deliver favours for his colleagues.⁴¹⁵ Disorganised and usually tardy, Humphrey could not match his rival's service-oriented platform. Moreover, a few months before the election, a cancer-stricken Humphrey underwent major surgery to remove his bladder.⁴¹⁶ The choice of Byrd reflected the expectation that a Democratic Congress would follow the policy agenda of the Carter White House. With a Democrat in the White House, remarked Gary Hart, the Senate Majority Leader would likely function as 'a hollow log in which both sides leave messages.'⁴¹⁷ Only two years after Watergate, the bellicosity with which Congress had once defended its prerogatives was beginning to diminish.

Given Carter's wariness, it might be assumed that Humphrey-Hawkins was a pipe-dream entertained by a band of aging New Dealers, unable to reconcile themselves to an increasingly conservative electorate. Certainly, Americans were growing increasingly resentful of tax burdens, and inflation alternated with unemployment as the public's principal concern. However, the available polling data reveals a more complicated attitude toward government activism. A Time/Yankelovich poll taken in August 1976 showed 56 percent in favour of an indeterminate full employment bill 'in which the government guarantees a job to everyone who wants to work.' Another poll taken by the same organisation in March 1977 showed that support had climbed to 60 percent. A further poll, taken in October

⁴¹⁵ Godfrey Sperling, Jr, "With Humphrey Out Of Race, Carter Campaign Surges," *CSM*, April 30, 1976; Morgan, "Hubert Humphrey's Last Hurrah," 287.

⁴¹⁶ Christopher Lyon, "Humphrey To Undergo Surgery; Still Seeks Majority Leadership," *NYT*, October 2, 1976.

⁴¹⁷ Joseph Lelyveld, "Liberals, Despite Humphrey Ties, Are Expected To Elect Byrd Today," *NYT*, January 4, 1977.

1977 by Cambridge Reports/National Omnibus Survey, showed 54 percent specifically in favour of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, compared to 29 percent opposed. Even in November 1980, as the Reagan revolution was supposedly surging to power, an ORC Public Opinion Index poll showed 78 percent of respondents were in favour of the federal government doing more to provide jobs for all Americans who were able to work during the 1980s.⁴¹⁸ Federal full-employment legislation enjoyed consistently solid public support throughout the 1970s. Why then did the Carter administration choose to prioritise inflation and balancing the budget over unemployment?

Throughout his 1976 campaign, Carter's economic philosophy remained conspicuously ill-formed. One reporter wrote that Jimmy Carter 'does not seem to have any economic policy positions at all, and he certainly has not come through with a major challenge to the incumbent Administration.'⁴¹⁹ The Democratic Party platform endorsed full employment legislation – though Humphrey-Hawkins was not mentioned by name – but Carter avoided commenting on the subject. The bill did, however, provoke a brief spat between the Democratic nominee and the Minnesota senator. Questioned directly on Humphrey-Hawkins, Carter dismissed the bill, in its present form, as 'too expensive.' Humphrey responded with a broad condemnation of anti-statism as 'a disguised new form of racism,' which prompted Carter to brand the former presidential nominee a 'loser.'⁴²⁰ Eventually, Carter was compelled to issue a tepid endorsement of a revised Humphrey-Hawkins bill to assuage irate black voters after an ill-advised remark expressing sympathy with those who sought to maintain the 'ethnic purity' of their neighbourhoods. Once in office, Carter's palpable lack of

⁴¹⁸ Time/Yankelovich, Skelly, Aug, 1976; Time/Yankelovich, Skelly, Mar, 1977; ORC Public Opinion Index, Nov, 1980. Polls retrieved Feb-12-2011 from the iPOLL Databank: http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:4032/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

⁴¹⁹ Edwin L. Dale, "Washington Report: The Economy as a Campaign Issue," *NYT*, March 21, 1976.

⁴²⁰ Thurber, *Politics of Equality*, 241.

enthusiasm for Humphrey-Hawkins would reveal just how half-hearted that endorsement had been.

For much of 1977 and 1978, the Carter administration's reluctance to move forward with full employment legislation created friction with the bill's supporters in Congress, and especially with the Black Caucus. In March 1977, a mere two months after Carter's inauguration, special assistant Valerie Pinson reported a fractious meeting with members of the Black Caucus and supportive groups who wanted 'to blast the President because of his lack of support for the bill.'⁴²¹ 'We are sitting on a timebomb here which will explode unless we move quickly,' chief domestic policy advisor Stuart Eizenstat wrote two weeks later in a memo to Bert Carp, Carter's deputy assistant for domestic affairs.⁴²² In June, Humphrey and Hawkins wrote to the President noting that they had not yet 'obtained a reaffirmation of your position on the Bill this year, nor any specific suggestions for further improvements in it from your representatives.' A 'clarification' on those points, they suggested, would be 'mutually beneficial to all concerned.'⁴²³

By July, Vernon Jordan, executive director of the National Urban League, was criticising the administration for 'not living up to the first commandment of politics – help those who help you.'⁴²⁴ In November, Jordan endorsed Humphrey-Hawkins, calling it 'a short-term promissory note to be redeemed in jobs.'⁴²⁵ A month earlier,

⁴²¹ Memo, Valerie Pinson to Frank Moore, March 28, 1977, "House Memoranda, 2/24/77-11/10/80" folder, Office of the Congressional Liaison (OCL), Frank Moore Subject Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (JCL), Box 32.

⁴²² Memo, Eizenstat to Bert Carp, April 11, 1977, "Humphrey-Hawkins [Bill][O/A 6345][2]" folder, Domestic Policy Staff (DPS), Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 221.

⁴²³ Letter, Humphrey and Hawkins to Carter, June 10, 1977, "Humphrey-Hawkins [Bill][O/A 6345][2]" folder, DPS, Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 221.

⁴²⁴ Warren Brown, "President is Taken to Task," *WP*, July 25, 1977

⁴²⁵ J. Zamga Browne, "Jordan Endorses Humphrey-Hawkins Bill," *NYAN*, November 26, 1977

when the NAACP board of directors met with Carter, the issue of jobs was at the top of their 18-item agenda.⁴²⁶ Many black activists had reason to expect, indeed demand, such a commitment from the White House. Carter's narrow victory in 1976 had been made possible by his sweep of the Southern states, where newly enfranchised African-American voters had often provided his margin of victory. As Walter E. Fauntroy, delegate for the District of Columbia, remarked in 1978: 'hands that picked cotton had picked a president.'⁴²⁷

Carter's concerns over the inflationary impact of the bill, as well as his determination to curtail excessive spending, proved the most significant stumbling blocks. After initial negotiations, for instance, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) director Bert Lance reported to Carter that Hawkins regarded 'both a very low numerical full employment unemployment rate and a guarantee of government jobs as essential ingredients of any bill he would sponsor.' Neither of these was acceptable to Carter. Consequently, 'there may be no version which could be consistent with both moderate principles of economic policy and the true objectives of the sponsors of the bill.'⁴²⁸ Tip O'Neill advised Carter's staff 'to put in the low unemployment rate as the sponsors want and just not worry about it.'⁴²⁹ Eizenstat, by contrast, urged the importance of 'the Administration [being] perceived as having made every effort to reach an accommodation.'⁴³⁰ The administration was unsuccessful in persuading Humphrey and Hawkins to prefix the unemployment goals with the word 'about' (i.e.

⁴²⁶ "We Need Jobs! – NAACP to Carter," *NYAN*, October 8, 1977

⁴²⁷ Donald P. Baker, "On The Road," *WP*, May 8, 1978

⁴²⁸ Memo, Bert Lance to Carter, May 31, 1977, "Humphrey-Hawkins Jobs Bill, 6/6/77-10/27/78 [O/A 6748]" folder, OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 32.

⁴²⁹ Memo, Schultze to Eizenstat, September 7, 1977, "Humphrey-Hawkins [Bill] [O/A 6342][1]" folder, DPS, Subject Files – Eizenstat, JCL, Box 221.

⁴³⁰ Memo, Eizenstat to Carter, Bert Lance, June 4, 1977, "Humphrey-Hawkins Jobs Bill, 6/6/77-10/27/78 [O/A 6748]" folder, OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 32.

‘about 4%’). Though this would have little practical impact, it would convey ‘some image of flexibility in the bill to counter conservative and moderate critics.’ The bill’s sponsors rejected this on the same grounds: ‘they want an image which, to the maximum extent possible, appears to bind the President to hard targets.’⁴³¹

The administration’s hesitancy was partly informed by the fierce opposition of business interests. Business antipathy to big government had existed since the New Deal, but by the end of the 1960s it was encountering a more receptive public.⁴³² Unlike in the 1930s, there was no widespread sense that the economic crisis was due largely to the recklessness of corporate America and the inactivity of the government. The prospect of Humphrey-Hawkins increasing federal intervention in the market economy was deeply unsettling for many business leaders. James H. Evans, president and CEO of the Union Pacific Corporation, dismissed Humphrey-Hawkins as ‘old fashioned and wrongheaded,’ a “‘big brother’” scheme that would ‘eat up’ taxes and spur ‘devastating’ inflation.⁴³³ The Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Business Roundtable were all flatly opposed to the bill, citing its likely inflationary impact. Along with other business organisations, they mounted vigorous lobbying efforts, ‘sending executives to pay personal calls to senators, promoting packaged editorials..., and mobilizing letter-writing campaigns.’⁴³⁴ By October 1977, Eizenstat was warning Carter that the administration should expect to be ‘blast[ed] by the business community’ regardless of any

⁴³¹ Memo, Eizenstat, Schultze to Carter, October 19, 1977, “Humphrey-Hawkins Jobs Bill, 6/6/77-10/27/78 [O/A 6748]” folder, OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 32.

⁴³² Benjamin Waterhouse, “The Conservative Mobilization Against Liberal Reform: Big Business Day, 1980,” in Kim Phillips-Fein and Julian Zelizer (eds.), *What’s Good For Business: Business and American Politics since World War II* (New York, 2012), 237. See also, Kim Phillips-Fein, “‘If Business and the Country Will Be Run Right:’ The Business Challenge to the Liberal Consensus, 1945-1964,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 72 (Fall, 2007), 192-215.

⁴³³ James H. Evans, “...And What Congress Proposes,” *NYT*, January 23, 1977.

⁴³⁴ Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2014), 130-2.

‘substantial revisions’ to the bill. Indeed, he wrote, ‘the term “Humphrey-Hawkins Bill” has taken on a dynamic of its own and can be seen as a code word for excessive spending.’⁴³⁵

Some of the most damaging criticisms of the bill came from liberal economists, many of whom remained wedded to the Phillips Curve, which depicted an inverse relationship between unemployment and inflation. It was assumed, therefore, that measures to drive unemployment to zero would accelerate inflation, already at intolerable levels. John Kenneth Galbraith, though sympathetic, begged optimistic Democrats not to succumb to the ‘wishful economics’ of imagining there was ‘some undiscovered fiscal or monetary magic’ that could control both inflation and unemployment. Humphrey was as sensitive to accusations that the bill was the product of wishful thinking as he was mindful of the deleterious effects of inflation. His initial response had been to include wage and price controls within the bill, but objections from organised labour forced their removal.⁴³⁶ To appease liberal critics, he and Hawkins revised the bill several times, both to strengthen its anti-inflation provisions and to win the support of the Carter White House. The back-and-forth continued throughout the first years of the Carter presidency. One of the first provisions to be lost was the most significant: that every American citizen had a legally-enforceable ‘right’ to a job. Without this, the legislation lost its most potent enforcement mechanism.

By November 1977, a shaky accord had finally been reached between the pro-Humphrey-Hawkins forces and the Carter administration. In a joint press release,

⁴³⁵ Memo, Eizenstat to Carter, October 6, 1977, “Humphrey-Hawkins [Bill][O/A 6345][2]” folder, DPS, Subject File – Eizenstat, JCL, Box 221.

⁴³⁶ Thurber, *Politics of Equality*, 246; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 272, 275.

Humphrey and Hawkins declared themselves ‘pleased’ with the agreement, and predicted ‘favorable’ action on the modified bill in the new year.⁴³⁷ At a press conference, FEAC chairs Coretta Scott King and Murray Finley endorsed the bill, calling it ‘an essential first step toward full employment’ and ‘an enormous improvement over existing law and policy.’ In a memo circulated to local coalitions and supporters, Executive Director John Carr announced that the FEAC was ‘going on the offensive’ against those who called the bill ‘an empty gesture or a costly spur to inflation.’ Lobbying was intensified, hostile newspapers petitioned, educational conferences were organised, and sympathetic legislators recruited.⁴³⁸ The same month, Michael Harrington orchestrated a two-day conference in Washington, D.C., which culminated in a march and rally to remind politicians ‘to keep their promises to the powerless.’ The ‘simple’ promise of a ‘job for every American who wants to work’ had ‘won the 1976 elections for the Democrats,’ wrote Harrington, and he meant to ensure that the party kept it.⁴³⁹ This determination to salvage something of the bill concealed deeper frustrations, however. The *New York Times* spoke for many disappointed liberals when it condemned the bill as ‘a flag for politicians to wave when next they need to demonstrate concern for the unemployed.’⁴⁴⁰

When Humphrey died in January 1978, the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, denuded as it was, gained fresh impetus. Its passage would be, said Labor Secretary Ray Marshall, ‘as fitting a tribute to Senator Humphrey as this Congress, and this Nation,

⁴³⁷ Press release, “Humphrey, Hawkins Pleased With Agreement on Full Employment Bill; Predict Favorable Action Early Next Year,” November 14, 1977, AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84.

⁴³⁸ Memo, John Carr to FEAC board, local coalitions, other interested persons, November 29, 1977, AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84.

⁴³⁹ Michael Harrington, “Dear Friend” letter, n.d., AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84; A. F. Hawkins, “Nationwide Rallies for ‘Decent’ Jobs at ‘Decent’ Wages,” *NYT*, August 13, 1977.

⁴⁴⁰ Editorial, “The Hollow Promise of Humphrey-Hawkins,” *NYT*, November 11, 1977.

could pay.⁴⁴¹ Nonetheless, the fate of the bill remained uncertain until its passage. In October 1978, a neutered version of the bill was signed into law. In November, in a special election, Republican David Durenberger won the Minnesota Senate seat left vacant by Humphrey's death. It was an ominous harbinger of the fate that many Senate liberals would suffer in 1980.

The second attempt to enforce full employment legislation since the Second World War had suffered a similar fate as its predecessor. Having been introduced as the Equal Opportunity and Full Employment bill, Humphrey-Hawkins ended its troubled passage through the legislature as the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act. Shorn of its most meaningful provisions, Humphrey-Hawkins was destined not to revolutionise the political economy of the United States by giving the federal government the tools and the responsibility to plan systematically to shield the American people from the caprices of the business cycle. Instead, the act became a toothless statement of the government's good intentions. Excessive, if understandable, concern for the inflationary and budgetary impact of such an ambitious measure meant that Humphrey's last legislative monument was distinctly less impressive than it could have been. However, at least the Humphrey-Hawkins bill was fortunate enough to become law. The same cannot be said of national health insurance, which suffered a series of false starts and near misses over the course of the 1970s, before finally collapsing with Senator Edward Kennedy's 1980 primary challenge to President Carter.

⁴⁴¹ Ray Marshall, Statement before the Employment Opportunities Subcommittee, House of Representatives, February 7, 1978, AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84.

'As A Matter of Right and Not of Privilege': National Health Insurance

After its inclusion in FDR's 'Second Bill of Rights,' national health insurance (NHI) had become first a central component of Truman's frustrated Fair Deal, and then a Democratic preoccupation in the ensuing decades. By the 1970s, the passage of some form of NHI had been folded into debates on national planning. Only by making the federal government a more substantial presence in this sector of the economy, argued its proponents, could healthcare cost inflation, a leading cause of inflation more broadly, be restrained. Many Democrats seized on the reform of the healthcare system as a means to lessen the financial burden on beleaguered middle-class families and the urban poor. In 1977, *U.S. News and World Report* calculated that healthcare cost an average of \$650 per person, or \$2,600 for a family of four, almost 11 percent of the typical American's annual income.⁴⁴² A few months after Carter assumed office, journalist Eliot Marshall wrote that healthcare inflation was now running at such an alarming rate 'that economists and budget planners now regard it as a kind of good soldier gone berserk.'⁴⁴³

None were more zealous in their efforts to tackle the problem than Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, for whom healthcare reform was the defining struggle of a long political career. If Democratic liberals had a king-over-the-water in the years after LBJ's resignation, it was surely Ted Kennedy. The youngest scion of the Kennedy family, he had first been elected to the Senate from Massachusetts in 1962. With his brothers occupying the White House and Attorney General's office, it was widely assumed that the first family had bestowed a sinecure on a rather louche,

⁴⁴² "Uproar Over Medical Bills," *USN*, March 28, 1977.

⁴⁴³ Eliot Marshall, "HEW's Half-Measure," *TNR*, May 7, 1977.

irresponsible younger brother. Ted had held no elective office prior to his election to fill his brother's Senate seat, nor for that matter had he held down a proper job. A child of privilege, Kennedy had been educated at Harvard, where he had distinguished himself on the college football team and by being temporarily expelled for cheating on a Spanish exam. His first experience of politics was in 1958, when he managed his eldest brother's Senate re-election campaign. He would be in charge of the Kennedy campaign in the West when John sought the presidency two years later. When JFK vacated his Senate seat in December 1960, Kennedy's father ensured that a placeholder was appointed until Ted turned 30 (in 1962) and became constitutionally eligible to occupy the seat. A prototypical younger son of a grand family, the casual observer might assume: sheltered, unambitious, and feckless. Indeed, during the 1962 special election, Kennedy's opponent famously remarked that '[i]f his name was Edward Moore [rather than Edward Moore Kennedy], his candidacy would be a joke.'⁴⁴⁴

Nonetheless, despite some hedonistic tendencies, Kennedy proved an effective senator, with a high tolerance for the drudgery that made up much of a legislator's work.⁴⁴⁵ His early years in office were punctuated by tragedy, however. His two elder brothers were felled by assassins' bullets before the decade's end, and in 1964 a near-fatal plane crash would leave him with chronic back pain for the rest of his life. Then in July 1969 came the event that would loom over the rest of his career. Returning from a party on Chappaquiddick Island, adjacent to Martha's Vineyard, accompanied by Mary-Jo Kopechne, a 28-year old former secretary to RFK, Kennedy's Oldsmobile plunged off a bridge into the Poucha Pond. He escaped, she did not. Kennedy claimed

⁴⁴⁴ John H. Fenton, "Kennedy Assailed In Debate," *NYT*, August 28, 1962; Stanley, *Kennedy v. Carter*, 32-40.

⁴⁴⁵ Burton Hersh, *The Shadow President: Ted Kennedy in Opposition* (South Royalton, VT, 1997), 11.

that he dove repeatedly in a vain attempt to rescue Kopechne. He failed to report the accident until the next morning.⁴⁴⁶ For the rest of his life, Chappaquiddick would be cited as evidence of Kennedy's moral deficiency.

Politically, whereas John Kennedy had maintained clear ideological distance from the party's New Deal legacy, Ted was situated more squarely in the Roosevelt tradition. Kennedy, wrote Burton Hersh, was 'an heir to the aspirations of the New Deal Left' and 'not nearly as squeamish at being labeled a man of the left as Jack or the early Bobby.'⁴⁴⁷ Like Humphrey, he had fewer neuroses about being perceived as big-spending liberal than many of his Democratic colleagues. Also like Humphrey, Kennedy had an appeal to blue collar voters that few contemporaries could match. *Time* magazine reported an incident when Kennedy, marching in an anti-Vietnam war parade, had been cheered by a counter-demonstration of construction workers wielding 'Back Our Boys in Vietnam' signs.⁴⁴⁸ However, Kennedy was not immune from the working class backlash, as was made painfully clear when he confronted Boston's anti-busing protests. As the protests reached their rowdy climax in September 1974, Kennedy had appeared at a rally of some 10,000 angry parents, at the invitation of the sponsor organisation ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights), to appeal to the protestors to obey the court orders. He was drowned out by jeering and choruses of 'God Bless America,' until he was escorted off the speaker's platform by

⁴⁴⁶ A brief, lucid account of the Chappaquiddick accident can be found in Adam Clymer, *Edward M. Kennedy: A Biography* (New York, 2009), 139-49.

⁴⁴⁷ William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Barack Obama* (4th ed., rev. and updated, Ithaca, NY, and London, 2009), 63-120; Hersh, *Shadow President*, 38.

⁴⁴⁸ "The Non-Candidacy of Edward Moore Kennedy," *Time*, November 29, 1971.

the police.⁴⁴⁹ Kennedy was troubled by this evidence of blue collar alienation, especially given his own presidential ambitions, and he took steps to combat it.

In 1973, Kennedy had appeared onstage with George Wallace at a ‘non-political’ July 4 event, at which he had hailed the Alabama governor as a fellow populist critic of the Nixon administration who used ‘the people’s power’ to ‘strike at the rights of the people.’⁴⁵⁰ Kennedy’s policy priorities also reflected his sensitivity to the backlash. On law and order issues, Kennedy became increasingly hawkish. He sponsored a bill (ultimately defeated in the House) to broaden federal prosecutorial powers and institute mandatory minimum penal sentences for certain crimes, as well as another, successfully enacted, bill to give the federal government new wiretapping powers. However, such measures drew criticism from civil libertarians and antagonised the liberal portions of Kennedy’s coalition.⁴⁵¹ It was far safer to pursue universalist policies, such as NHI, in the hope that they would smother tensions exacerbated by disagreements over the ‘Social Issue.’

Kennedy’s commitment to NHI was both philosophical and personal. Much like Humphrey-Hawkins, national health insurance was a means of extending rights-consciousness into the Democratic Party’s traditional economic concerns, a way to give ‘white middle-class voters a stake in the Great Society.’⁴⁵² Inevitably, this put Kennedy and his supporters on a collision course with the inflation-wary administrations, both Republican and Democratic, of the 1970s. Rights had to be

⁴⁴⁹ William Chapman, “Busing Foes Boo Kennedy in Boston,” *WP*, September 10, 1974; Stanley, *Kennedy vs. Carter*, 41, 50.

⁴⁵⁰ Editorial, “The Kennedy-Wallace Summit,” *CSM*, July 7, 1987.

⁴⁵¹ Hersh, *Shadow President*, 14-15; Anne Taylor Fleming, “Kennedy: Time of Decision,” *NYT*, June 24, 1979.

⁴⁵² Stanley, *Kennedy vs. Carter*, 51.

observed, said Kennedy, regardless of the economic or political climate. In any case, as far as the supporters of NHI were concerned, the political climate was propitious. As he later recalled, Kennedy believed that the Democratic victories in 1976 ‘called for bold leadership and swift action built around a single piece of legislation.’⁴⁵³ On this issue, the audacity which Kennedy expected from the White House would not materialise. Nonetheless, exploiting recent congressional reforms and the changing media context, Kennedy was able to provide that policy leadership himself from within the Senate, emerging as a kind of ‘shadow president’ by the end of the decade.⁴⁵⁴ Though not occupying a leadership position (in another parallel with Humphrey, Kennedy had lost his post as majority whip in 1971 to Robert Byrd), Kennedy was able to make use of his chairmanship of the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research to champion NHI.⁴⁵⁵

Kennedy also had a well-organised and well-financed pressure group to lead, the Committee for National Health Insurance (CNHI). The CNHI had been founded in 1969 as a joint venture between the UAW and the AFL-CIO. At the instigation of the CNHI, Kennedy introduced several healthcare reform bills over the course of the 1970s, first with Wilbur Mills as co-sponsor in 1973, and, after Mills left Congress in disgrace, with Rep. James Corman of California. Such bills would have introduced a single-payer, not-for-profit national insurance scheme, which would cover all Americans regardless of income, employment status, or pre-existing conditions. He made some headway toward securing White House cooperation. Between 1974 and 1976, for example, Kennedy came tantalisingly close to reaching a compromise deal with the Ford administration. Ultimately he was forced to disown the resulting

⁴⁵³ Edward M. Kennedy, *True Compass A Memoir* (New York, 2009), 359.

⁴⁵⁴ Fleming, “Kennedy: Time of Decision”; Hersh, *Shadow President*, xv.

⁴⁵⁵ Spencer Rich, “Byrd Ousts Kennedy As Senate Whip,” *WP*, January 22, 1971.

legislation, largely because of the objections of the CNHI, which had no intention of settling for a Republican-diluted bill when all signs pointed to a Democratic landslide in 1976. In this way, as Timothy Stanley has argued, Kennedy was ‘a hostage to his own constituency ... as much a product of his own movement as its steward.’⁴⁵⁶

Once in office, however, President Carter was unenthusiastic about the prospect of reforming the American healthcare system. Though by no means indifferent to its iniquities, it was simply not high on his list of priorities. Technocratic and averse to grand schemes, he seemed less concerned about extending insurance coverage than with correcting inefficiencies and abuses within the existing system. As Peter Bourne, the president’s special assistant on health issues, explained, Carter ‘preferred to talk movingly of his deep and genuine sympathy for those who suffered for lack of health care, as though the depth of his compassion could be a substitute for embracing a major new and expensive government solution for the problem.’⁴⁵⁷ He stood firm only on the need for stringent cost-containment measures, which he insisted should be implemented before broader reform could be undertaken. During the campaign, Carter had made a vague commitment to healthcare reform, while the more ambitious party platform had called for ‘a comprehensive national health insurance system with universal and mandatory coverage.’⁴⁵⁸ Much like his support for Humphrey-Hawkins, this pledge had been grudgingly extracted, largely to win the support of the UAW.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁶ Stanley, *Kennedy vs. Carter*, 52-3.

⁴⁵⁷ David Blumenthal and James A. Morone, *The Heart of Power: Health and Politics in the Oval Office* (Berkeley and London, 2009), 252-3; Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Postpresidency* (New York, 1997), 433.

⁴⁵⁸ National Democratic Party Platform, 1976, papers of Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr. (TPO), John J. Burns Library (JJBL), Boston College, Legislative Files, Democratic Steering & Policy Committee, Sub-series 7, Box 57

⁴⁵⁹ During the campaign, Carter had courted the UAW, consulting extensively with the union before delivering a major speech on health insurance. The support of the UAW was vital to Carter’s victories

The growing realisation that Carter's cost containment proposals were a substitute for, rather than a precursor to, NHI prompted a swift and angry response from liberals. It would fall to Kennedy to lead the charge. However, both had been anxious to avoid a public confrontation. In June 1977, Peter Bourne, the administration official most sympathetic to Kennedy's position, recommended unsuccessfully to Hamilton Jordan that they should quietly begin working directly with the senator. 'He has, I think, tried to demonstrate restraint by holding back on criticizing our slow start on this issue, but National Health Insurance is the most important thing in his career at the present time, and he feels that his own credibility will be in jeopardy if he goes too long without saying something.' Without 'evidence of a major move on this issue' in the near future, Kennedy would likely be obliged to 'drop a bomb' on the administration to preserve his own credibility.⁴⁶⁰ Bourne was among those urging Carter to adopt a more radical plan, arguing in a December 1977 memo that, 'opposition to a conservative, limited plan will be almost as great as opposition to a more comprehensive program. On the other hand the intensity of support will be tied directly to comprehensiveness.'⁴⁶¹

The White House's position was further complicated by its strained relationship with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), then under the direction of Joseph Califano. Califano had spent nearly his entire career in Washington, including stints as a special assistant to LBJ and in various roles for the

in Iowa and Florida, among other states. Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats*, 101-2; Bourne, *Jimmy Carter*, 432.

⁴⁶⁰ Memo, Bourne to Jordan, June 20, 1977, "National Health Insurance [CF, O/A 40]" folder, DPS, Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 240.

⁴⁶¹ Memo, Bourne to Carter, December 12, 1977; Memo, Jordan to Bourne, July 8, 1977; Memo, Eizenstat to Jordan, July 5, 1977, "National Health Insurance [CF, O/A 40]" folder, DPS, Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 240; Author interview with Peter Bourne, November 19, 2013.

DNC. In many respects, Carter and Califano had overlapping political priorities ('I saw it as my job to prove that these programs could be run with competence and integrity, to convince taxpayers that they were getting full value for the dollars they were investing in HEW,' the latter wrote in his memoirs).⁴⁶² Nonetheless, Califano resented White House intrusion in the working of his department and resisted attempts to move faster on developing legislation. This bureaucratic infighting obstructed progress on any bill. Within six months of Carter's inauguration, Bourne was complaining about HEW's stalling on NHI proposals and was unsure 'whether he [Califano] is unaware of the lack of movement or whether he is just trying to keep us off his back.'⁴⁶³ As early as September, Eizenstat's staffers were reporting to him that the 'spirit of detente [sic] with HEW seems to have broken down.'⁴⁶⁴

Though he initially shrank from frontal assaults on Carter, Kennedy was not averse to chiding the administration publicly for its irresolution on NHI. In May 1977, 116 days after Carter's inauguration, Kennedy used an address to the UAW to warn that healthcare reform was 'in danger of becoming the missing promise in the Administration's plans.'⁴⁶⁵ In August, Bourne reported that Kennedy was planning 'a multi-city blitz in the fall to push National Health Insurance, not necessarily [for] his legislation, but [which] will inevitably focus on our failures of which he is extremely

⁴⁶² Joseph A. Califano, Jr., *Inside: A Public and Private Life* (New York, 2004), 329.

⁴⁶³ Bourne to Jordan, Eizenstat, August 1, 1977, "National Health Insurance [CF, O/A 40]" folder, DPS, Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 240.

⁴⁶⁴ Memo, Joe Onek, Bob Havely, to Eizenstat, September 27, 1977, "National Health Insurance [CF, O/A 40]" folder, Domestic Policy Staff, Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 240.

⁴⁶⁵ Edward M. Kennedy, Tribute to Leonard Woodcock at the United Auto Workers Convention, Los Angeles, CA, May 16, 1977, Papers of Adam Clymer, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (JFKL), Box 12.

aware.⁴⁶⁶ The senator continued to push for the administration to adopt his bill. Carter was disdainful of Kennedy's proposals, which he dismissed as too expensive.

The president's qualms only intensified as the economy worsened and he doggedly insisted that inflation-spurring costs must be brought under control before further reform could be countenanced. For Kennedy, who believed that every American citizen had a right to good quality healthcare, such preconditions were irrelevant.⁴⁶⁷ By early 1978, Kennedy and the CNHI were pressuring the administration to promulgate comprehensive reform proposals which could be used as a Democratic platform in that year's elections. Both were keen to secure commitments from any incoming Democrats, or those facing re-election, in preparation for a potentially divisive enactment battle. By contrast, the Carter administration hoped to avoid any serious moves on healthcare until 1979. Eizenstat counselled Carter against releasing any detailed plan prior to the midterms which might damage Democratic candidates by affixing the 'big spender' label to them: 'When the history of NHI is written, whether the plan came before or after the election will be irrelevant.'⁴⁶⁸ As well as fencing with dyspeptic liberals, Carter was forced to contend with pressure from conservative Democrats, who began to mobilise to oppose such legislation, citing their concerns about limited available revenues for such a dramatic expansion of government responsibility.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁶ Memo, Eizenstat to Jordan, Bourne, August 2, 1977, "National Health Insurance [CF, O/A 40]" folder, Domestic Policy Staff, Eizenstat Subject Files, JCL, Box 240.

⁴⁶⁷ Lawrence Meyer, "Carter Raps 'Spend More' Attitude in Health Care," *WP*, June 17, 1977; Richard D. Lyons, "Carter and Health Care Costs," *NYT*, April 30, 1977.

⁴⁶⁸ Memo, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter, July 27, 1978, Clymer papers, JFKL, Box 12.

⁴⁶⁹ Blumenthal, Morone, *Heart Of Power*, 267-8.

As liberal dissatisfaction with Carter intensified, Kennedy became a rallying point for the disillusioned and NHI his battle standard. Attorney General Griffin Bell told the *Boston Globe* in 1978, '[t]he President ... asked me the other day if I thought Senator Kennedy would accept an appointment to the Supreme Court. I replied that I did not believe he would want to give up being co-president.'⁴⁷⁰ The situation came to a head at the Democratic Midterm Convention in Memphis, Tennessee, held in December 1978. Carter's aura was still aglow after the successful conclusion of the Camp David Accords in September, which would lead to the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979. These achievements encouraged little intra-party adulation for the president. 'We're not gathering here in Memphis to sing a hallelujah chorus to Jimmy Carter,' Maryland congresswoman Barbara A. Mikulski told a women's caucus meeting. Carter tried to use the mini-convention to mollify the rebels, appearing at a series of workshops to defend the administration and listen patiently while the disgruntled vented their frustrations.⁴⁷¹ Senior officials in the White House Communications Office advised Carter to adopt a 'strong, responsible, confident, proud, uplifting, but determined and firm' tone in his speech to the convention, his first at a party-wide gathering since his nomination.⁴⁷²

By far the biggest draw of the convention was the workshop on health insurance, at which Carter did not appear, but which did feature the increasingly truculent senator from Massachusetts. Apart from Kennedy, the panel included UAW president Douglas Fraser, Eizenstat, and Califano, and the chairman was the young

⁴⁷⁰ Bell quoted in Hersh, *Shadow President*, 29.

⁴⁷¹ Warren Weaver, Jr., "Democrats in Memphis: Of Birds, Sorghum, and Sincerity," *NYT*, December 9, 1978; Terence Smith, "Carter's Dual Role in Memphis: A Politician As Well As A President," *NYT*, December 10, 1978.

⁴⁷² Memo, Rafshoon, Greg Schneiders, Bernie Aronson, to Carter, November 2, 1978, "Midterm Conference [CF 187]" folder, OAPC, Retired Office Files, JCL, Box 55.

governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. Kennedy's contribution was typically impassioned and elicited the warmest response. Invoking FDR and JFK, Kennedy defended his healthcare reforms and warned that Carter's use of fiscal restraint to combat inflation should not adulterate the Democratic Party's commitment to the impoverished. Thumping the rostrum, he pledged to continue the fight for 'that Democratic platform plank that provides decent quality healthcare, North and South, East and West, for all Americans, as a matter of right and not of privilege.' A keen yachtsman, Kennedy concluded his remarks with a metaphor that came to define his later primary challenge to the president: 'Sometimes a party must sail against the wind. We cannot afford to drift or lie at anchor. We cannot heed the call of those who say it is time to furl the sail.'⁴⁷³ The crowd roared its approval and Kennedy's speech led that evening's news bulletins. Carter later said that he interpreted the speech as Kennedy 'kind of throwing down the gauntlet.'⁴⁷⁴

From that point onwards, efforts to pass NHI became snarled up in the Carter-Kennedy psychodrama. A month before the Memphis convention, the midterm congressional elections had seen the Republican Party gain 15 seats in the House of Representatives, and 3 seats in the Senate. Such results only confirmed Carter's conviction that he had been elected to 'bring fiscal responsibility to the federal government.'⁴⁷⁵ Greg Schneiders, Deputy Assistant to the President for Communications, suggested that they stop underplaying the split with Kennedy on NHI. The administration was 'in a position to look "conservative" whenever we

⁴⁷³ EMK, Remarks at the Workshop on Health Care, Democratic National Committee, Mid-term Convention, Memphis, TN, December 9, 1978, Clymer papers, JFKL, Box 12.

⁴⁷⁴ Myra McPherson, "Heeeeere's Teddy!" *WP*, December 11, 1978; Interview with Jimmy Carter, May 15, 1998, Clymer papers, JFKL, Box 3.

⁴⁷⁵ "The New Congress: A Small Step to the Right," *CQA*, Vol. 34, 1978, 3-B, 4-B; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville, AR, 1995), 77.

discuss the issue. Therefore, the more columnists and others write about it now, the better.” It should be stressed, argued Rafshoon, that Carter was on the right side of the issue, both politically and substantively, and that his ‘taking on’ of Kennedy was an indication of the new spirit of ‘toughness.’⁴⁷⁶

In January 1979, as the new Congress convened, the Carter administration took the decision to propose a modest catastrophic insurance plan together with reforms to Medicare and Medicaid. Alongside catastrophic insurance, the Carter plan mandated employers to cover workers, introduced a new federal insurance plan for the elderly, poor and uninsured (which would absorb both Medicare and Medicaid), as well as introducing further systemic reforms such as the promotion of HMOs and the constraining of hospital and physician fees.⁴⁷⁷ Much like Carter’s other proposals, the focus was on cost-containment, rather than coverage for the uninsured. Appearing on NBC’s *Today Show* the day after Carter’s plan was announced, Kennedy framed his opposition in the language of national planning. He told Tom Brokaw that the nation could not simply ‘add more benefits to the health care system.’ It was essential, he said, to follow other nations and pursue ‘prospective budgeting’: ‘To establish a budget [for health care], as we do for national defense, as we do for education, as we do in fighting crime ... and then see the distribution of benefits underneath.’⁴⁷⁸

Carter’s response to Kennedy’s objections, as outlined by press secretary Jody Powell, stressed that the proposals were ‘fiscally responsible’ and ‘a first step in a national insurance plan.’ Kennedy was dismissed as the representative of those who

⁴⁷⁶ Memo, Greg Schneiders to Gerald Rafshoon, n.d. “National Health Insurance [3]” folder, Office of the Assistant to the President for Communications (OAPC), Rafshoon Subject Files, JCL, Box 4.

⁴⁷⁷ Blumenthal and Morone, *Heart Of Power*, 275.

⁴⁷⁸ Transcript, *Today Show*, Tom Brokaw interview with EMK, Clymer papers, JFKL Box 7.

had raised NHI into ‘a semi-sacred ideological principle.’⁴⁷⁹ This strategy ultimately failed, however, and the Carter-backed bill expired in the House. By September 1979, despairing of the apparently terminally unambitious Carter administration, Kennedy decided on just such a bold initiative. Joining with Henry Waxman, Kennedy introduced the ‘Health Care for All Americans’ bill. In order to placate the deficit-averse White House, the Kennedy-Waxman bill included a heavy cost-sharing component and employed private insurers as fiscal intermediaries. Kennedy’s onetime co-sponsor, James Corman denounced the bill for its reliance on the private insurance sector.⁴⁸⁰ The Kennedy-Waxman bill failed, despite its moderated provisions, as all NHI bills were to fail in the 1970s.

Carter was convinced that his reforms had been the victim of Kennedy’s overweening ambition. The over-privileged Massachusetts senator had set his covetous eyes on the White House, and was apparently prepared to undermine a cause to which he was passionately committed, as long as Carter would be denied a victory. In a postscript to his published White House diary, Carter acidly concluded that he could have done little to forestall a challenge from the Massachusetts senator ‘to remove me for the political office that he considered his justifiable family heritage.’⁴⁸¹ It is unfair, however, to view Kennedy’s challenge in these terms. In his autobiography, Kennedy claimed that Carter’s ‘crisis of confidence’ speech first prompted considerations of mounting a primary challenge. He recalled watching the talk ‘with mounting incredulousness and outrage ... This message was contrary to – it

⁴⁷⁹ Memo, Powell to Carter, May 18, 1979, “National Health Insurance [CF, O/A 729][3]” folder, Eizenstat Subject Files, Domestic Policy Staff, JCL, Box 241.

⁴⁸⁰ Philip J. Funigiello, *Chronic Politics: Health Care Security from FDR to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS, 2005), 191.

⁴⁸¹ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York, 2010), 527.

was in conflict with – all the ideals of the Democratic Party that I cherished.’⁴⁸² Kennedy’s disgust exposes a principal cause of the bitter rift between him and Carter: a fundamental disagreement about the proper handling of the presidency. For Carter, a crisis was an opportunity for reflection; for Kennedy, such moments demanded audacity. This differing conception of presidential power, and of the future of Democratic Party, was sublimated into the clash over healthcare reform. ‘Kennedy and his supporters saw a deep human need for protection against the cost of illness. Carter saw a broken, inefficient healthcare system to be reengineered.’⁴⁸³ Ultimately, it would find expression in Edward Kennedy’s 1980 primary challenge to the incumbent Carter, a rebellion of Democratic liberals against Carter’s post-New Deal politics of lowered expectations.

Missed Opportunities

Many scholars have asked whether, at a certain point in its development, America missed an opportunity to transform into a social democratic state.⁴⁸⁴ Historians have compared the U.S. to other advanced industrial democracies, mostly in Europe, and, noting the underdeveloped welfare state and the fact that all mainstream political parties are broadly committed to near-identical systems of capitalism, have sought an explanation for the apparent American aberration. Considerable attention has been given to the failings of the Great Society, but there is a growing consensus among historians of American liberalism that the missed opportunity, if indeed there was one,

⁴⁸² Kennedy, *True Compass*, 367.

⁴⁸³ Blumenthal, Morone, *Heart Of Power*, 278.

⁴⁸⁴ See, for instance, Nelson Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era” and Ira Katznelson, “Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?” in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J., 1989); Also, Paul Conkin, *The New Deal* (New York, 1967).

occurred in the 1940s, as New Deal liberalism hardened into Cold War liberalism.⁴⁸⁵ According to Ira Katznelson, for example, the Great Society, while by no means devoid of successes, only reinforced trends that had originated in the liberalism of the early Cold War which strangled the elements of proto-social democracy within the late New Deal.⁴⁸⁶

It may be too much to say that these two legislative failures – full employment and national health insurance – represent another missed opportunity to turn the United States towards social democracy. Nonetheless, the political viability of both of these acts has been obscured in the historical narrative by Reagan’s triumph in 1980. That the crises of the 1970s would produce a popular swing away ‘big government’ and towards market solutions is too often taken as inevitable. The circulation of national planning ideas among American academic and policymaking elites, and the fact that two major pieces of legislation inspired by those ideas commanded such widespread public support, is a standing rebuke to such teleology.

The Humphrey-Hawkins and NHI episodes reveal a Democratic Party struggling to come to terms with the legacy of the New Deal. Democrats like Humphrey and Kennedy were anxious to demonstrate that solutions predicated on vigorous government activism were still relevant in the era of stagflation. They also sought to demonstrate that the New Deal’s ‘universalist’ ideology was capacious enough to incorporate once excluded groups who were clamouring for full economic citizenship. In this, they enjoyed the support of many campaigning organisations, most

⁴⁸⁵ See Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (New York, 2004).

⁴⁸⁶ Ira Katznelson, ‘Was The Great Society A Lost Opportunity?’ Fraser and Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J., 1989).

notably African-American and feminist groups, who had long understood the connections between questions of economic status and their other objectives. That such groups could be drawn into cohesive political coalitions with, for instance, labour unions, seemed to offer the hope for a renewed Democratic majority around traditional pocketbook issues.

However, despite 1976 amounting to the most propitious moment for the Democrats since 1964, such a majority never materialised. Congressional Democrats discovered that grand visions of a 'New New Deal' would go nowhere without forceful presidential leadership. Carter had little interest in being FDR's second coming. For Kennedy, and the supporters of his 1980 primary challenge, Carter's failure to show more audacious leadership in response to the crisis of the 1970s was an indictment of his entire governing philosophy. However, Carter's White House confronted an economic situation that was no straightforward replay of the Great Depression and a political context that was in crucial respects more conservative than it had been a decade earlier. 'It's a weird period for liberals,' Michael Harrington remarked during the Memphis convention. 'The problem is the conventional liberal wisdom of the past doesn't work anymore. This is like 1931. Just as the conventional wisdom of the 1920s was totally shattered by the depression, the conventional wisdom of the 1960s has been shattered by inflation.'⁴⁸⁷ Inflationary and budgetary concerns always precluded ambitious government programmes, especially as Carter had promised repeatedly during the 1976 campaign to balance the budget by 1980. Support for a great many federal programmes sat, paradoxically, alongside a growing resentment of the federal budget deficits that seemed to have become a permanent

⁴⁸⁷ Bill Peterson, "Liberals Win A Few By Compromises, Not Confrontation," *WP*, December 11, 1978.

feature of the American economy. By 1979, the Carter administration, for example, had to counteract a national campaign for a ‘balanced budget’ amendment to the Constitution, which attracted the support of Californian governor Jerry Brown among others.⁴⁸⁸

Moreover, it would be simplistic to characterise these legislative struggles as a case of a predominantly ‘liberal’ Congress continually frustrated by a ‘conservative’ president. Carter enjoyed considerable support in his fiscal conservatism from numerous congressional Democrats. On the issue of economics, the tension was essentially generational. For the most part, Democrats who entered Congress in the 1970s were less amenable to grand federal projects. They shared their suburban constituents’ dislike of inflation and tax increases and backed Carter’s push for budgetary discipline. Bob Carr recalled that he and many other younger members had ‘fabulous relationships with the president.’⁴⁸⁹ Their formative experiences were Vietnam and Watergate, not the Great Depression and the Second World War. The Watergate Babies had internalised a deep scepticism of government that would have seemed bizarre before the Great Society’s failures and the Watergate scandal. Humphrey and Kennedy failed to tackle that loss of faith in government’s ability to solve economic and social problems.

Democrats like Humphrey and Kennedy found themselves caught between an inflation-weary public and two fiscally-hawkish presidents, one of whom was from their own party. Perhaps if a more conventional Democrat had occupied the White House between 1977 and 1981 a robust full employment law and national health

⁴⁸⁸ Maxwell Glenn, “Balance-the-Budget Juggernaut Heads for Capitol Hill,” *National Journal*, February 24, 1979.

⁴⁸⁹ M. Robert Carr, author interview.

insurance would have stood a greater chance of enactment. Liberals who sought to expand the New Deal in the 1970s would be reminded of the limits of Congress as a platform for such ambitious policy leadership, particularly when the response of the White House ranged from hostile to unenthusiastic. Humphrey and Kennedy were by no means the only congressional Democrats grappling with the legacy of the New Deal. At the same time, a group of iconoclastic legislators from the more prosperous and self-confident Sunbelt West were endeavouring to convert the party to a less statist post-New Deal liberalism. Their efforts to approach the problem from the opposite direction would be frustrated by the institutional limitations of Congress and the missteps of the Carter administration.

4. Sunbelt Democrats, or How the West Wasn't Won

In 1969, Kevin Phillips, a young Harvard-educated special assistant in the U.S. Attorney General's office and a political strategist for Nixon's presidential campaign, published *The Emerging Republican Majority*. Surveying Nixon's victory, Phillips predicted an imminent conservative realignment which would sunder the New Deal coalition. An unprecedented population shift that had been underway since 1945, argued Phillips, promised to remake the electoral map of the United States. Galvanised by 'high pensions, early retirement, increased leisure time and technological innovation,' a sizable proportion of the American middle class, mostly white and affluent, were uprooting themselves from the old urban centres of the Northeast and Midwest to enjoy the 'endless summer' of the Sun Country that stretched from the Florida Gold Coast to the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁹⁰ Their cities were not the old, ethnically heterogeneous, machine-dominated Democratic fiefdoms of the Northeast and Midwest, but 'centers of commerce, light industry, military preparedness, defense production and space-age technology, [the] vocational seedbeds of a huge middle class.' They were ripe for incorporation into Nixon's new conservative majority. 'It is no coincidence,' concluded Phillips, 'that this conservative trend is best exemplified by California, Arizona, Florida and Texas (apart from Nevada, the fastest-growing states in the nation), where the very areas of greatest population explosion are the demonstrated strongholds of Reagan, Goldwater, Gurney and Tower, the vanguardmen of the new conservative sun politics.'⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ The 'Sunbelt,' as Phillips defines it, encapsulates the states of the South and Southwest United States: Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Southern California, and at least parts of Arkansas, North Carolina, and Southern Nevada. Here, a slightly more expansive definition, including the state of Colorado, will be employed.

⁴⁹¹ Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, 1969), 436-38.

Six years later, in 1975, at the moment that this new Republican majority seemed most imperilled, radical journalist Kirkpatrick Sale echoed Phillips' assessment, noting that the balance of national power was tilting away from the old Northeastern establishment to the 'Southern Rim' (a region coterminous with Phillips' 'Sunbelt'). There was, argued Sale, a 'climatic, historical, and cultural cohesiveness' that set this region apart. He contrasted, unfavourably, 'the traditional, staid, old-time, button-down, Ivy League, tight-lipped, patrician, New England-rooted WASP culture' of the Northeastern 'Yankees' with 'the aggressive, flamboyant, restless, swaggering, new-fangled, open-collar, can-do, Southern-rooted, Baptist culture' of the Southern Rim 'Cowboys.'⁴⁹² Sale's differentiation between 'Cowboys' and 'Yankees' captured the tenor of the conservative insurgency that was solidifying its hold on the Republican Party and would propel California governor Ronald Reagan into the White House by the end of the decade. The New Right was in many ways a profoundly Southern and Southwestern entity, infused with the curious mix of free-booting swagger, rugged individualism, and pious evangelism that Sale had described. The Sunbelt, it seemed, was Reagan Country. The chequered electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party in this region appear to confirm this conclusion. In the 1976 presidential election, with the exception of Texas and Hawaii, Jimmy Carter won no states west of Minnesota. Indeed, not until 1992 would a Democratic presidential candidate again win a state in the Southwest. The Democratic Party spent the 1970s and 1980s disproportionately reliant on its traditional bases in the Northeast and Midwest, regions that were increasingly at a disadvantage as deindustrialisation favoured a blossoming South and Southwest.

⁴⁹² Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift: The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenge to the Eastern Establishment* (New York, 1975), 5-6, 9, 13.

That the Sunbelt states were the spiritual and electoral catalyst of the late twentieth century conservative ascendancy is well established in the literature. Lisa McGirr, for instance, has studied a group of highly motivated suburban conservative activists, backed by regional entrepreneurs, in Orange County, California, and made a compelling case that these ‘Southland conservatives’ should be considered a vital component of any historical study of the conservative majority.⁴⁹³ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer has demonstrated how the business and political elite of Phoenix, Arizona (among them, Barry Goldwater), formulated a proto-neoliberal vision in response to the expansion of the state and the empowerment of trade unions under the New Deal.⁴⁹⁴ Matthew Lassiter has argued that the roots of the Republican majority are to be found in the suburbs of the post-Civil Rights South, while Meg Jacobs has argued that the party’s Sunbelt base defines its energy policies.⁴⁹⁵

Yet a narrative in which the Sunbelt is understood exclusively as the cockpit of the New Right is incomplete. Writing in 1981, the urban historian Carl Abbott was moved to take issue with the characterisation of the Sunbelt as a uniquely conservative phenomenon. Abbott noted that while the ‘typical sunbelt politician of the last decade may have been Jesse Helms, Jeremiah Denton, John Tower, or Barry Goldwater ... [i]t may also have been Tom Hayden, Jerry Brown, Henry Cisneros, or Andrew Young.’⁴⁹⁶ Abbott is by no means the only scholar who has sought to complicate the Sunbelt’s political trajectory. Jonathan Bell, for example, has argued persuasively that

⁴⁹³ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 5-8.

⁴⁹⁴ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013).

⁴⁹⁵ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J. and Oxford, 2007); Meg Jacobs, “The Conservative Struggle and the Energy Crisis,” in Schulman, Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound* and Meg Jacobs, “Wreaking Havoc from Within: George W. Bush’s Energy Policy in Historical Perspective,” in Julian E. Zelizer (ed.) *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2010).

⁴⁹⁶ Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), 8.

California 'ended the 1970s as the spiritual home of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party as much as that of John Birch sympathizers.'⁴⁹⁷ Focusing on the intersection of grassroots activists and party politics, Bell shows how Democrats came to dominate the politics of the Golden State in the years after the Second World War, developing a liberalism that fused economic rights and civil rights: the New Deal with a Sixties makeover. This ideology was capable of holding together a diverse coalition of labour unions, Latino farm workers, black civil rights campaigners, gay rights activists, and affluent suburbanites.

This chapter seeks first to develop the objections raised by historians such as Abbott and Bell, and demonstrate that the Sunbelt was contested political terrain in the 1970s. In particular, it will focus on the states of the Southwest and on Democratic efforts to build political coalitions in a seemingly hostile climate. For reasons of analytical clarity, the states of the South will be excluded. Like the states of the old Confederacy, the American West – and particularly the Southwest – has a distinct identity and political culture that benefit from separate treatment. This identity, as Clive Thomas has noted, has been moulded by the region's distinctive geography. The states west of the 100th meridian (with the exception of Hawaii, Alaska, and a strip along the Pacific coast) enjoy less than 20 inches of rainfall per annum. This aridity, the permanent scarcity of water, is the defining feature of life in these states and it has shaped their political culture.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁷ Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism* (Philadelphia, 2012), 5.

⁴⁹⁸ Clive S. Thomas, "The West and Its Brand of Politics," in Clive S. Thomas (ed.), *Politics and Public Policy in the Contemporary American West* (Albuquerque, NM, 1991), 4.

From their incorporation into the Union, the desert states of the West depended upon the guiding hand of the federal government to provide much-needed infrastructure. The most significant extension of federal power into Western life came with the New Deal. For Western state governments buffeted by the Depression, with limited welfare capacities and property tax-based revenues that vanished as house prices collapsed, the relief offered by the Roosevelt administration was indispensable.⁴⁹⁹ In return, Western states became, initially at least, a solid component of the New Deal coalition. As James Patterson has noted, prior to 1937 ‘the New Deal ... seemed largely a southern-western movement which was imaginatively attacking the problems of these regions.’⁵⁰⁰ Franklin Roosevelt carried every Western state in all four of his presidential elections, except Colorado and Wyoming, which he lost twice and once respectively. Moreover, the top three states in total per capita New Deal spending were Nevada, Montana, and Wyoming. Western politicians built careers on their ability to bring home the federal bacon.⁵⁰¹ Through such federal activity – the building of highways and dams and the siting of military installations – was the West developed. Effectively, the development of this infrastructure enabled the emergence of the ‘Sun Belt.’

Yet the West’s place in the New Deal coalition was short-lived. From 1938, as the threat of economic catastrophe receded, the Western states began to drift back into the Republican orbit. To some extent, this was unsurprising. The region’s political tradition is rooted in a kind of cognitive dissonance. Federal intervention was both

⁴⁹⁹ Michael P. Malone, F. Ross Peterson, “Politics and Protest,” in Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (eds.), *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York and Oxford, 1994), 513-14.

⁵⁰⁰ James T. Patterson, “The New Deal in the West,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 38:3 (August, 1969), 317. See also Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham, NC, and London, 1994).

⁵⁰¹ Malone, Peterson, “Politics and Protest,” 516.

demanding and denounced. The West had been shaped by a frontier mythology, by the belief that the region was built by bold, rugged, self-reliant individuals. The Westerner's spiritual antecedent was the lone pioneer pushing across the untamed wilderness. Seductive as this image is, only the continual attention and support of the federal government ensured that the West was settled and developed. Lone pioneers cannot build highways, dams, canals, or railway lines. The paradox of a federal presence that was both essential and resented defined Western politics.⁵⁰²

It was in this hostile climate that Democrats sought to prosper. This chapter will begin by analysing the careers of three Democratic politicians from three Southwestern states – Gary Hart of Colorado, Morris Udall of Arizona, and Jerry Brown of California – in an attempt to problematize the deterministic 'rise of Sunbelt conservatism' narrative, while showing that what worked politically for Democrats in the West made it more difficult to construct a national coalition. These are by no means the only possible focuses for an assessment of the Democratic Party's fortunes in the Western states. One could just as easily and fruitfully explore the careers of, among others, Senators Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, Joseph Montoya of New Mexico, or Alan Cranston of California; Representatives Patricia Schroeder or Timothy Wirth of Colorado, Henry Waxman or George Miller, both of California; or Governors Bruce Babbitt of Arizona and Richard Lamm of Colorado. Hart, Udall, and Brown have been chosen because each sought the Democratic presidential nomination at some point in their careers. Indeed, in every cycle from 1976 until 1992, at least one of these men was actively campaigning for the nomination.⁵⁰³ They were thus confronted with the

⁵⁰² Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, OK, and London, 1991), 613-32.

⁵⁰³ Udall ran in 1976, Hart in 1984 and 1988, and Brown in 1976, 1980, and 1992.

problem of translating a political philosophy developed for a Western context to a national campaign.

That context had a profound impact on their philosophies. Unlike their colleagues in the Northeast and Midwest, the Sunbelt Democrats honed their political philosophy in a relatively prosperous and confident region. Amid the economic malaise of the 1970s, that region's future seemed bright, and its industries innovative. Even as the Sunbelt Democrats reckoned with the diminished expectations of that decade, the region's confidence was reflected in their political approaches. These three cast themselves as forward-thinking modernisers who would reinvigorate the progressive case for government by giving it a distinctive Western spin. Of course, Hart, Udall, and Brown were not interchangeable personalities. For instance, while Hart and Brown consciously positioned themselves as post-New Deal/Great Society Democrats, Udall was far more comfortable maintaining links to that tradition. Yet they all portrayed themselves as insurgents challenging their party's ossified establishment; in Udall's case, the unreformed hierarchies of the House of Representatives and, in the case of Hart and Brown, a misguided federal government. In this, they were exemplars of an increasing reliance, by candidates for political office, on personality-driven campaigns independent of traditional party structures. They were textbook examples of Burdett Loomis's 'new American politician' – impatient, issue-oriented, policy entrepreneurs.

The second part of this chapter will focus on two controversies that dominated Jimmy Carter's approach to Western affairs: the water projects debacle and the Sagebrush Rebellion. Through these cases, the ways in which the national Democratic

Party alienated many (particularly rural) westerners will be explored. These controversies also reveal the difficulties Southwestern Democrats encountered in trying to incorporate themselves into, or offering leadership to, a national constituency. The anti-Washington populism that permeated Western politics, exacerbated by the 1970s' crisis of government authority, further impelled the region's Democratic politicians to define themselves against the federal government, and frequently put them in conflict with party leaders. This distinguished them from New Deal-era Southwestern Democrats who found that the interests of their states and their party dovetailed in the cause of regional development.

The conflicts were sharpened by a growing consciousness of the scarcity of resources. Some Democrats responded by embracing the burgeoning environmentalist movement, in which they saw the potential for a crusade that could endear the party to a conservationist-minded suburban middle class and demonstrate the party's sensitivity to the 'age of limits' in which it found itself. However, attempts by the Carter administration to enact an environmentalist agenda brought it into conflict not only with Western conservatives who disliked the regulatory apparatus that such policies demanded but with Western Democrats' concerns for regional improvement and political advancement. The congressional battles over the water projects and the Sagebrush Rebellion underscored the fact that, as was so often the case for other Democrats in the legislature, the pursuit of personal political success for Southwestern Democrats militated against party-building activities.

Gary Hart was born in November 1936, a little over three weeks after President Franklin Roosevelt overwhelmed Alf Landon in one of the most lopsided election victories in American history, establishing the New Deal coalition as the pre-eminent force in national politics.⁵⁰⁴ Some 38 years later, in his first Senate campaign, Hart used his stump speech to consign the New Deal itself to the history books.⁵⁰⁵ Touring Colorado, his home state, candidate Hart told audiences that 'it is time to replace the New Deal, or at least the conventional thinking which is its grandchild.' His opponent, Republican senator Peter Dominick, was bemused by Hart's reinvention, having expected that the candidate's time as George McGovern's campaign manager would be a more significant drag. He complained that Hart had moved 'almost to the right of Attila the Hun' on some issues.⁵⁰⁶

It was John Kennedy's presidential candidacy that persuaded Hart to transfer from divinity to law school at Yale, and Kennedy left a deep imprint on Hart's political identity. Hart had 'hand[ed] out leaflets on New Haven street corners' for the Massachusetts senator, worked in Robert Kennedy's Department of Justice, and organised in Colorado for RFK's 1968 campaign.⁵⁰⁷ Kennedy's example, according to Randall Rothenberg, convinced Hart that 'power – even power within a single ideological discipline, such as liberalism – must be wrested by each generation from

⁵⁰⁴ Roosevelt carried 46 of 48 states (only Maine and Vermont opted to reject the incumbent), winning 523 Electoral College votes to Landon's 8 and 27,750,866 popular votes (a 60.8 percent share) to Landon's 16,679,683 (36.5 percent). CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. Elections, Volume I* (6th ed., Washington, D.C., 2010), 783.

⁵⁰⁵ Hart's early life has been explored in more detail in the first chapter of this thesis. This section will therefore focus on those aspects of his political identity that were shaped by his Western background.

⁵⁰⁶ Miller, "The Transformation of Gary Hart"; Broder, "Hart Sheds '72 Image."

⁵⁰⁷ Gary Hart, *The Thunder and the Sunshine: Four Seasons in a Burnished Life* (Golden, CO, 2010), 10.

its predecessors, who have grown complacent and conservative, and will fight internal change.⁵⁰⁸ This was certainly reflected in Hart's first Senate campaign in 1974, when he accused his opponent of supporting 'an untouchable and undemocratic political aristocracy.'⁵⁰⁹ The slogan of his campaign was 'Now it's our turn!' and he exhorted audiences to 'rise up' and reclaim the nation from 'the comfortable, complacent, backward-looking, out-dated old men' who occupy 'the United States Senate like a private club.'⁵¹⁰

This politics of inter-generational conflict had been common across the class of '74. Their apparent homogeneity brought those legislators in for some criticism. Chris Matthews, an aide to Tip O'Neill, suggested that what distinguished the Watergate Babies (and their successor classes) from the party's old guard was that the new members had 'no imprint of their districts.' Whereas O'Neill could only have been produced by Boston, many younger members could have been parachuted into any district.⁵¹¹ This analysis is hardly fair in the case of Hart, whose political identity was distinctly Western, not least because he campaigned on horseback, decked out in jeans and a Stetson.⁵¹² Moreover, environmental issues loomed larger in Hart's politics than they would had he been running in a non-Western state. He promised an Economic-Conservation Plan for Colorado which would continue the state's development while protecting its 'unique scenic, recreational, [and] environmental treasures.' Emphasising his service in the Interior Department, Hart also promised increased investment in alternative energy sources and better national planning for future energy

⁵⁰⁸ Rothenberg, *Neoliberals*, 129.

⁵⁰⁹ 'Dear Friend' letter, Hart for Senate 1974, November 12, 1973, GH papers UCB, Box 53.

⁵¹⁰ Speech, GH, "Now It's Our Turn," GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

⁵¹¹ Smith, *The Power Game*, 135.

⁵¹² Hart, *Thunder and the Sunshine*, 89.

shortages. He castigated oil companies, declared himself ‘for the environment,’ and distributed campaign fliers that described him as ‘An Expert On Energy.’⁵¹³

Hart bore the imprints of the Sunbelt in other ways, most notably in his economic futurism and his critiques of the federal government. By the mid-1970s, Hart later wrote in his memoir, ‘[t]wo epic revolutions were underway, globalization and the information revolution, and they were changing and would continue to change the face of America.’ Yet, ‘as steelworkers entered the unemployment lines, their children were picking up new devices called computers.’ The United States stood ‘at a crossroads’: ‘One road led to rescue of the cooling steel mills and auto plants. That road was called protectionism. The other road led to the new information economy. It was called competition.’ This attitude presented few political risks for Hart, given the centres of this new information economy were in the Sunbelt. His constituents would feel only the benefits of the transition. ‘The industrial Northeast was rusting,’ he recalled. ‘The new West was rolling in gold.’⁵¹⁴

There was little role for the federal government in Hart’s proposed response to this economic and technological revolution. Unlike Hubert Humphrey, for example, then touting his full employment bill with Augustus Hawkins, Hart voiced little faith in the government’s ability to shape the transition to the new economy.⁵¹⁵ The New Deal’s experimental pragmatism, he said, had hardened into a ‘doctrine – if there is a

⁵¹³ Campaign newsletter, Hart for Senate 1974, n.d.; Campaign flier, Hart for Senate 1974, n.d., GH papers, UCB, Box 53. Judith Frutig, “Hart: Aggressive Challenger,” *CSM*, October 31, 1974.

⁵¹⁴ Hart, *Thunder and the Sunshine*, 33, 41.

⁵¹⁵ Though Hart did endorse some form of full employment legislation, he did so in terms of converting from ‘a welfare state’ to ‘an employment state’ and reducing ‘much of the present bureaucracy in the process.’ GH, ‘Now It’s Our Turn,’ April 9, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

problem, create an agency and throw money at [it].⁵¹⁶ Hart's critique took on a sharper edge when he accused big government of having become interlinked with big business 'leading us to a two-class society – the rich and all the rest of us.'⁵¹⁷ His most famous remark, made to a journalist shortly after his election, was that the incoming class was not made up of 'little Hubert Humphreys.' As a result of this offhand comment, Hart had to apologise to Humphrey and began his congressional career fielding letters from disgruntled Democratic voters. The point he was trying to make, he conceded to one, was 'that all "liberals" do not necessarily vote alike.' He believed, he said, that 'the New Deal philosophy of a dominant federal government' had done much good but 'that does not mean we ... must worship it forever.'⁵¹⁸

In place of the 'dominant federal government' Hart's political economy relied on mass citizen participation as a countervailing power. He was seeking election to the Senate, Hart told voters, 'because we have strayed from the fundamental constitutional principles upon which America was founded ... the worth of the individual ... the control of government by its citizens ... and in Jefferson's terms, "economy in the public expense, that labor may be lightly burdened".'⁵¹⁹ When asked to define his own politics, Hart opted for the label 'Prairie Populist Jeffersonian democracy.'⁵²⁰ During the 1974 campaign, Hart boasted of the breadth of his grassroots movement. By July that year, he had 14 field organisers in place across the state, working with county and precinct coordinators with the ambitious aim of contacting every single Democratic voter before the primary (the Hart campaign had county coordinators in all 63 of the

⁵¹⁶ GH, "The End of the New Deal," Remarks at the University of Denver, September 25, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 54.

⁵¹⁷ Miller, "The Transformation of Gary Hart."

⁵¹⁸ Letter, GH to William McCormick Blair, Jr., January 3, 1975, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

⁵¹⁹ 'Dear Friend' letter, Gary Hart for US Senate, November 12, 1973, GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

⁵²⁰ Rothenberg, *Neoliberals*, 22.

state's counties and precinct coordinators in over half of its 2300 precincts). The Hart campaign also set up 'neighborhood headquarters' in private homes across the state, which it hailed as a 'new concept' in Colorado politics.⁵²¹

In the 1974 elections, Democrats made significant gains across the West. By January 1975, in 14 Western and Southwestern states, Democrats could boast 16 Senators to the Republicans' 12. Of the 100 House seats distributed among the same 14 states, Democrats won 72 to the Republicans' 28. At the state level, Democrats won 10 of the 11 gubernatorial races taking place in those 14 states, even in unfriendly terrain such as Arizona. In Idaho, incumbent Governor Cecil D. Andrus, who would become Carter's Secretary of the Interior, was re-elected with 70.9 percent of the vote. The Western results, reported the *New York Times*, had been 'a Republican disaster.'⁵²² Colorado had been a particular bright spot for the Democrats. Alongside Hart's victory, the Democrats won every top state-wide office, with the exception of Secretary of State. 'There's a new breed of Democrats here,' wrote *The New Republic's* report from the state. 'They're going to be heard from.'⁵²³

In late November, Senator-elect Hart wrote to Majority Leader Mike Mansfield to express his preferences for committee appointments. Top of the list was the Budget Committee. Only through the federal budget, Hart had argued during the campaign, could the United States reconfigure its national priorities. 'I believe the most difficult decisions ahead relate to determination of relative national priorities as reflected in allocation of tax dollars,' he told Mansfield. 'The case I took to my constituents during

⁵²¹ Campaign newsletter, n.d., GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

⁵²² The 14 states were, in alphabetical order: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Wallace Turner, "California and Colorado Pace the Democrats," *NYT*, November 7, 1974.

⁵²³ Wieck, "How They Won In Colorado."

the recent election related to the necessity of making carefully-considered but substantial changes in directions of federal expenditures.’ Second choice was the Armed Services Committee where Hart believed he could be a powerful contributor ‘to obtain the most effective national defense for taxpayers’ dollars.’⁵²⁴ He received appointments to both committees and began to use them as platforms to develop the policy positions that had animated his campaign.

On the Budget Committee, Hart preached a liberalism of limits, arguing that the American people wanted leaders who would tell them ‘the hard truth’ that ‘the free lunch is over and, in fact, the economic pie is shrinking.’⁵²⁵ His particular area of specialism was national defence, however, and as a member of the Armed Services Committee he took up the cause of military reform. Hart became particularly interested in replacing the nation’s ‘continental’ military strategy with a ‘maritime’ strategy (so much so that it earned him the nickname ‘the admiral from Colorado’). Military strategy, he wrote, should reflect the fact that the United States was effectively an ‘island nation’ – in that the majority of its trade in raw materials was done by sea – that ‘control of the sea’ would become ever more important in an era of economic interdependence. In practical terms that meant investing in smaller aircraft carriers, conventional submarines over larger nuclear attack subs, and faster, high-tech ships (such as hydrofoils).⁵²⁶ Hart’s ideal US military would be manoeuvrable, high-tech, and cost-effective. In the pursuit of that ideal he had some success. In May 1976, the Senate narrowly passed a Hart-sponsored amendment eliminating a \$120 million appropriation from the annual military procurement bill to buy 24 A-7 attack planes

⁵²⁴ Beyond those two, Hart expressed an interest in the Interior Committee, as well as in the Committees on Public Works, and Labor and Public Welfare. Letter, GH to Michael Mansfield, November 29, 1974, GH papers, UCB, Box 55.

⁵²⁵ Gary Hart, “‘Free Lunch is Over’,” *NYT*, April 21, 1975.

⁵²⁶ Rothenberg, *Neoliberals*, 115-16.

for the Air National Guard, planes which the Department of Defense had not requested.⁵²⁷

Judging by Hart's efforts to position himself in the first years of his senatorial career, one might be forgiven for imagining that he would have become a firm ally of the Carter administration. Carter was, after all, a fellow Sunbelt politician. Both were suspicious of what they perceived as kneejerk government activism and both fetishized assaults on their party's ideological nostrums. Both had grown up outside the mainstream structures of the Democratic Party and neither had a deep emotional bond with the memory of the New Deal. Both owed their political success to personality-driven, populist, and anti-establishment campaigns. Both had pronounced technocratic streaks and sought to redefine liberalism for an era of lower expectations. Yet their relationship proved considerably more complicated. The issues over which they would clash, particularly the 1977 water projects controversy, revealed the West's inconsistent anti-statism when its own issues were at stake, together with the unsuitability of the Congress as an arena for honing a coherent alternative liberalism for the 1970s and '80s. Before considering those controversies, however, this chapter will turn to another Sunbelt Democrat whose relationship with Carter was initially strained, Morris 'Mo' Udall, liberal congressman from deeply conservative Arizona.

'A One-Eyed Mormon Democrat From Arizona': Mo Udall

When he arrived in Washington in May 1961, having won a special election for the Arizona seat vacated by his brother Stewart, Representative Mo Udall brought the

⁵²⁷ "Senate Kills Funds for Plane Pentagon Doesn't Want and Upsets Backing of a Second Unwanted Craft," *NYT*, May 27, 1976.

Southwest with him. The new congressman was usually seen sporting a wide leather belt studded with turquoise stones and fastened with a Navajo-made silver buckle. Such accessories were largely due to the influence of Udall's first wife, Pat, who herself favoured squaw dresses.⁵²⁸ Combined with his unusual height (Udall was 6' 5" tall), crew cut, and bow tie, Arizona's newest congressman must have been all but unmissable. Udall brought not only Western sartorial flamboyance to Congress, but a distinctly Western perspective, particularly on the subject of environmentalism. 'He thinks as a westerner,' observed Republican congressman Richard Cheney of Wyoming in 1985. 'Nobody would call me an environmentalist but Mo and I see eye-to-eye on some legislation involving the land and the water.'⁵²⁹

A family of Mormon pioneer settlers, the Udalls were omnipresent in Arizona politics. Family members, both Republicans and Democrats, occupied a plethora of offices at both the state and national level. Udall's father, Levi, rose to become Chief Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court. The Arizona town where Mo Udall was born in 1922 – St. Johns – had been founded by his grandfather, David King Udall, on the orders of Brigham Young. Sited at a crossing on the Colorado River in the harsh northeastern uplands of Arizona, the arid desert climate of St. Johns would define Udall's childhood.⁵³⁰ A naturally adventurous child, Udall would spend hours exploring the town's desert environs with his brothers. Such excursions inculcated an enduring love for the outdoors. At age 6, Udall lost his right eye in an accident involving a friend's pocket knife; he wore a glass prosthesis for the rest of his life.

⁵²⁸ Donald W. Carson and James W. Johnson, *Mo: The Life and Times of Morris K. Udall* (Tucson, AZ, 2001), 61.

⁵²⁹ Myra McPherson, "Mo Udall, Triumph of the Good Guy," *WP*, December 29, 1985

⁵³⁰ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 3-4. Bloodworth, *Losing the Center*, 179-80.

After graduation from high school in 1940, Udall followed his elder brother Stewart to the University of Arizona. He also joined his brother on the college basketball team, quickly emerging as a star player. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Udall was prevented by his disability from enlisting. When standards were later relaxed, he was admitted as a non-combat officer, serving in the army and air corps until mid-1946. Stationed in Louisiana, Udall was deeply affected by the segregated South, in particular an unsuccessful stint as defence counsel for a black airman accused of murder. A demobbed Udall transferred to the University of Denver's law school after being offered a contract to play for a Colorado-based basketball team. In 1949, newly married and having passed the Arizona bar exam, Udall set up a law office in Tucson with his brother. Udall swiftly established himself as a skilful trial lawyer, exploiting his natural quick wit to great effect in the courtroom. Throughout his career, Udall's humour was one of his best political assets. His 1988 memoir was titled *Too Funny To Be President*.⁵³¹

In 1952, having successfully prosecuted a series of corrupt officials for bribery, Udall was elected the Pima County Attorney. Two years later, he was defeated in the primary for a Superior Court judgeship, while his brother Stewart easily won election to the House from Arizona's 2nd district. A crestfallen Udall returned to his practice, throwing himself into the law with renewed vigour. In 1961, Stewart was nominated as Secretary of the Interior in the incoming Kennedy administration, vacating his district. In the special election that followed, Mo Udall was pitted against Mac C. Matheson, a Tucson radio host with a fierce antipathy to the federal government and a penchant for off-colour racial jokes. Despite low turnout, Udall bested his Republican

⁵³¹ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 49, 135; Mark Shields, "Mo Udall's Monuments," *NYT*, April 23, 1991; Morris K. Udall, Bob Neuman, and Randy Udall, *Too Funny To Be President* (New York, 1988).

opponent, albeit by a narrow two thousand votes. In thirteen subsequent re-election campaigns, this would prove to be his closest result. What is perhaps most remarkable about Udall's political career is that such an orthodox liberal was able to flourish in relatively conservative Arizona. During his 1976 presidential campaign, Udall was asked on a golf course whether he had a handicap, and quipped in response, 'I'm a one-eyed Mormon Democrat from conservative Arizona.'⁵³²

In Congress, Udall became active in the Democratic Study Group and took up the cause of congressional reform, waging a decade-long assault on the seniority system.⁵³³ In 1964, he was chosen as the floor whip for northern and western members on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, his first congressional leadership role. By the late 1960s, he became one of the first Democrats to publicly condemn the administration's policy in Vietnam and was instrumental in triggering the congressional investigation into the My Lai massacre.⁵³⁴ In 1969 and 1971, in an effort to accelerate House reform, Udall launched two unsuccessful bids for House leadership posts – Speaker and Majority Leader, respectively – earning him the enmity of the Democratic congressional establishment. Nonetheless, in spite of his defeats, Udall's quixotic campaigns did at least succeed in further catalysing the painfully slow reform of House procedures. 'I used to say that you could exhume a congressman from 1920 and he'd never know he'd been gone,' said Udall shortly after his second defeat. 'You can't say that anymore.'⁵³⁵ By the mid-1970s, Udall had established a profile that guaranteed his standing in the eyes of the incoming freshmen reformers who had little

⁵³² Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 58-9, 141.

⁵³³ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 64.

⁵³⁴ Udall's involvement stemmed from a letter from ex-GI Ron Ridenhour, which induced him to lobby the House Armed Services Committee to undertake the investigation. Of thirty recipients, Udall was the only congressman to act on Ridenhour's missive. Myra McPherson, "Mo Udall, Triumph of the Good Guy," *WP*, December 29, 1985.

⁵³⁵ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 104-116

time for other politicians of his generation. He was thus well placed to contribute to a debate within the Democratic Party about the best way to reinvigorate liberalism.

As the 1976 election approached, Udall set off in pursuit of the Democratic presidential nomination. With Ted Kennedy declining to run, Udall emerged as the preferred candidate of Democratic liberals. A relatively unknown House member, Udall understood just how formidable a task lay ahead.⁵³⁶ Though a darling of the party's liberal wing, Udall ducked the 'liberal' moniker and preferred to describe himself as a 'progressive.'⁵³⁷ Nonetheless, his support for congressional and campaign finance reform, busing, abortion, gay rights, and his record as an early opponent of the Vietnam War placed him decisively on the left of his party. Only his support for right-to-work laws (a prerequisite for any ambitious politician in Arizona) gave liberals pause.⁵³⁸ 'With exquisitely awful timing,' noted conservative columnist George Will, Udall had 'established himself as the liberal candidate at a moment when liberalism seems stale, less a public philosophy than an incantation, a barren orthodoxy.'⁵³⁹

In advance of the primaries, Udall had been carving out a niche for himself as one of his party's pre-eminent voices on environmental affairs. Adopting a public philosophy that belied his irreverent persona, Udall issued warnings about unrestrained economic growth, the energy crisis, and the population explosion, all of which signalled a coming 'Age of Scarcity.' With such portents, Udall endeared himself to the nascent environmentalist movement, but he struggled to establish a

⁵³⁶ Stewart Dill McBride, "Udall: Wit, Pragmatism in Early Campaigning," *CSM*, February 4, 1975; McPherson, "Mo Udall, Triumph of the Good Guy."

⁵³⁷ Larry L. King, "Unbowed Udall," *NYT*, July 14, 1976.

⁵³⁸ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 164.

⁵³⁹ George F. Will, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Liberal," *Newsweek*, May 3, 1976.

convincing lead.⁵⁴⁰ Barrelling from primary to primary in a prop plane nicknamed the ‘Basler Bomber,’ Udall never achieved his much-needed breakthrough.⁵⁴¹ He failed to win a single primary, though he often came close, a predicament which earned him the nickname ‘Second Place Mo.’ His best chance came in April, in the Wisconsin primary. Six of the original ten candidates had dropped out, leaving a four-way race between Udall, Carter, Henry Jackson, and George Wallace. The Arizona congressman seemed poised to win, and was buoyed when ABC news and many early editions called the race for him. As the late returns trickled in, however, Carter closed the gap with Udall, and then overtook him. In the end, Udall lost by one percentage point.

After his presidential run, Udall returned to Congress defeated, but not broken. His national reputation had been enhanced by his run and he had by no means abandoned his presidential ambitions. There still remained opportunities in the House to shape the future of his nation and his party. Udall’s passionate environmentalism extended beyond campaign rhetoric and he involved himself in legislation that touched on nearly every environmental issue that came before the House. In 1977, Udall succeeded to the vacant chairmanship of the House Committee on Insular and Interior Affairs. With a Democratic president in the White House, albeit a onetime rival that he felt was too conservative, Udall had high hopes that significant advances could be made in environmental policy.⁵⁴² Whether those hopes would be fulfilled is a matter that will be considered later in this chapter. For now, attention will turn to consider the career of another Westerner who made a bid for the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination: Jerry Brown.

⁵⁴⁰ Bloodworth, *Losing the Center*, 185-88.

⁵⁴¹ McPherson, “Mo Udall, Triumph of the Good Guy.”

⁵⁴² Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 182-83.

'The Apostle Of Future Shock': Jerry Brown

In June 1979, San Francisco-based punk rock band the Dead Kennedys released their first single, 'California Über Alles.' Told from the perspective of California's governor, Jerry Brown – then in his second term and planning a primary challenge to President Carter – this scabrous track imagined Brown as the unconventional Führer of a Zen fascist state. Listeners were told that they would 'jog for the master race / and always wear the happy face' while their 'kids meditate[d] in school.' The 'uncool' would be interned in concentration camps by 'the suede-denim secret police,' there to perish on 'organic poison gas.'⁵⁴³ Few politicians could inspire such a reaction. By the end of 1970s, depending on one's perspective, Jerry Brown was the free-thinking saviour of the Democratic Party, a risible oddity churned up by the Golden State's nonconformist politics, or, as the Dead Kennedys satirically suggested, a megalomaniac leading a sinister personality cult.

Jerry Brown was the son of a California governor, Pat Brown, a man who loomed large over his son's public life. Beyond a name and an office, however, Brown *père* and Brown *fils* had little in common.⁵⁴⁴ As his nickname suggests (both father and son were christened Edmund Gerald Brown), 'Pat' Brown was an avuncular, glad-handing Irish pol, never happier than when demonstrating the positive impact state government could have on the lives of ordinary Californians. His governorship saw an unprecedented expansion of California's system of public colleges and networks, the passage of fair employment legislation, the establishment of a consumers' council, and

⁵⁴³ Dead Kennedys, *California Über Alles* (Optional Music, 1979).

⁵⁴⁴ Al Martinez, "Pat and Jerry Brown: A Great Respect and a Great Distance," *LAT*, February 2, 1975.

the financing of a state-wide network of dams and waterways, then the largest public works project that any single state had embarked upon.⁵⁴⁵ Pat Brown's California was the embodiment of the ebullient liberal confidence then in the ascendant in the Washington of the New Frontier and Great Society. So, when the liberal project ran aground after 1965, Brown was the authority figure to be punished by an aggrieved public. Having defeated Richard Nixon handsomely in the 1962 gubernatorial elections, Pat Brown would find himself unceremoniously turfed from office by another future Republican president, Ronald Reagan, in 1966. Amid student uprisings and urban rebellions, Brown, increasingly derided as an exemplar of liberal hubris and weakness, proved no match for Reagan's muscular law-and-order conservatism.⁵⁴⁶

The younger Brown came to his political career through a very different route to his father. In 1956, a year after enrolling at Santa Clara University, Brown had entered a Jesuit seminary with the intention of becoming a priest. He lasted as a seminarian for approximately one year, and then enrolled at UC Berkeley, before progressing to Yale Law School. Brown's onetime clerical ambitions would be woven into his mythology, and the self-created image of the young governor as an unworldly interloper into the sphere of politics, would be hailed as both a virtue and a failing.⁵⁴⁷ Where Pat was a creature of California party politics (moving from the San Francisco district attorney's office to that of the state district attorney, and finally ending up in the governor's mansion), Jerry got his start in extra-party activism, aiding the civil rights effort in Mississippi in 1962 and joining the anti-Vietnam War movement in

⁵⁴⁵ Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (Berkeley and London, 2005), 1, 3.

⁵⁴⁶ A full account of Reagan's campaign can be found in, Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York, 2000).

⁵⁴⁷ John C. Bollens and G. Robert Williams, *Jerry Brown: In A Plain Brown Wrapper* (Pacific Palisades, CA, 1978), 33.

1967. In 1968, Jerry Brown would serve as Southern California vice chairman and treasurer for Eugene McCarthy's campaign. In 1970, Brown struck out on his own, entering the race for California Secretary of State. Easily winning election alongside Reagan, Brown would use his office to fashion an image as a tireless crusader for the strict enforcement of campaign finance laws. He instigated, and won, prosecutions against private corporations and individual candidates for the making and receiving of illicit campaign contributions.

In 1974, buoyed by the reputation he had gained as Secretary, Brown leapt into the Democratic gubernatorial primary to replace Reagan. In a split field, Brown was able to secure the nomination with relative ease. He did so by relying on the favourable memories evoked by his surname and by burnishing his liberal credentials. California, Brown said, needed 'an activist Democratic governor,' not the 'passivity' of Reagan's tenure. His literature stressed his role in the McCarthy campaign and with the anti-war movement.⁵⁴⁸ Brown's campaign was '[o]ld-fashioned politics – dressed up to sell in the 1970s,' declared one reporter.⁵⁴⁹ Like Hart in Colorado, Brown made the restoration of trust in public officials a mainstay of his campaign. 'He Could Make You Believe In Government Again,' declared one leaflet.⁵⁵⁰ Brown's victory over his Republican opponent in the general election, Houston I. Flournoy, was less convincing; the Democrat only just managed to break 50 percent. The new governor would soon establish that he was certainly not the second coming of Pat Brown. Though recognisably a Democrat, Brown Jr. would exhibit considerably less confidence in the ameliorative capacities of government. They were even physically

⁵⁴⁸ Jerry Brown, untitled speech, 1974, Papers of Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown, Jr. (JB) papers, University of Southern California (USC), Special Collections, Box B-32-9; Bell, *California Crucible*, 270.

⁵⁴⁹ Bill Boyarsky, "Brown's Campaign – Old-Fashioned but Mod," *LAT*, May 29, 1974.

⁵⁵⁰ Brown for Governor, 1974, Election leaflet, JB papers, USC, Box B-32-9.

dissimilar. Tall, thin, and angular-featured, Brown cut a more dashing figure as governor than his stocky and bespectacled father.

As a politician, Brown was hard to categorise. Certainly he was consciously ‘post-New Deal,’ but how that translated into a coherent political identity was often unclear. In this sense he was an ideal standard bearer for a party struggling to come to terms with the roiling political, economic and cultural climate of the 1970s. Walter Cronkite wrote that Brown was ‘the consummate anti-politician ... a mixture of liberalism, conservatism, populism, existentialism, Zen Buddhism, [and] Puritanism.’ In some ways he was recognisably liberal. One of his first acts as governor was to orchestrate the passage of legislation that extended to farm labourers the right to hold secret ballots on whether to form unions, a measure which Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers had been seeking since its formation. Bargaining rights were likewise extended to public school employees. He was a staunch opponent of the death penalty, cultivated a friendship with the left-wing activist power-couple Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden, and appointed more women and minorities to public offices than any governor in the state’s history.⁵⁵¹

In other ways, Brown seemed well suited to an increasingly conservative political climate. He set the tone for much of his administration in his 1976 message to the state legislature when he announced ‘we are entering an era of limits. In place of a manifest economic destiny, we face a sober reassessment of new economic realities; and we all have to get used to it.’⁵⁵² Brown’s political austerity was reflected in

⁵⁵¹ Bell, *California Crucible*, 271; Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (New York, 2011), 249; Warden Moxley, “Brown: Striving for a New Political Coalition,” *CQWR*, 37:42, October 20, 1979.

⁵⁵² Edmund G. Brown, Jr., Report to the Legislature, January 7, 1976, JB papers, USC, Box B-32-10.

personal asceticism. Famously, he refused to make use of the governor's palatial mansion or chauffeur-driven car, preferring a rented apartment in downtown Sacramento and a battered Plymouth Satellite sedan. 'Observers could be forgiven for thinking,' notes Jonathan Bell, 'that Brown's self-proclaimed status as master of ceremonies of an "era of limits" marked the end of the line for his father's conception of "government with a heart" that had driven Democratic politics and activism in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s.'⁵⁵³

As much a part of Brown's political identity were his eccentricities. Jesuit-trained, philosophically-minded, and with an enduring fascination for Japanese Buddhism, Brown often seemed determined to prove that California was best governed through the Socratic method. One of his special assistants, for example, was Jacques Barzhagi, a French shaven-headed ex-sailor with a penchant for opening cabinet meetings with Zen questions like 'How is the Governor different from a shoemaker?'⁵⁵⁴ Brown likewise had a habit of floating unusual trial balloons in his public statements. On one occasion, the governor proposed launching a satellite into orbit to provide the state with communications during emergencies. Some found these quirks refreshing, while others remained resolutely uncharmed. One unhappy Democrat was moved to complain, 'We need a Governor, not a guru.'⁵⁵⁵ They made him an easy target for mockery, as when *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Mike Royko nicknamed him 'Governor Moonbeam.'⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵³ Bell, *California Crucible*, 272.

⁵⁵⁴ Richard Reeves, "'How Does The Governor of California Differ from a Shoemaker?' And Why Is He So Popular?" *NYT*, August 24, 1975.

⁵⁵⁵ Bollens, Williams, *Jerry Brown*, 11.

⁵⁵⁶ Jesse McKinley, "How Jerry Brown Became 'Governor Moonbeam'," *NYT*, March 6, 2010; Mike Royko, 'Governor Moonbeam Has Landed,' *LAT*, offprint in the JB papers, USC, Box B-32-10.

From the outset, Brown fascinated the national media. Few other governors drew such attention. In a 1975 profile, Richard Reeves dubbed him ‘the most interesting politician in the United States.’ In 1979, with one failed presidential candidacy under his belt and another one imminent, a *Newsweek* profile gushed about Brown’s ‘ten dazzling years as the apostle of future shock in American politics – a Zen-schooled, ‘60s-bred original who has flouted all the conventions of his craft and still won every office he has sought except, in 1976, the Presidency.’⁵⁵⁷

Brown’s 1976 presidential campaign began ‘in a quizzical, almost offhanded way.’⁵⁵⁸ In March, Brown disclosed – casually during an informal press conference – his entry into California’s presidential primary as a favourite son candidate. His initial plan seems to have been to confine himself to California and then emerge as an acceptable compromise candidate at a deadlocked convention. However, as it became apparent that Carter was overtaking all potential rivals, Brown realised that he would need to expand his campaign.⁵⁵⁹ He pulled off an impressive victory in Maryland, an even more remarkable win given that it was outside his Western comfort zone, as well as in Nevada, and his home state.⁵⁶⁰ Despite missing the filing deadline, he also placed a strong third as a write-in candidate in the Oregon primary.

Brown’s campaign drew on the themes that had animated his governorship. Like Gary Hart, and indeed like Jimmy Carter, Brown understood the appeal of the anti-politician in an era when politics, and its practitioners, were held in such low

⁵⁵⁷ Richard Reeves, “‘How Does The Governor of California Differ from a Shoemaker?’ And Why Is He So Popular?” *NYT*, August 24, 1975; Peter Goldman et al., “The Pop Politics of Jerry Brown,” *Newsweek*, April 23, 1979.

⁵⁵⁸ Gaylord Shaw, “How Jerry Brown Did the Impossible,” *LAT*, May 20, 1976.

⁵⁵⁹ Bollens, Williams, *Jerry Brown*, 230-31.

⁵⁶⁰ Shaw, “How Jerry Brown Did the Impossible.”

public esteem. The *Christian Science Monitor* described his ideology as ‘a new kind of populism’ that ‘mixes the conservative thriftiness of his predecessor Ronald Reagan, the appeal to the little man of George Wallace, and a Robin Hood philosophy of taking from the rich and giving to the poor.’⁵⁶¹ While Brown carried three states, he was unable, in large part because of his late entry and his rival’s formidable lead in delegates, to derail Carter. He was likewise hampered by another latecomer, Senator Frank Church of Idaho. Church – who won his native state, as well as Montana, Oregon, and Nebraska – diluted Brown’s ambition (with Udall’s candidacy increasingly dismissed as a failure) to present himself as the authentic Western candidate. Brown returned to Sacramento to plan his next foray into the national arena.

The political successes of Gary Hart, Mo Udall, and Jerry Brown demonstrate the shifting, protean character of the West in the 1970s. Far from drifting inexorably into a new Republican coalition, the states of the American Southwest represented potentially fertile terrain for Democrats who could situate themselves within the region’s populist tradition. However, governing proved harder than winning elections: an increasingly toxic anti-government political culture would present Sunbelt Democrats with a circle that they would find difficult to square. After 1976, policy decisions taken by the Carter White House would invite angry accusations that the Southern-led administration was prosecuting a ‘War on the West.’ Hart, Brown, and Udall would thus find themselves – as a consequence of policy disagreements and personal ambitions – in an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the de facto leader of their party.

⁵⁶¹ Curtis J. Sitomer, “Jerry Brown Tries A ‘New Populism’,” *CSM*, July 17, 1975.

From the moment he launched his campaign in Warm Springs, Georgia, Jimmy Carter drew comparisons with FDR. Carter himself was not above encouraging those comparisons as he endeavoured to portray Ford as Herbert Hoover redux, incapable of addressing the nation's economic tribulations.⁵⁶² The geography of Carter's presidential coalition, relying so heavily on New Deal blocs, seemed to confirm this. Yet one vital component was missing. Roosevelt had always been able to rely on the West; Carter had no such luxury. Regionally, his narrow victory rested on the Northeast, Midwest, and South.⁵⁶³ Having begun his administration with a pressing need to win over the West, Carter's policies, particularly his environmental priorities, would succeed only in alienating it and in damaging the nascent Sunbelt Democracy.

Throughout 1976, Carter had sought to distinguish his candidacy by stressing his strong environmental credentials. His campaign reached out to several national environmental groups, recruiting volunteers to form Conservationists for Carter. Scepticism of federal water resource projects was a central theme. In July 1975, the Carter campaign had issued a press release declaring that 'the Army Corps of Engineers ought to get out of the dam-building business.'⁵⁶⁴ Carter arrived in the White House determined to deny funding to wasteful or unnecessary water resource projects, and to reform the procedures by which they were commissioned. Yet the Carter administration had underestimated the importance of water to the desert states.

⁵⁶² Leuchtenburg, *In The Shadow Of FDR*, 185; Tom Wicker, "Franklin D. Roosevelt Carter," *NYT*, September 21, 1976.

⁵⁶³ Barry Sussman, "East, South and Labor Provided Carter's Thin Margin," *WP*, November 4, 1976.

⁵⁶⁴ Jeffrey K. Stine, "Environmental Policy during the Carter Administration," in Gary M. Fink, Hugh Davis Graham (eds.), *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 182.

‘The American West,’ according to environmental historian Donald Worster, ‘can best be described as a modern *hydraulic society* ... a social order based on the intensive, large-scale manipulation of water and its products for an arid setting.’⁵⁶⁵ In the confrontation over the water projects, Carter’s belief in his technocratic grasp of policy detail and his superior democratic communion with the American people would run headlong into a resurgent Congress, fiercely protective of its constitutional prerogatives and the particularist, pork-laden procedures that distributed public-works projects amongst the states.

In late February, Carter announced in a message to Congress that nineteen water projects had been identified for cancellation on ‘economic, environmental and/or safety grounds.’ While acknowledging the ‘critical role’ that such projects had played in the development of the national economy, Carter asserted that many of the proposed schemes were ‘of doubtful necessity now, in light of new economic conditions and environmental policies.’ Their elimination would reduce the FY 1978 budget by \$289 million, with total potential savings projected to amount to \$5.1 billion.⁵⁶⁶ Carter directed the Secretaries of the Interior and the Army, in concert with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and OMB, to embark on a comprehensive review of each of the named projects and to deliver their report by April 15. The announcement ignited a political firestorm.

As damaging to the Carter administration as the fact of the cancellations was the manner in which they were unveiled. Legislators in the affected states were not

⁵⁶⁵ Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York and Oxford, 1985), 6.

⁵⁶⁶ U.S. Office of the Federal Register, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977: Book I – January 20 to June 24, 1977* (Washington, D.C., 1977), 207-8.

notified of the administration's decision until the Friday before Congress was officially informed. Some only discovered that cuts were planned through newspapers or television. Still more fumed that the administration had offered assurances that certain schemes were safe only to subsequently announce their elimination.⁵⁶⁷ Senators and representatives balked at the apparent high-handedness of the White House. Carter was not insensitive to the political minefield into which he was wandering. On the day that the administration began notifying members of the cuts, Carter confided to his diary that he expected 'a political furor' and 'a pretty touchy legislative fight,' but that he was committed to removing these projects from the budget.⁵⁶⁸

From the outset, Carter's relationship with Congress was strained. 'Congress will not be bludgeoned into submission, as Nixon learned to his cost,' writes Nigel Bowles. '[I]t must be courted into partnership, as Carter learned to his.'⁵⁶⁹ Carter disliked the courtship rituals, seeing them as emblematic of the business-as-usual politics he had campaigned against. The president's congressional liaison, Frank Moore, came in for particular criticism. A member of Carter's 'Georgia mafia,' Moore's selection seemed to confirm the administration's intention of standing aloof from political Washington. The president was hardly likely to make friends in Congress by immediately signalling his disdain for the institution, and Moore apparently compounded the original sin by handling the Democratic caucuses clumsily.⁵⁷⁰ Members were also infuriated by Carter's habit, as the controversy got

⁵⁶⁷ Mercer Cross, "Carter vs. Congress: At War Over Water," *CQWR*, March 19, 1977, 481.

⁵⁶⁸ Carter, *White House Diary*, 23.

⁵⁶⁹ Bowles, *The White House and Capitol Hill*, 3.

⁵⁷⁰ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation* (2nd ed., Manchester and New York, 1995), 40; Dom Bonafede, "Carter's Relationship with Congress – Making a Mountain Out of a 'Moorehill'," *National Journal*, March 26, 1977.

underway, of announcing that he planned to bypass Congress and take his case to the people. As early as March, aide Bill Smith was advising Vice President Walter Mondale that the president's congressional relations would be improved if he 'stopped threatening to go to the public.'⁵⁷¹

Carter's plans had their defenders. Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson, for instance, said that he believed Carter's instinct on the need to curb wasteful and unnecessary dam-building was 'absolutely correct' and called on the Senate not to obstruct the president's attempts to offer 'some long-needed national leadership to force us to address ourselves very carefully to these projects and start rapidly cutting back on them, because we are wasting money.'⁵⁷² Nelson's enthusiasm was exceptional, however. With his caucus seething, Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd was moved to write a letter of complaint to the president, and followed up with another shot across the White House's bows through the Washington press corps. 'The road can be smooth or the road can be rough,' was his ominous remark to reporters.⁵⁷³ Senator Gary Hart, ostensibly sympathetic to Carter's budgetary restraint, came out in defence of the projects that had been targeted for deletion in Colorado. 'I could have helped pick some of those in my own state,' he sighed to *Congressional Quarterly*. 'I just think they picked the wrong ones.'⁵⁷⁴ He did go on to discuss which projects he would have eliminated. Running for re-election in 1980, Hart boasted of having opposed Carter's 'hit list,' and claimed credit for having persuaded the administration

⁵⁷¹ An invaluable conduit between the Carter administration and the Senate, Mondale 'spent much of his time attending to crises and mollifying senators offended by White House misjudgements and errors' in the first months of Carter's presidency. Memo, Bill Smith to WFM, March 21, 1977, Papers of Walter F. Mondale (WFM), MNHS, Box 153.L.20.2F; Bowles, *The White House and Capitol Hill*, 198.

⁵⁷² Cross, "Carter vs. Congress: At War Over Water," 484.

⁵⁷³ Martin Tolchin, "Byrd Tells Carter Senate Is Angered By Unilateral Acts," *NYT*, March 12, 1977.

⁵⁷⁴ Cross, "Carter vs. Congress: At War Over Water," 482.

to agree to hearings on each of the cancelled projects and to have restored funding to two.⁵⁷⁵

The issue dragged on for much of 1977 without a satisfactory compromise being reached. On March 10, Carter recorded in his diary ‘a rough meeting’ with around 35 members of the Congress who were ‘raising Cain’ because of the proposed cuts.⁵⁷⁶ Less than a week later, in an effort to soothe bruised egos, Carter circulated a letter to members of Congress that set out his rationale for the water project cuts in greater detail and announced a meeting with congressional leaders from all affected committees ‘to establish a dialogue and close cooperation on this issue.’⁵⁷⁷ He did not, however, promise any concessions. In April, Frank Moore reported on a dispiriting meeting with leading Senate Democrats on the controversy. Moore had been told by ‘Dr. Byrd,’ that ‘the patient is in intensive care, has no discernible pulse, and prospects of survival are nil unless it receives an immediate Presidential transfusion.’⁵⁷⁸ Carter had yet to clear his first hundred days and already a signature policy was floundering.

In August 1977, Congress submitted to Carter an appropriations bill that reinstated funding for all previously cancelled projects. As the bill contained funds for vital elements of Carter’s stimulus package, and in the knowledge that Congress had the votes to override a veto in any case, Carter reluctantly signed. Even as he did so, however, he announced that he remained ‘very concerned’ about ten projects for

⁵⁷⁵ Position paper, GH, “Labor: Where Gary Hart Stands,” n.d. [1980], GH papers, UCB, Box 53.

⁵⁷⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 78.

⁵⁷⁷ Letter, Carter to Members of Congress, March 16, 1977, “Water Projects, 2/18/77-10/6/78 [CF, O/A 625]” folder, OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 50.

⁵⁷⁸ ‘Please excuse the silly analogy, but I wanted to report the Senator’s conversation accurately,’ added Moore. Memo, Frank Moore to Carter, April 5, 1977, “Water Projects Briefing, 3/10/77 [O/A 6748]” folder, OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 50.

which the bill guaranteed funding.⁵⁷⁹ Carter would later say that he ‘still regret[ted] ... weakening and compromising that first year on some of these worthless dam projects.’ In October 1978, apparently disgusted by his own earlier concessions, Carter vetoed the Energy and Water Development Authorization bill, which restored funding to many of the cancelled projects.⁵⁸⁰ The controversy over water projects would continue for the rest of Carter’s term, slowly poisoning the Carter administration’s relations with Congress and the Western states. Interviewed in 1980, Congressman Tim Wirth of Colorado lamented, ‘Mr. Carter seems never to have understood the emotional and substantive importance of water to the West.’⁵⁸¹

Bert Lance, director of the Office of Management and Budget, called the confrontation over the water resource projects ‘the worst political mistake [Carter] made, and its effects lasted the rest of his term and doomed any hopes we had of developing a good, effective working relationship with Congress.’⁵⁸² The water projects debacle, Carter later reflected, ‘caused the deepest breach between me and the Democratic leadership.’⁵⁸³ Affronted members of Congress proved to have long memories. Robert Beckel, a White House lobbyist, recalled that, on an occasion when he was trying to persuade a recalcitrant senator of the virtues of a foreign aid bill, he was reminded that it included appropriations for a dam in Pakistan. ‘Once I get my dam, you can have your dam,’ he was told.⁵⁸⁴ It was an inauspicious start for president who had fared so poorly in the Western states in 1976. Some went so far as to accuse

⁵⁷⁹ Stine, ‘Environmental Policy,’ in Fink, Graham, *Carter Presidency*, 187; Edward Walsh, ‘\$10 Billion Public Works Bill Is Signed,’ *WP*, August 9, 1977.

⁵⁸⁰ Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency*, 40.

⁵⁸¹ Seth S. King, ‘Win or Lose, the President Will Be Remembered For His Fight With Congress Over Water Projects,’ *NYT*, October 14, 1980.

⁵⁸² Stine, ‘Environmental Policy,’ in Fink, Graham, *Carter Presidency*, 185.

⁵⁸³ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 78.

⁵⁸⁴ Dumbrell, *Carter Presidency*, 40-41

the Carter administration of a ‘War on the West.’ Even nominal allies questioned Carter’s sensitivity to the region. In early 1979, in a speech to the Colorado River Water Users Association in early 1979, Gary Hart claimed that the last two years had seen ‘the greatest water policy controversy and conflict in our nation’s history’ because Carter ‘did not learn about our unique Western customs, practices, and policies.’⁵⁸⁵

‘The Big Federal Land Grab’: Democrats Confront the Sagebrush Rebellion

On September 6, 1979, a gang of rebels gathered to plot strategy. The venue was ‘The Biggest Little City in the World’ and onetime gambling capital of the United States – Reno, Nevada – and the convocation had assembled under the deceptively bland title of the Western Conference of the Council of State Governments. The rebels were playing for high stakes, however: nothing less than a fundamental restructuring of federal-state relations in the Western United States. The keynote speaker was first-term senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, a fiery conservative who had defeated incumbent Democrat Frank Moss by a remarkable nine points in 1976. From the dais, Hatch proclaimed a ‘second American revolution’ and called on the assembled state officials to ‘throw off the shackles in which the federal government now holds [the West’s] destiny – ownership of the public domain.’ The Conference ended with a unanimous vote to endorse a bill that Hatch had recently introduced in Congress to return lands then under federal control to the states.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁵ John Herbers, “West Taking South’s Place as Most Alienated Area,” *NYT*, March 18, 1979.

⁵⁸⁶ Dick Kirschten, “There’s More Rhetoric than Reality In the West’s ‘Sagebrush Rebellion,’” *National Journal*, November 17, 1979; “Around the Nation,” *NYT*, September 8, 1979.

This was the Sagebrush Rebellion at its height. No sooner had the Carter administration extricated itself from the worst of the water projects imbroglio, than it found itself confronting insistent demands for federally-owned lands to be transferred to the respective states. As the federal government was the largest landowner in the West – holding in trust, for example, 87 percent of Nevada, 66 percent of Utah, 45 percent of California, and 42 percent of Arizona – this would have meant a significant reconfiguring of federal-state relations. In contrast, federal authorities controlled no more than 12 percent of any state outside the West.⁵⁸⁷ Much of these lands were managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service, agencies in the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture respectively. Of course, the federal presence had always been a cause of simmering grievance, but this was given fresh impetus by the passage, in 1976, of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) which stated that it would be the policy of the United States government that ‘the public lands be retained in federal ownership, unless ... it is determined that disposal of a particular parcel will serve the national interest.’⁵⁸⁸

This clarification of federal attitudes towards the public lands represented the culmination of a significant shift in focus away from resource development and towards conservation which had been underway since the early 1960s. Western interests had been used to a favourable reception from policymakers. Indeed, the BLM was often dismissed by environmentalists as the Bureau of Livestock and Mining.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁷ The only U.S. territory where that was higher was the District of Columbia where, for obvious reasons, the federal government held 26 percent of the land. Kirschten, “There’s More Rhetoric than Reality In the West’s ‘Sagebrush Rebellion’.” Lou Cannon, “Sagebrush Rebellion Challenges U.S. Grip On Western Land,” *WP*, April 9, 1979.

⁵⁸⁸ Quoted in Carroll B. Foster, “The ‘Sagebrush Rebellion’ and the Alaska Lands Bill in the U.S. Congress,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 8:4, (November, 1983), 658.

⁵⁸⁹ Kirschten, “There’s More Rhetoric Than Reality In the West’s ‘Sagebrush Rebellion’”; James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (Seattle and London, 2012), 228.

By the 1970s, this was no longer the case. The change, which reflected the growing influence of the environmental movement, had been initiated by the 1964 Wilderness Act which extended regulation of federal lands in the West. The act created a National Wilderness Preservation System which outlawed a plethora of destructive activities – including logging, grazing, and mining – in areas designated as ‘wilderness.’⁵⁹⁰ Over the next decade, BLM regulation of federal lands became ever more onerous, and many Westerners – in particular the aforementioned mining, logging, and grazing interests – became ever more disgruntled. ‘By the late 1970s,’ wrote one historian, ‘the West was a political tinderbox, and nowhere was the tinder drier than on the lands managed by the BLM.’⁵⁹¹ For many Westerners their increasingly intrusive absentee landlord had become an intolerable burden. By 1979, this would bubble over into the political campaign to take control of the lands under federal stewardship.

In early 1978, the Carter administration was trying to negotiate a ceasefire in the ‘War on the West’ that it had unknowingly declared in pursuit of water resource reform. Carter himself had toured the West in late 1977 to express his ‘sincere concern about Western problems.’⁵⁹² In January, Vice President Walter Mondale was dispatched on a week-long trip through the Western states with an olive branch. Reporting on the trip, Lou Cannon noted that Mondale’s ‘relaxed good-humored manner’ had proved a hit with Westerners. Not everyone was placated, however. ‘We want a real partnership with the West,’ Mondale told one audience. ‘How about just diplomatic recognition,’ a young politician reportedly muttered from the back of the

⁵⁹⁰ Foster, “The ‘Sagebrush Rebellion’ and the Alaska Lands Bill,” 658; Bloodworth, *Losing the Center*, 177-79

⁵⁹¹ Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 228.

⁵⁹² Memo, Tom Donilon to ‘Bob’, October 13, 1977, “[President’s] Western Trip, 10/21-23/77 [CF, O/A 536]” folder, OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 45.

room.⁵⁹³ Such solicitations did not solve the administration's problems. They were no significant revisions of those policies that Western opponents of the administration found most offensive. Carter remained committed throughout his presidency to defunding water projects deemed wasteful. Furthermore, the administration pressed ahead with a series of new wilderness reviews that had been initiated by the Federal Land Policy Act, which a 1978 article in the *Conservative Digest* derisively christened 'The Big Federal Land Grab.'⁵⁹⁴ A *New York Times* report from March 1979 found that the West had 'replaced the South as the region that feels itself most abused by the Federal Government and least understood by the rest of the nation, the area that believes itself to have the most peculiar problems.'⁵⁹⁵

The first salvo was fired by the Nevada state legislature which, in July 1979, passed a bill asserting its rights over approximately 49 million acres of land then in federal hands.⁵⁹⁶ 'We're tired of being pistol-whipped by the bureaucrats and ambushed and dry-gulched by federal regulations,' declared the author of the legislation, Nevada state senator and Elko cattle rancher, Norman Glaser.⁵⁹⁷ By 1981, similar legislation had been passed in all remaining Western states. *National Journal* saw more bluster than menace in the uprising. 'The sagebrush rebellion rhetoric may be merely a satisfying way to vent frustration over the complicated regulations that accompany a more complicated society.'⁵⁹⁸ Nonetheless, the Carter administration

⁵⁹³ Lou Cannon, "Mondale, Touring West, Told of Coal Boom Towns' Social and Economic Problems," *WP*, January 12, 1978; Lou Cannon, "Carter in Full Retreat in 'War on West'," *WP*, January 15, 1979.

⁵⁹⁴ 'The Big Federal Land Grab,' *Conservative Digest*, 4 (December, 1978), 7-11, cited in James Morton Turner, "'The Specter of Environmentalism': Wilderness, Environmental Politics, and the Evolution of the New Right," *The Journal of American History*, 96:1 (June, 2009), 130.

⁵⁹⁵ This claim was supported largely by anecdotal evidence. The article cited no polling data or large-scale quantitative analyses, alluding only to 'a range of evidence and persons interviewed across the country.' John Herbers, "West Taking South's Place as Most Alienated Area," *NYT*, March 18, 1979.

⁵⁹⁶ Foster, "The 'Sagebrush Rebellion' and the Alaska Lands Bill in the U.S. Congress," 658.

⁵⁹⁷ Lou Cannon, "Sagebrush Rebellion Challenges U.S. Grip on Western Land," *WP*, April 9, 1979.

⁵⁹⁸ Kirschten, "There's More Rhetoric than Reality In the West's 'Sagebrush Rebellion'."

believed it had to take the resistance seriously, and endeavoured to reach out to the region. In an August 1979 message to Congress, a month before the Reno conference, Carter used a restatement of the administration's environmental priorities to offer several concessions to the malcontents. The federal government must not only endeavour to be 'a good steward' of the 417 million acres then under its control, but also 'a good neighbor,' sensitive to those affected by federal management decisions, particularly in the Western states.⁵⁹⁹

As the controversy swelled to engulf the Carter administration, some Democrats set out to push back against the perception that the West was being short-changed. Mo Udall dismissed the gripes in a newsletter to his constituents: 'The West, in fact, is the only region in the country with its "own" Cabinet agency – the Department of the Interior.'⁶⁰⁰ However, many Western Democrats, governors especially given their political contexts, felt the need to genuflect to the growing anti-federal sentiment. One such example was Governor Scott Matheson of Utah, so far the last Democrat to serve in that post, who made a positive hobby of clashing with the federal government. Elected in 1976, the same year as Orrin Hatch, in his first three years, Matheson locked horns with the federal bureaucracy over water and federal land rights, the movement of 'weteye' nerve gas bombs from Denver to his state, the deployment of MX missiles in Utah's western desert, and radioactive fallout from nuclear tests decades previously. 'It's up to the states to aggressively take after the federal government and put them back in their historical posture of federalism,' he told

⁵⁹⁹ U.S. Office of the Federal Register, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979: Book 2 – June 23 to December 31, 1979* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 1363.

⁶⁰⁰ Kirschten, "There's More Rhetoric than Reality In the West's 'Sagebrush Rebellion'."

the *Christian Science Monitor* in March 1980. ‘They are not going to give up anything without a fight.’⁶⁰¹

Another Democrat with rebel sympathies was Richard Lamm, the governor of Colorado, elected in the same sweep that brought Gary Hart to office. Lamm became an occasional contributor to the *New York Times*, bringing a Western liberal perspective to its op-ed page. In a 1976 piece, he had cautioned his party against complacency in the face of recent triumphs and, echoing Jerry Brown’s rhetoric, castigated it for its overreliance on the proliferation of federal programmes in an era of increasingly scarce resources and public mistrust of government. ‘The Democratic Party would make a great mistake to allow another party to capture the public feeling against our overcentralized bureaucracy, red tape and the illusion in Washington that passing a law is tantamount to solving a problem.’ By 1980, Lamm was using his column to throw in his lot with the Sagebrush Rebels. ‘When Colorado Springs wants to be able to store a little water, it has to play “Mother, May I?” with a thousand high-level bureaucrats in Washington.’⁶⁰²

The Sagebrush Rebellion was just one example of anti-federal spasms that were felt across the nation, and particularly in the West, during the Carter administration, and with which local Democrats were forced to contend. Another was Proposition 13. This measure, a proposed amendment to the California constitution submitted as a ballot initiative, was the brainchild of Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann, a pair of vociferous tax reformers. It proposed cutting the state’s punitively high property tax rates to 1 percent, which proved wildly popular after years of mounting

⁶⁰¹ Mark Stevens, ‘Utah’s Governor – Determined Crusader for States’ Rights,’ *CSM*, March 3, 1980.

⁶⁰² Richard D. Lamm, ‘Whither The Democratic Party?’ *NYT*, February 1, 1976; Richard D. Lamm, ‘Out West, Worries,’ *NYT*, August 12, 1980.

housing prices.⁶⁰³ Governor Brown initially toured the state in an effort to ensure the initiative's defeat, denouncing it as a 'mirage' and a 'rip-off.' When it became clear that it would pass – which it did, by an overwhelming 62 percent in favour – the governor abruptly reversed course.⁶⁰⁴ By mid-July, a *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 41 percent of respondents believed Brown had supported Proposition 13 from the outset. Jarvis even appeared in Brown's re-election ads later that year. In his second inaugural address, Brown doubled down by calling for a balanced budget amendment to the federal constitution, becoming the highest ranking Democrat to do so.⁶⁰⁵ A self-described 'stimulus-response politician,' Brown saw nothing distasteful in embracing a policy that had been so resoundingly endorsed by his electorate, despite his previous objections.⁶⁰⁶ There was, however, a heavy dose of self-interest in Brown's expertly timed volte face. As the 1980 election approached, Brown was positioning himself to take advantage of growing anti-Washington sentiment across the West.

At the same time as it was fielding demands to transfer federal property to state hands, the Carter administration was negotiating with Congress to settle the question of land ownership in the comparatively new state of Alaska. This fraught and ponderous legislative debate would result in the doubling in size of the U.S. national parks system. The controversy over the apportionment of Alaska's lands dated back to the territory's incorporation into the Union as a state in January 1959. As with most of

⁶⁰³ Lou Cannon, "In California, A Ceiling Is Proposed," *WP*, April 17, 1978; Andrew Rolle, "Howard Jarvis: Taxpayers' Santa Tells His Story," *LAT*, December 9, 1979.

⁶⁰⁴ "Mutiny in California," *TNR*, June 3, 1976.

⁶⁰⁵ Jarvis also appeared in campaign ads for Brown's Republican opponent, Attorney General Evelle J. Younger, demonstrating the extent to which Proposition 13 had become settled consensus in California months after its passage. Bill Bulliter, "Jarvis Makes Ads for Brown and Younger," *LAT*, October 10, 1978; Edmund G. Brown, Jr., Second Inaugural Address, January 8, 1979, JB papers, USC, Box 32-10-09; Iwan Morgan, "Unconventional Politics: The Campaign for a Balanced-Budget Amendment Constitutional Convention in the 1970s," *Journal of American Studies*, 32:3 (1998), 428-30.

⁶⁰⁶ Warden Moxley, "Brown: Striving for a New Political Coalition," *CQWR*, October 20, 1979; Tom Mathews, Martin Kasindorf, Janet Huck, "The Pop Politics of Jerry Brown," *Newsweek*, April 23, 1979.

the states west of the 100th meridian, the federal government was the major landowner, and Congress authorised the state government to select, over twenty-five years, some 104 million acres of land to be returned. In 1971, with Alaska yet to complete its land selection, Congress passed the Alaska Native Lands Claim Settlement Act, which appropriated \$942 million and 44 million acres for distribution among various Eskimos, Aleuts, and Indians. Mo Udall, in concert with Republican Congressman John P. Saylor of Pennsylvania, proposed an amendment that would become Section 17(d)(2) of the act empowering the Interior Secretary to select 80 million acres of Alaskan land for national parks, wildlife refuges, and national forests. The amendment set a deadline on this appropriation, requiring Congress to pass legislation protecting the chosen land by December 18, 1978.⁶⁰⁷ The Sagebrush Rebellion exploded into life while the torturous congressional debate over successive Alaska Lands Bills neared completion. The rebellion made Udall and his conservationist allies ever more determined to pass legislation protecting the land.

As the new chairman of the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, Udall was able to become a central influence in the endgame of the Alaskan lands dispute. Only the congressional reforms of the early 1970s made this possible. Decades earlier it is unlikely that a politician who had so antagonised the House Democratic leadership would be able to exercise such responsibility. Denied the opportunity to ascend the party hierarchy, Udall wielded power instead as a committee chairman, becoming a key actor in the passage of one of the most significant acts of conservation in American history. Before joining that effort, Udall had never even visited Alaska. He made his first trip there in 1977. When his National Guard

⁶⁰⁷ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 195.

helicopter touched down on a plateau in the snow-topped Wrangell Mountains, Udall bounded out and exclaimed, to laughter, ‘I want it all!’⁶⁰⁸ To opponents of the plans, Udall represented everything that was wrong with modern liberalism’s attitude towards the states. For them, Udall was a meddlesome big government type from a desert state thousands of miles away scheming to appropriate a huge tranche of Alaska’s lands to save some caribou and a vista that could only be seen by Americans who subscribed to *National Geographic*. Signs sprang up demanding ‘States Rights!’ and declaring ‘Alaskans Can Manage Alaskan Land.’⁶⁰⁹

Udall was supported in his efforts by a federation of environmental groups, the Alaska Coalition, which maintained continuous pressure on lawmakers throughout the dispute. The Coalition had been formed in 1970 and included over 50 environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the National Audubon Society, the League of Conservation Voters, and the National Wildlife Federation. This coalition was able to draw on a vast network of environmental activists across the nation and applied insistent and targeted pressure to waverers and opponents of the various incarnations of the Alaska Lands bill in Congress. ‘We did the ultimate kind of civics and lobbying jobs that you read about in the textbooks,’ Udall would later boast.⁶¹⁰

A full discussion of the complex and arduous struggle, stretching over some three years, to enact the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁶¹¹ After considerable wrangling within Congress, the bill was

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁰⁹ Turner, “‘The Specter of Environmentalism’,” 130.

⁶¹⁰ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 195, 201.

⁶¹¹ A full account of the struggle, and Udall’s role in it, can be found in Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 193-202.

finally signed into law on December 2, 1980. At the signing ceremony, Carter declared that it was ‘without a doubt ... one of the most important pieces of conservation legislation ever passed in this Nation ... Never before have we seized the opportunity to preserve so much of America’s natural and cultural heritage on so grand a scale.’⁶¹² ‘For environmentalists, it was little short of glorious,’ wrote Udall’s biographers.⁶¹³ History, said fellow westerner Gary Hart, would ‘count [Udall] as one of the great environmentalists.’⁶¹⁴ Few western conservatives had such warm feelings towards the congressman from Arizona, however. Some years after the passage of the Alaska Lands Act, Udall returned to the state. ‘Times have changed for my coming up here,’ he observed. ‘I think I’m doing better now. When people wave at me, they use all five fingers.’⁶¹⁵

With the Carter administration apparently responding to their grievances by appropriating yet more Western land, the Sagebrush Rebels would find their national champion in the former California governor, Ronald Reagan, a ‘transplanted Midwesterner’ and former Hollywood actor who had reinvented himself as a cowboy-politician in the Sunbelt mould.⁶¹⁶ In late June 1980, in a campaign speech in Salt Lake City, Reagan set out to identify himself with the uprising. ‘I happen to be one who cheers on and supports the “Sagebrush Rebellion”,’ he declared to cheers. ‘Count me in as a rebel.’⁶¹⁷ When, in late December 1980, Reagan chose James G. Watt as the next Secretary of the Interior, to squeals of protests from environmentalist groups, it seemed to signal the beginning of a sea change in federal attitudes towards western

⁶¹² U.S. Office of the Federal Register, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1980-81: Book III – September 29, 1980 to January 20, 1981* (Washington, D.C., 1982), 2756.

⁶¹³ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 194.

⁶¹⁴ McPherson, “Mo Udall, Triumph of the Good Guy.”

⁶¹⁵ Carson, Johnson, *Mo*, 202.

⁶¹⁶ Malone, Peterson, “Politics and Protest,” 501.

⁶¹⁷ Howell Raines, “States’ Rights Move in West Influencing Reagan’s Drive,” *NYT*, July 5, 1980.

lands. At the press conference to announce his appointment, Watt denounced ‘environmental extremists’ who ‘would deny economic development’ and who seek ‘to lock up from utilization our resources for one specific purpose.’

What was an early Christmas present for the sagebrush rebels was a lump of strip-mined coal in the stocking of the environmental movement. William Turnage, executive director of the Wilderness Society, set the tone when he branded Watt ‘a joke’ and ‘a caricature of an anticonservationist [*sic*].’⁶¹⁸ Watt certainly took policy decisions that enraged the environmental movement. He expedited the procedures by which mining permits were awarded, relaxed restrictions on grazing on federal lands, and attempted to amend the 1964 Wilderness Act so as to include a statutory time limit on its protection. However, as James Morton Turner has noted, the Reagan White House and Watt’s Interior Department never fully embraced the doctrine of states’ rights at the heart of the Sagebrush Rebellion. ‘Instead of gaining title to the federal lands, the Sagebrush Rebels settled, at least temporarily, for the Reagan administration’s reforms, which promised to prioritize development, reduce federal oversight, and accommodate the states.’⁶¹⁹ Deprived of the unifying antagonist of President Jimmy Carter, and placated by the Reagan administration’s modest concessions, the Sagebrush Rebellion largely fizzled. The long-term consequences for the Democratic Party, however, would be far more dire.

⁶¹⁸ Helen Dewar, Richard L. Lyons, “All but One of President’s Department Heads Confirmed by Senate,” *WP*, January 23, 1981.

⁶¹⁹ Turner, ““The Specter of Environmentalism”” 134-35.

How the West Was Lost

By 1980, the Democratic presence in the West had begun to crumble under a renewed Republican onslaught. In that year's election, not only did Jimmy Carter fail to win a single Western state, in the seven states of the Sunbelt West the president was unable to come within 10 percentage points of Reagan.⁶²⁰ In Colorado, a state which Carter lost by 24 percentage points, Gary Hart squeaked to re-election against a moderate Republican opponent by 1.6 percentage points. Other Democrats were less fortunate, with Republicans winning three of the five contested seats in the Southwest and seven of the ten contested seats across the entire West. The GOP likewise gained nine House seats in the Southwestern states on their 1976 totals. By the time of the landslide Republican election of 1994, the extent of the Democratic disintegration had become even clearer. That year, the GOP won 54 House seats in the Sunbelt West, to the Democrats 52, as well as three of the six Senate races, and four of the six governorships.⁶²¹

It would, however, be a mistake to view this outcome as inevitable. As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, like so much else in the 1970s, in electoral terms this region was very much up for grabs. In 1974 and 1976, the Republican Party found itself as much under pressure in the states of the Southwest as in any other region of the United States. Certainly, there were features of the West's political culture that were favourable to a libertarian-inflected resurgent Republican coalition, but there is no need to assume that the states of the Sunbelt West would become for the post-

⁶²⁰ Exclude Texas and, in the remaining six states, Carter was never less than 15 points behind Reagan. CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, Vol. I, 794.

⁶²¹ CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, Volume II (6th ed., Washington, D.C., 2010), 1312-16, 1347-51, 1434-71, 1598-1660.

Sixties GOP what Dixie had been for the post-Civil War Democratic Party. With the protean character of the region in mind, one is forced to look at the events of the late 1970s for an explanation for the collapse of Democratic fortunes. Democrats who prospered in the West usually did so by adapting to the prevailing anti-government, anti-Washington political culture. Hart, Udall, and Brown would find themselves, by the end of the decade, struggling to reconcile cross-cutting imperatives that pitted their political ambitions against the welfare of their national party. Having not relied on party machinery on their way up, there was little to induce them to think of its welfare as of a piece with the advancement of their personal political fortunes. This was, in part, a reflection of national trends, shaped and exacerbated by the decay of old party machines, the rise of the open primary, and the increasing dominance of television. More and more, ambitious politicians discovered that their advancement depended on an ability to construct coalitions of activists and interest groups. This required a distinctive political persona or policy agenda. The Democratic Party's future belonged to young, presentable policy entrepreneurs in the Gary Hart or Jerry Brown mould.

Yet, there were certain features that were unique to the region. As the Carter administration, and by extension the Democratic Party, became engulfed by the 'War on the West,' Democratic politicians in the Southwest were forced to pursue survival over party-building activities. The most curious feature is that, in these two imbroglios (the water projects dispute and the Sagebrush Rebellion), Democratic politicians in the Western states would find themselves forced to first pursue federal intervention and then to reject it. In this way, Democrats found themselves entangled in the paradoxical political culture of the desert states, a region that depended in many ways on federal stewardship for its continued development and consequently resented the paternalistic

interest that Washington took in its affairs. This antipathy was sharpened by a burgeoning environmental consciousness, which served only to increase the federal presence in the Western states. Many Southwestern Democrats – most notably Mo Udall – had embraced environmentalism as one cause around which a national coalition could unite. It was, for them, an appropriate expression of qualitative rather than quantitative liberalism suitable to a new age of limits, but which nonetheless preserved the party's historic commitment to federal activism. Ultimately, however, such attempts to defend and critique these modified forms of government activism would prove to be a less potent political philosophy than Republican denunciations of the smothering hand of government.

The political careers of these Sunbelt Democrats further underline the peculiar inadequacies of the Congress as a body from which to reshape the public philosophy of the national Democratic Party. Iconoclastic positions that make a candidate seem exciting and dynamic during a campaign are revealed to be unsustainable once that candidate enters office. It is easier, for instance, to call for a rethinking of spending priorities within the federal budget than to acquiesce in the elimination of valuable infrastructure projects within your own state, regardless of how wasteful they might be. The imperatives of legislative politics that point the legislator towards the preservation of the *status quo* are difficult to overcome. A similar fate would befall Daniel Patrick Moynihan, at one time the brightest hope of the party's 'neoconservative' wing who, after his election as senator from New York, would go on to disappoint many of his onetime ideological comrades. Though New York's interests were often diametrically opposed to those of the Western states, as it competed with the richer region for increasingly scarce resources, the striking

similarities between Moynihan's evolution, and that of his Sunbelt colleagues, reveals the moderating effect that congressional politicking had on iconoclastic ambitions.

5. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Neoconservatism, and the Limits of the Iconoclastic Legislator

The advertisement had appeared in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* exactly one month after McGovern's defeat in 1972. Placed by a group calling itself The Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), the advertisement's heading entreated 'Come Home, Democrats,' echoing McGovern's convention acceptance speech.⁶²² 'The Democratic Party is in trouble,' it announced. 'And when the Democratic Party is in trouble – America is in trouble.' Rather than presaging a realignment, the election had been a 'clear signal' that the Democrats should return to the tradition of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. The principles that defined that tradition included 'ever expanding opportunity ... without regard to race, class, sex, or ethnic origin,' a 'fairer distribution of the fruits of the country's vast wealth and productivity,' a commitment to 'compensatory action' to advance those disadvantaged 'by birth or background,' a 'sober but spirited assumption of America's share of responsibility for ... a more secure international order,' and a 'belief that democracy works.'

The CDM accused the reformist 'New Politics' Democrats of dragging the party away from that tradition. 'For too long now,' it declared, 'the voices of common-sense liberals have been barely audible in the blare of the New Politics.' What was needed was 'a robust voice' to reply to the cacophony.⁶²³ Along with the names of the organising committee, this statement of political principles featured a 'partial list' of some 72 high-profile sponsors. These included Ben Wattenberg, civil rights activist

⁶²² The theme and refrain of McGovern's acceptance speech at the 1972 convention had been 'Come Home, America.' George McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York, 1977), 169-70.

⁶²³ Coalition for a Democratic Majority ad, *NYT* and *WP-TH*, December 7, 1972.

Bayard Rustin, lawyer Max M. Kampelman, Harvard professors Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer, congressmen Thomas Foley and Richard Bolling, economist Leon Keyserling, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, business executive Richard Ravitch, journalist and white ethnic activist Michael Novak, and labour leaders Albert Shanker and Louis Stulberg. Two members of the organising committee were drawn from the staffs of Senators Hubert Humphrey and Henry Jackson, whose presidential campaigns would be most readily identified with the CDM. The list was a roll call of Cold War liberalism's aristocracy.

The Coalition had been conceived in a Miami hotel room during the same raucous convention that nominated McGovern. It comprised an *ad hoc* alliance of labour leaders, party elders, and liberal intellectuals who constituted the Democratic old guard, and who were disquieted by what they perceived as the self-indulgence, rejection of coalition politics, and anti-internationalist inclinations of the New Politics. It was born out of the realisation that the counterattack needed a coordinating entity. In the meetings that led to forming the Coalition, Representative Tom Foley of Washington State had complained that the only pressure most liberal members of Congress felt came from the New Politics. The CDM existed to 'crack that monopoly.'⁶²⁴

A name not included among the ad's co-sponsors was that of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the eccentric and dandyish professor-politician who had recently retired as the 'house liberal' in the Nixon administration. Nonetheless, Moynihan was among those who identified with the CDM's aims. Reflecting on the campaign in a *Newsweek*

⁶²⁴ Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, "Anti-New Politics Liberals," *WP-TH*, November 12, 1972.

article published days before the CDM ads appeared, Moynihan took aim at New Politics reformers who did not understand the vital role of party structures in a political system designed to produce conflict. ‘Now is the time,’ he concluded, ‘for all good men and women to come to the aid of party [sic].’⁶²⁵ He maintained warm personal and political relationships with many of the signatories, counting Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, and Daniel Bell as correspondents and friends. Within a few years, he would become one of those robust voices that the CDM relied upon to defend its particular brand of liberalism, through his tenure first as US ambassador to the United Nations, then as a senatorial candidate, and finally as senator from New York.⁶²⁶

Supporters of the CDM, who understood themselves to be defenders of their party’s New Deal and Cold War traditions, soon found themselves tagged with a new and tenacious label: ‘neoconservative.’ The term had first been applied by the socialist writer and activist, Michael Harrington, in a 1973 *Dissent* article.⁶²⁷ ‘We finally started calling them “neoconservatives”,’ Harrington said later, ‘because we recognized that they represented something new in American politics.’⁶²⁸ Just what that new thing was proved rather more difficult to pin down.⁶²⁹ In Harrington’s original formulation, the ‘neo-conservatives’ were liberal intellectuals who had been

⁶²⁵ Daniel P. Moynihan, “My Turn: The Lesson of ’72,” *Newsweek*, November 27, 1972, offprint in the papers of Daniel Patrick Moynihan (DPM), LOC, Part I, Box 220.

⁶²⁶ Many who would go on to support Moynihan’s 1976 Senate campaign were signatories to the ad, including journalist Michael Novak, businessman Richard Ravitch, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Albert Shanker, and Max Kampelman.

⁶²⁷ Michael Harrington, ‘The Welfare State and Its Neoconservative Critics’, *Dissent*, Autumn 1973.

⁶²⁸ Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia, 1993), 2.

⁶²⁹ Gallons of ink have been spilled in pursuit of a definitive answer. See, for instance: Adam L. Fuller, *Taking The Fight to The Enemy: Neoconservatism and the Age of Ideology* (Lanham, MD, 2012); Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Origins of a Movement* (Rev. ed., New York, 2013 [orig. 1979]); Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (tr. Arthur Goldhammer; Cambridge, MA, and London, 2010); John Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York and London, 2008).

so disillusioned by the perceived failures of the War on Poverty that they had embraced the conservative critique of social welfare programmes as dependency-fostering. It was surely only a matter of time, he reasoned, before they surrendered to a broader critique of the welfare state and made common cause with the New Right.⁶³⁰

As many members of the CDM would eventually make their home in the Republican Party, it is tempting to embrace ‘neoconservatism’ as convenient shorthand for their political beliefs. However, this label obscures the character of their advocacy, at least in the mid-1970s, when the situation in the Democratic Party and the wider political scene appeared to be very much in flux. Most of those to whom the label was applied fiercely resisted it. According to John Ehrman it is more accurate, albeit unwieldy, to describe these ‘neoconservatives’ as ‘veterans of the vital center.’⁶³¹ They should not be understood as proto-conservatives but as one faction in an intra-party dispute over what it meant to be a ‘liberal,’ and who would get to define that, in the unsettled political, economic and social climate of the 1970s.

There is perhaps no better illustration of the ambivalent, mutating character of the neoconservatives than the career of Pat Moynihan. Throughout that career, Moynihan drew attention from journalists for his intellect and idiosyncrasies. David Remnick mused in a 1986 profile on Moynihan’s tics: ‘the herky-jerky Anglo-speech, the bow tie slightly askew, the tweedy caps and professorial rambles – they all make him seem vaguely not there, a figure not of the present but of an unreal history, an

⁶³⁰ Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York, 2000), 303-308.

⁶³¹ John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven, CT, 1995), 34.

American Edmund Burke taking dominion on the Hill.⁶³² This can create an impression of Moynihan as a unique political actor, a nominal Democrat who contrived to stand apart from his party. While not entirely misleading, this underplays the extent to which Moynihan positioned himself within a liberal tradition that was increasingly embattled within the Democratic Party in the 1970s. By then, Moynihan was, much to his chagrin, being identified with the neoconservative tendency. Over the course of the next decade, that neoconservative grouping would begin to fracture, with some moving into Reagan's orbit while others remained committed to their liberal roots. Moynihan was part of the latter cohort. From an acknowledged leader of the Democratic right under Jimmy Carter, Moynihan would emerge as one of Reagan's most articulate liberal critics. Some attributed this to a political shift brought on by the demands of practical politics, but Moynihan maintained that he had remained essentially consistent throughout his career.

One can identify an abiding theme in Moynihan's political thought: the problem of how to make government *work*. In this he was clearly distinct from New Right activists who viewed federal power as essentially incompetent or malignant. This preoccupation marked him out as a Democrat prepared to think deeply about the party's historical mission. An accomplished social scientist, who had devoted much of his career to questions of public policy, sociology and politics, Moynihan brought considerable intellectual firepower with him into public office. Michael Barone famously described him as 'the nation's best thinker among politicians since Lincoln and its best politician among thinkers since Jefferson.'⁶³³ By the 1970s, with popular

⁶³² David Remnick, "The Family Crusader, Belying Labels, Drawing Crowds & Loving It All," *WP*, July 16, 1986.

⁶³³ Michael Barone, Grant Ujifusa, *The Almanac of American Politics 2000* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 1090.

faith in government sinking and taxpayer resentment curdling into revolt, Moynihan was confronting the problem of how to convince voters that they received a fair return from their government for the taxes they paid.

That Moynihan would be derided first as a neoconservative and then embraced as a liberal for this reveals as much about the state of the Democratic Party from 1972 to 1984 as it does about Moynihan himself. Tracing his career in these years reveals the party's fissures in the late 1970s as it struggled to redefine or reaffirm liberalism itself while still complacently convinced of its majority status, and then the partial coalescing of many of those after 1980, when Democrats were caught on the hop by the 'Reagan Revolution' and scrambled to defend the New Deal welfare state. Throughout Moynihan never wavered in his conviction that he was responsible for defending his party's legacy and preserving its tradition. In the mid-1970s, it seemed the greatest threat to that Democratic tradition came from within its own house; by the early 1980s, a revived conservative movement presented a far more pressing challenge.

However, there is some truth to the charge that Moynihan's position as senator from New York compelled him to moderate his iconoclasm. His positions on welfare reform, for instance, would perhaps have been bolder if he had been making them from a Harvard office rather than on the Senate floor. Moynihan was in some sense tamed by the Senate, and by the exigencies and incentives of representing his state in a fundamentally localist, pork-oriented legislative body. Moynihan's transition from neoconservative iconoclast in the mid-1970s to more conventional liberal Democrat under Reagan illuminates the ways that legislative politics often militated against

efforts to maintain a coherent political philosophy and proselytise on its behalf. Like the House, the Senate was an intrinsically problematic venue for serious and constructive conversations about the party's future.

How to Lose Friends and Alienate Liberals: Moynihan Before the Senate

Born in Oklahoma in 1927, Moynihan had been raised in New York City.⁶³⁴ A tough childhood spent partly in Hell's Kitchen would eventually form the cornerstone of his personal mythology. After high school, he worked briefly as a longshoreman, before enrolling at the City College of New York (CCNY). After a stint in the navy, he earned a B.A. at Tufts University, where he remained, in the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, for his M.A. and Ph.D. He spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar at the London School of Economics (LSE), and on his return joined the staff of New York governor W. Averell Harriman, launching his career in Democratic politics. In 1961, he was appointed an Assistant Secretary of Labor under John F. Kennedy.

Following Kennedy's assassination, he was briefly a favourite of Lyndon Johnson, becoming involved in civil rights policy. It was in this capacity that, in 1965, an internal report he had drafted would attract unwelcome national attention. The report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, argued that disproportionately high rates of black unemployment, poverty and welfare enrolment, as well as the pervasive legacy of slavery and discrimination, had led to the 'profound

⁶³⁴ The foregoing potted biography is based principally on Godfrey Hodgson, *The Gentleman from New York: Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Biography* (Boston, 2000), Douglas E. Schoen, *Pat: A Biography of Daniel Patrick Moynihan* (New York, 1979), and Katzmann (ed.), *Daniel Patrick Moynihan*.

weakening of Negro family structure.’⁶³⁵ A ‘tangle of pathology’, he wrote, perpetuated a black underclass and only forceful government action could break the cycle. When the report leaked, the response was explosive. Moynihan was accused of racism, cultural bias, and victim-blaming. He left the Johnson administration shortly thereafter and, after an abortive bid for the presidency of the New York city council in 1965, returned to academia.

In 1969, Moynihan was plucked from a Harvard professorship by Richard Nixon to serve on the White House staff as counselor for urban affairs.⁶³⁶ Like many officials in the Nixon administration, Moynihan was occupied by the burgeoning resentment among blue collar whites, mostly male and often ethnic, toward government welfare programmes. While Republican political strategists machinated to peel these voters away from the New Deal coalition, Moynihan worried at the question of what their growing disillusionment would mean for the long term legitimacy of American government. The working class, he wrote to Nixon in May 1969, must ‘see what it is getting out of government, and even, perhaps, to provide it more.’ Achieving this required that social problems should no longer be defined as to ‘separate blacks (and to a degree Hispanics) from the rest of society.’⁶³⁷

Such thinking led to Moynihan’s signature policy preoccupation in this role: the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), a guaranteed income scheme that sought to cut through the Gordian knot of welfare reform. Appealing to the president’s ego and

⁶³⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C., 1965); See also James T. Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle Over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (New York, 2010).

⁶³⁶ Stephen Hess, *The Professor and the President: Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the Nixon White House* (Washington, D.C., 2015).

⁶³⁷ Memo, DPM to Nixon, May 17, 1969, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 247.

hunger for historic achievements, Moynihan predicted that FAP would allow Nixon 'to assert with full validity that it was under your Presidency that poverty was abolished in America.' FAP would do this by instituting a system of direct payments to the impoverished, in the form of income supplements, sharply reducing 'the costly and questionable services' that had been endemic to previous poverty programmes. Poverty would be eliminated and at an ultimate saving to the taxpayer.⁶³⁸ Needless to say, Nixon was enthusiastic about the reforms, but when FAP ran into difficulty in Congress, he proved a fickle patron. FAP would eventually founder on an unlikely alliance of conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. Moynihan bitterly regretted the defeat and particularly resented the fierce liberal opposition.⁶³⁹

In 1970, another leaked internal memo reopened old wounds. Moynihan had been growing increasingly concerned about intemperate rhetoric on matters of race and fearful of a backlash that might jeopardize black gains. '[T]he issue of race could benefit from a period of "benign neglect",' he wrote to Nixon. 'The subject has been too much talked about ... We need a period in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades.'⁶⁴⁰ When this memo leaked, the most damning phrase was the one that Moynihan had chosen for its eye-catching qualities: 'benign neglect.' Once again, Moynihan found himself denounced as a racist. For many liberals and African-Americans, this confirmed suspicions raised by the 1965 report. 'The memo, if couched in the language of a Southern saloon,' editorialised the *New York Post*, 'might

⁶³⁸ Memo, DPM to Nixon, March 26, 1969; Memo, DPM to Nixon, April 1, 1969, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 247.

⁶³⁹ For more on FAP, see Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan* (New York, 1973) and Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence, KS, 1996), 211-233

⁶⁴⁰ Memo, DPM to Nixon, January 16, 1970, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 255.

be summarized in the sentence “those people never had it so good” and it is time to mute national debate about their alleged troubles.’⁶⁴¹

Stung after FAP’s defeat and by fresh accusations of bigotry, Moynihan retreated to Harvard. In 1973, the now embattled Nixon appointed him ambassador to India. Two years later, with Gerald Ford in the White House, Moynihan found himself appointed ambassador to the United Nations. The cause of Moynihan’s appointment was an article he had written for *Commentary* in March 1975, ‘The United States in Opposition,’ in which he had argued that the US should ‘go into opposition’ within the UN, where it found itself outnumbered by anti-‘imperialist,’ anti-capitalist, and anti-American autocracies.⁶⁴²

Though he spent less than a year in the post, at the UN Moynihan established himself as a pugnacious defender of American ideals and interests, courting national popularity for the first time in his career. His most dramatic confrontation was in leading the opposition to UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 which condemned Zionism as ‘a form of racism and racial discrimination.’ Israel was, Moynihan said, ‘one of the very few places ... where Western democratic principles survive, and of all such places, currently the most exposed.’⁶⁴³ That the resolution was sponsored principally by authoritarian Arab and Third World states, and apparently the product of Soviet machinations, was evidence enough for Moynihan of a totalitarian assault on democracy. Despite a determined effort to defeat the resolution, in the end Moynihan

⁶⁴¹ “With All ‘Benign Neglect’,” *New York Post*, March 2, 1970. Other interpretations were similarly hostile: “Moynihan Idea Draws Anger ... As Usual,” *Newsday*, March 2, 1970; “Let Us Lower Our Voices, But Not To ‘Benign Neglect’,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 3, 1970; Mary McGrory, “Tone of Moynihan Memo Will Infuriate Blacks,” *Boston Globe*, March 3, 1970; offprints in the DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 255.

⁶⁴² Daniel P. Moynihan, ‘The United States in Opposition’, *Commentary*, March 1975.

⁶⁴³ ‘Moynihan Says U.N. Must Bar Resolution Condemning Zionism’, *NYT*, 22 October 1975.

could offer only symbolic acts of resistance. When the General Assembly passed the resolution, a furious Moynihan rose to declare that the United States ‘does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.’⁶⁴⁴

Ambassador Moynihan infuriated both fellow diplomats and his State Department superiors. However, growing admiration of his style among the American public offered some insulation. By January 1976, the U.S. mission to the UN had received over 28,000 pieces of mail relating to Moynihan’s performance, fewer than 200 of which were critical. Praise came from former California governor Ronald Reagan, then challenging Ford for the Republican presidential nomination. Moynihan was an early champion of the muscular patriotism – in Gil Troy’s coinage, ‘the politics of patriotic indignation’ – that Reagan would use to great effect in his 1980 campaign.⁶⁴⁵ Months after the fall of Saigon and the communist takeover of Cambodia, at a moment of intense crisis for the United States, the fact that one of its representatives was mounting such an impassioned, often impolitic defence of its values proved immensely popular. One poll found 70 per cent of respondents wanted Moynihan to continue speaking out ‘frankly and forthrightly’ even at the expense of ‘tact and diplomacy.’⁶⁴⁶

Moynihan’s pyrotechnics at the UN led more than one observer to wonder at his wider ambitions. The chatter rose to such a distracting level that in October 1975, appearing on *Face The Nation* in the midst of the ‘Zionism is racism’ fight, Moynihan

⁶⁴⁴ Moynihan discusses his tenure at the UN in *A Dangerous Place* (with Suzanne Weaver; Boston, MA, 1978). For a detailed and sympathetic account of the battle over Resolution 3379 see Gil Troy, *Moynihan’s Moment: America’s Fight Against Zionism As Racism* (New York, 2013).

⁶⁴⁵ Clayton Fritchley, ‘Moynihan-Kissinger Split: A Matter of Style’, *WP*, December 6, 1975; Troy, *Moynihan’s Moment*, 9.

⁶⁴⁶ ‘A Fighting Irishman At The U.N.’, *Time*, January 26, 1976.

was asked outright about his intentions towards New York's Senate seat. Moynihan was initially unequivocal in his denials, saying he would 'consider it dishonorable' to leave to the UN to run for office.⁶⁴⁷ In some quarters, it was dearly hoped that Moynihan would slink off quietly to academia after his tenure at the UN ended. Many liberals were inclined to cast a jaundiced eye on Moynihan's career trajectory. 'Will we ever be free of the Moynihan phenomenon?' lamented a *Nation* editorial in February 1976. '[I]s it possible still to think of this ponderous lightweight as a Democrat?'⁶⁴⁸

*Pat vs. Bella and Jim: The 1976 New York Senate Election*⁶⁴⁹

New York Democrats enjoyed a historical voter registration advantage but often found it difficult to translate this into electoral success. As Moynihan never tired of reminding voters during his run, from 1950 until 1976, with the exception of Robert Kennedy, New York State returned no Democratic senators to Washington. In part, this was due to the state's unusual party system. In each cycle, the Democratic, Republican, Liberal, and Conservative Parties would each nominate a candidate. Unusual permutations were common, with some Republican senators – Jacob Javits, for example – winning the imprimatur of the Liberal Party. Moreover, the New York State Democratic Party was divided between its regular and reformer wings. Moynihan had witnessed the damage wrought by these divisions first-hand at the 1958

⁶⁴⁷ 'Moynihan Sees U.N. Assembly Voting Anti-Zionism Resolution', *NYT*, October 27, 1975; Hodgson, *Gentleman From New York*, 259.

⁶⁴⁸ 'Final(?) Questions on Moynihan', *Nation*, February 14, 1976.

⁶⁴⁹ A more detailed analysis of this campaign forms the basis of the author's article, "Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the 1976 New York Senate Race, and the Struggle to Define American Liberalism," *Historical Journal*, 57:4 (December, 2014), 1111-1133.

New York State Democratic convention, when a dispute between the regular and the reform wings over a Senate candidate produced televised deadlock.⁶⁵⁰

By the mid-1970s, however, it seemed the stars were aligning for New York's Democrats, as they were for the national party, with economic downturn, Watergate, and Republican mishandling of New York City's fiscal crisis offering them their best opportunity in decades to retake a Senate seat. The 1974-5 recession, the worst to hit the United States since the Depression, had a particularly deleterious effect on the nation's already weakened cities. New York became emblematic of the urban crisis. From the 1960s, with mounting outlays and declining revenues, New York City became dangerously reliant on the sale of notes and bonds to service a growing budget deficit and meet its annual operating costs. By early 1975, Manhattan banks were refusing to underwrite any further loans, and the city was forced to turn to the federal government for relief.⁶⁵¹

The staunchly orthodox Ford rejected this appeal outright, advising the city to pursue stringent cost-cutting measures instead. New York's pleas continued throughout 1975 while Ford remained intransigent. The Ford administration argued that any bail-out would only encourage further profligacy on the part of the municipal authorities. The president may have imagined he was administering some tough love, but the people of New York settled on a less generous interpretation. The *Daily News* distilled the resentment when it ran the celebrated headline, 'Ford To City: Drop Dead.' Ford eventually relented, signing the New York City Seasonal Financial Act

⁶⁵⁰ Moynihan, *Coping*, 8-11.

⁶⁵¹ Roger Biles, *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000* (Lawrence, KS, 2011), 201; Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York, 2002), 548-53.

towards the end of the year which authorised loans of \$2.3 billion in each of the three subsequent financial years.⁶⁵²

James Buckley, the incumbent senator seeking re-election in 1976, was a vociferous opponent of the bail-out. The elder brother of *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, Jr., Buckley had won in 1970 as the nominee of the Conservative Party in a split field. As the city's financial condition worsened, Buckley had clung tenaciously to his anti-statist convictions despite their political toxicity. Any intervention by Washington, Buckley said, would 'further erode our Federal system.'⁶⁵³ This principled but wildly unpopular stance led many to assume that Buckley was acutely vulnerable to a Democratic challenge. By February 1976, the *Washington Post* reported that no fewer than a dozen Democrats were exploring a Senate run.⁶⁵⁴ Yet Moynihan hesitated.

His weaknesses as a candidate were daunting. Many liberals were unwilling to forgive his apparent disloyalty. ADA founder Joseph Rauh told Moynihan that he had 'forfeited his right to Democratic support' with his support of Nixon.⁶⁵⁵ His previous remarks on racial matters were also an albatross. Representatives Charlie Rangel and Shirley Chisholm, two of New York's most respected black leaders, actively lobbied against Moynihan's candidacy, and the State Council of Black Elected Officials voted to declare him an unacceptable candidate.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵² Biles, *Fate of Cities*, 210-212. For more on the crisis and its resolution see Seymour P. Lachlan, Robert Polner, *The Man Who Saved New York: Hugh Carey and the Great Fiscal Crisis of 1975* (Albany, NY, 1975).

⁶⁵³ Martin Tolchin, "Buckley Opposes U.S. Intervention In City's Crisis," *NYT*, September 24, 1975.

⁶⁵⁴ William Claibourne, "Moynihan 'Open' To Senate Race," *WP*, February 4, 1976.

⁶⁵⁵ Letter, Rauh to DPM, n.d., papers of Joseph L. Rauh, LOC, Box 3.

⁶⁵⁶ Frank Lynn, "Black Politicians Oppose Moynihan," *NYT*, February 18, 1976.

However, Moynihan also brought considerable strengths. He was the favoured candidate of both organised labour and the Jewish community. Al Barkan, the head of the AFL-CIO's political action committee, and Lane Kirkland, Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, gave Moynihan private undertakings that his campaign could expect \$100,000 in union contributions.⁶⁵⁷ Moynihan's robust defence of Israel at the U.N. meant that he could expect considerable goodwill from Jewish voters, who made up almost a third of the Democratic primary electorate. One *Daily News* poll showed that support for Moynihan's actions in the UN stood at 78 percent among Jewish respondents, 60 percent of whom favoured his entry into the race.⁶⁵⁸ He also had well-placed allies within the state party. Moynihan's most aggressive courter was Joseph Crangle, the Democratic leader of upstate Erie County. At a dinner which Crangle organised, he pleaded with the vacillating Moynihan to enter the race, lamenting that the state party was being 'Manhattanized,' and that only Moynihan could wrest it back from the reformers.⁶⁵⁹

Moynihan's principal opponent in the primary would be Bella Abzug. A native New Yorker, Abzug started out as a lawyer; her early cases included defending civil rights activists in the Deep South. She was one of the few women in her profession when she began practicing in the 1940s and, to ensure that she would not be mistaken for a secretary, she took to wearing large, wide-brimmed hats, an affectation that would become a political trademark. In 1970 she won a congressional seat on Manhattan's solidly liberal West Side, defeating a seven-term incumbent in the

⁶⁵⁷ Ken Bode, William Straus, "The New York Senate Race: Five Is A Crowd," *TNR*, August 21-28, 1976; "A.F.L.-C.I.O. Aide Backs Moynihan," *NYT*, March 25, 1976.

⁶⁵⁸ "Moynihan for Senate Run Favored," *Daily News*, March 1, 1976, clipping in the papers of Norman Podhoretz (NP), LOC, Box 2.

⁶⁵⁹ Letter, Crangle to Moynihan, February 18, 1976, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 383; "Moynihan Is Open To A Senate Race," *NYT*, February 3, 1976.

Democratic primary. 'A Woman's Place is in the House,' ran her campaign slogan, 'And the Senate.'⁶⁶⁰ She co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus with Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, and championed the Equal Rights Amendment. A fierce opponent of the Vietnam War, Abzug's uncompromising liberalism won her a spot on Richard Nixon's enemies list. 'The adjective *flamboyant* was attached to her almost as stock epithets were given to Homer's heroes,' wrote Godfrey Hodgson. 'She was loud, rude and proud of it.'⁶⁶¹

When Crangle complained of the 'Manhattanization' of the state party, it was Abzug and her allies that he had in mind. With Abzug and Moynihan as principal contenders, the primary campaign became a microcosm of the larger struggle then raging through the Democratic Party. Each served as the avatars of competing factions then engaged in tug-of-war for the party's future. Abzug had credibility with liberals that Moynihan could only dream of, but lacked his appeal to centrist and conservative Democrats. A forceful personality who attracted devotion and revulsion in equal measure, Abzug was someone against whom centrist politicians could define a distinctive political identity.

On June 10, Moynihan finally committed himself to the Senate race.⁶⁶² Crangle drafted Meyer 'Sandy' Frucher as campaign manager. Frucher had been press secretary for Arthur Goldberg's unsuccessful 1970 gubernatorial campaign and was thought to be a suitably high profile sop to Moynihan's liberal critics. Fearing that the campaign would be undermined if the candidate found himself on the wrong side of a liberal vs. conservative primary fight, Frucher sought to downplay the ideological

⁶⁶⁰ Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York, 2010), 98.

⁶⁶¹ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 265.

⁶⁶² R. W. Apple, Jr., 'Moynihan Tests Political Winds,' *NYT*, April 5, 1976; Schoen, *Pat*, 248.

differences between Moynihan and his rivals. ‘There are no issues of substance in this campaign,’ he told *The New Republic*, ‘the only issue is the character of the candidates and in both cases that is pretty well defined.’⁶⁶³

Nonetheless, Moynihan’s campaign did rest on substantive foundations and he outlined those in four speeches delivered in late August and early September.⁶⁶⁴ Each took a different unit as its focus: the nation, the Democratic Party (or the ‘liberal tradition’), New York City, and the family. He restated the liberal internationalism that had distinguished his tenure at the UN, and called for ‘a strong and resolute America’ to stand against the relentless onslaught of totalitarianism. He situated himself in what he defined as the reformist liberal tradition of the New York Democratic Party: ‘I stand for the liberalism of Al Smith and the Democratic Party tradition that says never promise anything you can’t deliver.’ He announced his opposition to ‘the politics of racial polarization and reverse discrimination’ and argued for social policies founded in universalist ideas. Finally, he attacked the welfare system for actively encouraging the disintegration of the American family and pressed for the federal government to assume the costs of New York’s welfare system.

This quartet offered a vision of liberalism that he had been defending throughout his career in public life: patriotic, internationalist and anti-communist in foreign policy, opposed to utopian schemes in public policy, wary of reforms that weakened a party’s ability to deliver for its constituents, and which situated itself within the liberal tradition of New York, the state that had given birth to the New

⁶⁶³ Schoen, *Pat*, 250, 253-4; Bode, Straus, “The New York Senate Race: Five is a Crowd.”

⁶⁶⁴ The note to editors and correspondents attached to the first speech, from communications director Richard T. Stout, announced that the four upcoming statements would ‘form the centerpiece of [Moynihan’s] campaign.’ Richard T. Stout, ‘Note to Editors and Correspondents,’ August 25, 1976, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 493.

Deal. His foils in these speeches were those who thought America ‘so immoral a nation that the best thing we can do for the rest of the world is withdraw and concentrate all our attention on cleansing ourselves of sin.’ They were ‘usurpers’ who had ‘made off with [liberalism’s] banner and corrupted its language’ and who maintained ‘that the American political system is sick and that only radical surgery can save it, if indeed it can be saved at all.’ They were ‘a certain kind of “liberal” ... [who] would rather protect what he considers the good name of the poor than do something about poverty.’ They were, though unnamed as such, New Politics liberals. Liberalism’s real enemies, as far as Moynihan was concerned, came not from a resurgent conservatism, but from within its own house.⁶⁶⁵

On primary day, September 15, Moynihan beat Abzug by 10,000 votes, a razor thin margin of 0.1 percent. Moynihan carried most of New York City, and its suburbs, as well as upstate New York. He swept Catholic and Jewish voters. Abzug carried Manhattan, the Bronx, and some upstate areas, and, in a potentially troubling omen, trounced Moynihan among blacks and Puerto Rican voters.⁶⁶⁶ The next day, at a press conference at his campaign headquarters, Moynihan announced, ‘I believe we are seeing a rebirth of the Democratic majority in New York.’ One journalist asked whether he would be taking steps to make peace with the liberals. ‘We were the liberals in the race,’ he replied with a grin.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁵ DPM, ‘A Nation Worth Defending,’ August 25, 1976; DPM, ‘New York State and the Liberal Tradition,’ August 28, 1976; DPM, ‘Saving New York City,’ August 30, 1976; DPM, ‘In Defense of the Family,’ September 1, 1976, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 493.

⁶⁶⁶ Schoen, *Pat*, 256-7.

⁶⁶⁷ Maurice Carroll, “Mrs. Abzug Offers to Aid Winner; Buckley Calls Moynihan ‘to the Left’,” *NYT*, September 16, 1976.

Narrowly backed by his party, Moynihan had to turn his attention to unseating Buckley. Little separated the two on foreign affairs; both were unimpeachable anti-communists, all but inflexible on the defence budget, and stoutly pro-Israel. Thus, the election quickly became a clash of domestic ideologies. With the debate framed in this way, Moynihan emerged as a more conventional liberal Democrat. Buckley, Moynihan charged, was 'a radical of the Right' who had never reconciled himself to the New Deal. 'My opponent keeps saying he wants to get Washington off our backs,' Moynihan told one labour group. 'I say I want to get Washington on our side.' Buckley, an underdog throughout, sought to paint Moynihan, whom he always referred to as 'Professor,' as a hopelessly liberal egghead.⁶⁶⁸

The most influential issue in the contest was New York's continued economic weakness and the extension of federally-backed loans to keep the city solvent. Approximately 40 percent of New York's total electorate, after all, was the city vote, and a municipal bankruptcy would have had ramifications throughout the state and the nation. This dispute revealed the fundamental ideological cleavage between Buckley and Moynihan over the role of the federal government in American life. A pessimistic *National Review* profile, which underscores the perceived weakness of conservatism at the decade's midpoint, explained that Senator Buckley was driven 'by the conviction that those conservative principles for which he stands, and for which there are fewer and fewer spokesmen of national stature, are essential as a counterforce against an increasingly dominant philosophy of governmental intervention.'⁶⁶⁹ Though he

⁶⁶⁸ Albert R. Hunt, "In The Senate Race, One Campaign Issue Is FDR's 'New Deal'," *WSJ*, October 15, 1976; "Buckley TV Ads Spur New, Tougher Stance," *NYT*, October 27, 1976.

⁶⁶⁹ Patricia S. Coyne, "A Conservative Senator In New York," *National Review*, October 29, 1976.

opposed any federal role in a municipal rescue package, Buckley was unable to offer a convincing alternative. ‘That was how I got elected,’ Moynihan said later.⁶⁷⁰

As election day neared, Buckley’s chances of another upset dwindled. Moynihan maintained a healthy poll lead that the incumbent could not overcome. The usually fratricidal Democrats, scenting victory, began to coalesce around Moynihan’s candidacy. A few holdouts aside, Moynihan even won some high-level black support, notably Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm.⁶⁷¹ The final result was not even close. Moynihan won a decisive victory, with 2,913,200 votes to Buckley’s 2,517,292 (54.1 to 44.9 percent). He ran best in Jewish and Catholic districts – retaining many of those ethnic, blue collar, and traditionally Democratic, voters who would defect to Reagan in 1980 – but ran behind Jimmy Carter in black districts. State-wide, Moynihan ran approximately 33,000 votes ahead of Carter.⁶⁷² This was by no means a unique occurrence in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, where Carter was the beneficiary of a reverse coattails effect and formidable union mobilization.⁶⁷³ This fact would colour his turbulent relationship with the president.

The result had particular significance for the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, which could now convincingly claim that it was capable of assembling that majority. If Moynihan won, Michael Novak had written months earlier, there would at last be a senator ‘in touch with the generous, liberal, and realistic attitudes of

⁶⁷⁰ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 272.

⁶⁷¹ Press release, Statement by Rep. Shirley Chisholm endorsing Moynihan, 26 Oct. 1976, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 489.

⁶⁷² CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. elections*, Vols. I-II, 793, 1457.

⁶⁷³ Stanley, *Kennedy vs. Carter*, 29-30.

a great majority of Americans. We will have a model for the future.’⁶⁷⁴ Joseph Crangle had predicted that Moynihan’s election ‘would place the moderate-center philosophy in the forefront of the national Democratic Party.’⁶⁷⁵ Now, Moynihan had a platform to fight for that moderate-centre philosophy. Of all the CDM’s putative leaders, he seemed best placed to exploit that platform. Hubert Humphrey was in increasingly poor health and, it would transpire, had only a year left to live. Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson, though an impressive legislator, lacked Moynihan’s charisma and rhetorical flair. His tenure in the Senate, however, despite a promising start, would prove an ultimate disappointment to many of the ‘neoconservatives.’

Correcting the Balance: Moynihan the Freshman

In January 1977, Moynihan entered what historian Ira Shapiro has described as ‘the last great Senate.’⁶⁷⁶ He became a reliably, and calculatedly, eccentric figure, in many ways a throwback to a semi-mythical era when senators were expected to be ‘characters.’ He responded to his name in the Caucus roll call with the naval cry, ‘Yo,’ and opened his regular constituent newsletters with the quaint archaism ‘Dear Yorker.’⁶⁷⁷ Newspaper and magazine profiles of this exotic addition to the Senate soon began to proliferate. ‘Like John Wayne walking into a Wild West saloon,’ ran one,

⁶⁷⁴ Michael Novak, “Isn’t It Time We Had A Senator?” [Periodical unknown], August 23, 1976, offprint in the NP papers, Box 2.

⁶⁷⁵ Albert R. Hunt, “In This Senate Race, One Campaign Issue Is FDR’s ‘New Deal’,” *WSJ*, October 15, 1976.

⁶⁷⁶ Ira Shapiro, *The Last Great Senate: Courage and Statesmanship in Times of Crisis* (New York, 2012), x.

⁶⁷⁷ Letter, DPM to Safire, June 23, 1984, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 9; Daniel P. Moynihan, Steven R. Weisman (ed.), *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary* (New York, 2010), 440.

New York's junior senator 'attracts immediate attention [when] he rises to address the Senate or a public gathering.'⁶⁷⁸

During the primary, Moynihan had been asked which of the Senate's major committees he would seek to join if elected. 'Finance,' he replied without hesitation, because '[t]hat's where the money is.'⁶⁷⁹ Most importantly, legislation pertaining to any future refinancing of New York would pass through that committee. No New Yorker had served on it since Reconstruction, and Moynihan delighted in reminding people that his predecessor had placed Samuel Tilden's name in nomination at the national convention.⁶⁸⁰ Moynihan also sought appointment to the Public Works Committee, traditionally responsible for doling out pork in the form of valuable infrastructure projects. With these places, Moynihan was signalling his intent to focus on domestic issues during his first term. This was hardly surprising. After all, he had claimed that his support for federal aid had won him his Senate seat. New York's condition remained precarious and the state would require a second federally-backed refinancing in 1978. Moynihan's first term would be dominated by an effort to secure New York's finances permanently by redressing the supposed imbalances in the state's fiscal relationship with the federal government.

During the campaign, Carter had stressed that he would be far more sympathetic to New York's plight than Ford had been. He pledged a federal guarantee of the state's bonds and promised to meet with Governor Hugh Carey and Mayor

⁶⁷⁸ Edward C. Burks, "Moynihan's Flamboyance and Quick Wit Draw Attention to Washington Freshman," *NYT*, November 7, 1977.

⁶⁷⁹ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 270.

⁶⁸⁰ Edward C. Burks, "Moynihan Gets A Major Post in the Senate," *NYT*, February 10, 1977.

Abraham Beame before his inauguration to work out a plan for New York's future.⁶⁸¹ Carter and Moynihan had campaigned together in the conservative upstate counties and photographs of Carter and Mondale were included on Moynihan's campaign literature under the slogan, 'They'll Never Say "Drop Dead" to New York City.'⁶⁸² In the days after Carter's election, it seemed the president was gearing up to honour these pledges. 'In the 1930s we had a President from the Northeast who was particularly sympathetic to the problems of poverty in the rural South,' remarked White House press secretary Jody Powell. '[T]he President-elect hopes to reciprocate some of the concern and aid that Roosevelt provided to the South.'⁶⁸³

At his first post-election press conference, days after his victory, Moynihan told the assembled journalists that he was 'confident' that the Carter administration would respect its 'contract with the people' by redeeming the urban policy planks of the party's platform. He reiterated an argument made on the campaign trail and to which he would soon give more empirical heft, that it was time to redress the regional imbalance that had come from disproportionate federal aid to the booming Southwest. This would offer those states, he added, 'a new experience – the joy of benevolence toward others.'⁶⁸⁴ During his campaign, Moynihan had said that the most serious question the next senator from New York would face was 'what the federal

⁶⁸¹ Biles, *The Fate of Cities*, 222; "Excerpt from an Interview With Jimmy Carter on Urban Affairs," NYT, March 31, 1976; Jack Egan, "Carter Might Back Form of N.Y. Loan Guarantee," WP, October 19, 1976.

⁶⁸² Thomas P. Ronan, "Carter Campaigns With Moynihan," NYT, October 1, 1976; Moynihan flyer, DPM papers, Part I, Box 490.

⁶⁸³ According to Moynihan, who quoted Powell, these remarks were reported by the *Albany Times-Union* on November 11, 1976. DPM, "How To Politicize the Economics of Growth – And Why Not To," Address before the White House Conference on Balanced Growth and Economic Development, January 31, 1978, "Senate – General Correspondence, 4/14/77-2/9/78 [CF, O/A 536]," OCL, Frank Moore Subject Files, JCL, Box 47.

⁶⁸⁴ Maurice Carroll, "Moynihan Planning to Talk With Beame," NYT, November 5, 1976.

government can and should do to help.’⁶⁸⁵ This would depend on Moynihan’s ability to persuade the Carter White House to embrace his analysis and recalibrate federal policies accordingly. Unfortunately Moynihan’s personal relationship with Carter was tense from the outset. The senator never quite discarded the conceit that his candidacy had delivered New York, and thus the presidency, to Carter. For his part, Carter never warmed to Moynihan. In July 1977, one anonymous presidential aide leaked that ‘[t]he President just doesn’t care very much for Pat. He’s too Northern, too much New York, too much Harvard.’⁶⁸⁶

Moynihan’s determination to shape the national conversation on New York and its fiscal relationship to the federal government led his Senate office to publish an annual report that purportedly confirmed the imbalance. These statements, commonly known as the Fisc. reports (a typically esoteric borrowing of the term used for the taxes collected by the Merovingian and Carolingian royal households from their feudal territories), marshalled reams of data to demonstrate the disadvantageous ‘balance of payments’ that existed between New York and the federal government. The first was released in June 1977. ‘I have come to the conclusion,’ he wrote in the cover letter to the president, ‘that the Federal government is very much more responsible for [New York’s] decline than any of us have quite realized.’⁶⁸⁷

⁶⁸⁵ DPM, “What a Senator Can Do For New York,” Speech to the City Club of NY, October 29, 1976, DPM papers, LOC, Part I, Box 493.

⁶⁸⁶ Mondale phoned Moynihan the same day to assure him that the remarks of the unnamed aide did not reflect the president’s views and that if Carter could ‘find the son of a bitch’ he would fire him. Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, “A Sharp Edge in Carter-Moynihan Relations,” *WP*, July 29, 1977; Memo, DPM to Elliot Abrams, Charles Horner, Tim Russert, Checker Finn, July 29, 1977, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 1.

⁶⁸⁷ Letter, DPM to Carter, June 24, 1977, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 1.

The most distorting items in the ledger, concluded the first Fisc., were those that were erroneously counted as expenditures for the state simply because they were processed through New York-based banks. For instance, New York was on record as receiving 51 percent of interest on the federal debt and 44 percent of foreign aid.⁶⁸⁸ New York also received most of its payments in what Moynihan called ‘soft’ expenditures – Medicaid, welfare, etc. – rather than ‘hard’ expenditures of infrastructure and defence contracts which Southern and Western states received. ‘We get food stamps; they get infrastructure,’ as he put it later.⁶⁸⁹ As a result, New York (along with other Northeastern and Midwestern states) was effectively subsidising the booming economies of the South and West. However necessary this arrangement had been when the Sunbelt renaissance had been a glint in the eye of federal developers, as the Frostbelt struggled to cope with accelerating deindustrialisation, the imbalance was intolerable. Moynihan called on the federal government to end ‘a policy of further weakening the weakest economy in the nation.’⁶⁹⁰

It was mid-September before Moynihan received an official acknowledgement of the report from the president. In the meantime, he had convened a press conference to angrily denounce the federal bureaucracy as a ‘pea-brained dinosaur’ without the competence to develop long-range solutions. While Carter’s reply was cool, he directed OMB director Charles Schultze and Stuart Eizenstat to prepare an administration review of Moynihan’s statement.⁶⁹¹ Their response, released two weeks later, agreed with Moynihan’s analysis ‘in certain respects’ but disputed Moynihan’s

⁶⁸⁸ The figures were taken from Professor Erik Johnsen of SUNY Plattsburgh, New York. Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 287.

⁶⁸⁹ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 289; Daniel P. Moynihan, “What Will They Do For New York,” *NYT*, January 27, 1980.

⁶⁹⁰ “Moynihan Criticizes Federal ‘Bias’,” *NYT*, June 27, 1977.

⁶⁹¹ Letter, Carter to DPM, Sept 14, 1977, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 1.

principal contention, and argued that the balance of payments was ‘not an appropriate measure’ of ‘the federal impact on individual states.’ Publicly, Moynihan was quick to declare victory: ‘It’s taken a long time for this argument to sink in with the Federal Government. Now, suddenly things become possible.’⁶⁹²

However, Carter remained unsympathetic to Moynihan’s efforts. The president viewed Moynihan in the context of what he perceived as a parochial, self-interested Congress, whose members jostled to defend their pet stipends while he struggled to balance national commitments amidst encroaching austerity. This impression was only confirmed when Moynihan joined with Southern and Western members to oppose the president in the water projects controversy, explaining that he had anticipated legislative ‘trade-offs’ in his defence of the Northeast. ‘If they voted for us, I let them know they can expect me to be a friend.’⁶⁹³ By mid-1978, Carter was writing in his journal that he was ‘discouraged’ by the pressure from the Congress to increase spending ‘almost across the board.’ The president wrote that he felt ‘more at home with the conservative Democratic and Republican members of Congress than I do the others, although the liberals vote with me more often.’⁶⁹⁴

Moynihan had limited success in squeezing concessions out of the Carter administration. Though the Fisc. project may have been, as Hodgson has suggested, ‘a fairly successful’ effort ‘to change the way people thought about New York and its economy,’ it yielded few policy successes in the late 1970s. Moynihan’s greatest triumph in this may have been his role, in concert with New York’s senior senator

⁶⁹² Letter, DPM to Carter, Sept 28, 1977, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 1; Edward C. Burks, “2 Carter Advisers Back Moynihan ‘In Certain Respects’ on Aid Bias,” *NYT*, September 28, 1977.

⁶⁹³ Edward C. Burks, “Northeast and Middle West Join In Congress in Bid for More Aid,” *NYT*, Jun 13, 1977.

⁶⁹⁴ Carter, *White House Diary*, 165, 199.

Jacob Javits, in shepherding a bill through the Senate in 1978 authorising a federal loan of \$2 billion to New York City. This was the first recapitalisation of the troubled city since 1976 and it passed amid a climate of increasing hostility towards any New York ‘bailout.’⁶⁹⁵ While the bill was making its way through the Congress, California voters passed Proposition 13, touching off a wave of taxpayer revolts that cautioned legislators against appearing too loose with the public purse. Such isolated successes aside, however, a more significant reorientation of federal priorities proved elusive.

Moynihan’s sparring with Carter marked him out as one of the president’s regular and most colourful critics. As the president’s approval ratings sank, Moynihan’s name was soon being floated as a possible primary challenger. ‘If there is not yet a Moynihan campaign,’ wrote Morton Kondracke, ‘there is a Moynihan movement and a Moynihan logic.’⁶⁹⁶ Support came largely from his old neoconservative allies. ‘If I had to invent a candidate to suit the political mood of the country,’ said Norman Podhoretz, ‘it would be somebody like Moynihan.’⁶⁹⁷ Confirming liberal suspicions, Moynihan also received support from the right. While stopping short of an endorsement, William F. Buckley wrote warmly about his putative candidacy.⁶⁹⁸

The expectation was that Moynihan would leap into the race as the champion of the CDM-inclined faction. By 1980, Humphrey was dead and Jackson, with two unsuccessful and unremarkable presidential campaigns behind him, was unlikely to tilt at the windmill a third time. For a neoconservative who still identified as a Democrat,

⁶⁹⁵ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 286-88; For a detailed account of the passage of the New York City Loan Guarantee Act of 1978, see Shapiro, *Last Great Senate*, 185-200.

⁶⁹⁶ Morton Kondracke, “The Moynihan Movement,” *TNR*, July 22, 1978.

⁶⁹⁷ Clayton Fritchey, “The New Moynihan,” *WP*, August 3, 1981.

⁶⁹⁸ William F. Buckley, “Why Not Moynihan?” *National Review*, June 22, 1980.

Moynihan was the only game in town. *The Nation* was sufficiently disquieted by the quickening drumbeat around Moynihan's presidential prospects to devote an entire special issue to the senator, under the heading 'The Conscience of a Neoconservative.' 'Why is this man on our cover?' asked the editorial. Moynihan, it explained, 'is the point man for an increasingly visible, vocal and ... powerful intellectual movement: the neoconservatives, who cloak conservative conclusions in the language of liberalism.' Contributors dissected Moynihan's positions, and by extension the neoconservative platform, on welfare, foreign affairs, race relations, and the use (or misuse) of social science in answering questions of public policy.⁶⁹⁹

Yet by 1980, Moynihan was already in the process of detaching himself, in subtle but distinct ways, from his neoconservative networks. He had never accepted the label and frequently corresponded with newspapers and magazines in an effort to assert his preferred nomenclature. In 1979, for instance, he wrote to Peter Steinfelds, of *Esquire* magazine, protesting its use in a recent profile. This mischaracterisation, wrote Moynihan with characteristic modesty, would mean that a 'good many persons of open mind and friendly mien will simply learn that the smartest people these days are something called neo-conservatives, and adapt their own disposition accordingly. Is it a service to liberalism to encourage this?' The so-called 'neo-conservatives' were, he continued, 'liberals much as John F. Kennedy was a liberal. A bit more so.'⁷⁰⁰

Increasingly, Moynihan's policy positions reflected his status as a Democratic senator from a Northeastern state. He was, for instance, a co-sponsor of the

⁶⁹⁹ *The Nation*, September 22, 1979.

⁷⁰⁰ Letter, DPM to Peter Steinfelds, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 1.

Humphrey-Hawkins Act in 1978.⁷⁰¹ He likewise remained determined to protect the welfare services that New York depended upon, and his attitude toward the USSR began to soften. This drift away from neoconservative iconoclasm was reflected in the changing composition of his Senate office staff. For much of his first term, the staff had been dominated by promising and capable young neoconservatives. These included Chester ‘Checker’ Finn, then making a rightward journey away from ‘youthful but earnest Kennedy-Johnson liberal,’ Elliot Abrams, formerly of Scoop Jackson’s office and latterly Moynihan’s chief of staff, and CDM co-founder Penn Kemble, who was Moynihan’s speechwriter.⁷⁰² As his Senate tenure lengthened, however, he came to rely more on Timothy Russert and his own wife, Liz, both ‘birthright Democrats.’⁷⁰³ Russert, a Buffalo-born former altar boy with a J.D. from Cleveland State University, had served in Moynihan’s Senate office since it was first established. Over time he came to greater prominence while the neoconservatives faded, rising from special counsel to chief of staff.

Eventually, Moynihan backed away from running against Carter, if he had ever seriously considered it. Privately, he was among those urging Edward Kennedy to challenge the president, though in public he would remain studiously neutral.⁷⁰⁴ Norman Podhoretz wrote later that it was Moynihan’s decision not to launch a campaign that freed him to vote for Reagan.⁷⁰⁵ He was by no means alone. Both Checker Finn and Elliot Abrams would find places in Reagan’s administration, Finn as

⁷⁰¹ AFH Newsletter “Humphrey-Hawkins Bill Passes House,” n.d., AFH papers, UCLA, Box 84.

⁷⁰² Chester Finn, *Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform Since Sputnik* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2008), 87, 90.

⁷⁰³ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 296.

⁷⁰⁴ Shapiro, *Last Great Senate*, 248, 308; Irvin Molotsky, “Moynihan Prefers the Role of a Neutral,” *NYT*, March 17, 1980.

⁷⁰⁵ Norman Podhoretz, *Ex-Friends: Falling Out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel & Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer* (New York, 1999), 101.

Assistant Secretary of Education and Abrams as an Assistant Secretary of State. Moynihan always denied that there had been any significant leftward shift in his politics after the mid-1970s. If so, this is largely because his rightward lurch had never been as pronounced as his critics had suggested.

For all Moynihan's apparent antagonistic relationship with the federal authorities, he remained essentially convinced that the remedies to New York's woes lay with the federal government. Moynihan was, at root, what he had always been: a Democrat of the old school, doggedly committed to the principle that government, utilised wisely, was a tool of amelioration and advancement. As Carter was ushered into the wings and Reagan's anti-government revolution took the stage, Moynihan would find himself at the forefront of the efforts to defend the legacy of the New Deal welfare state. He would be embraced by those who had once denounced him, and would discover that, even if Democrats had limited success in maintaining an electoral majority, liberal goals could still command widespread support.

Saving The New Deal State: Social Security Reform

Nineteen-eighty was a hideous year for Senate Democrats, as it was for the party as a whole. Not only did the party lose control of the chamber for the first time since 1954, but several high profile liberals were ejected. George McGovern, Frank Church, Birch Bayh, John Culver, and Gaylord Nelson were among those who fell to well-coordinated campaigns by surging New Right activist groups. In New York, conservative Republican Al D'Amato bested Moynihan's colleague and frequent legislative partner Jacob Javits in the Senate primary. A post-mortem feature for NBC

News identified Moynihan – along with Paul Tsongas and Gary Hart – as a national spokesman for the party. ‘We’re likely to be out of power here for the rest of this decade, and we’re going to deserve it, unless we pay attention to what the Republicans did,’ the now senior senator from New York told correspondent Jessica Savitch. However, Moynihan remained upbeat. ‘We’re not short of leaders. We’re short of followers, for the moment. But we’re still the majority party, and we don’t have an agenda for the 1980s. So, we’ll produce one.’⁷⁰⁶

Moynihan was under no illusions about the difficulty of the task ahead. ‘[I]t occurred to me,’ Moynihan wrote to columnist Tom Wicker in early 1980, ‘that the Republicans, dammit, have become a party of ideas without the rest of us in the least noticing.’⁷⁰⁷ Wicker would expand on this, citing Moynihan’s admission, in an op-ed published days after Reagan’s inauguration a year later. ‘[The Democrats’] basic approach – big and costly Government programs of benevolent intent but mixed results – has fallen in to disrepute with inflation-conscious voters.’ Some Democrats, Wicker continued, believed the party needed ‘a new kind of instrument ... to help develop and publicize what has been most lacking – new ideas about governing and new means of pursuing the traditional Democratic goals of social and economic justice, and economic opportunity for all, without bankrupting or alienating the middle class. Such a revitalisation is overdue for a party that has let itself become the proponent of political orthodoxy and elephantine bureaucracy.’⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁶ Headline: “Democratic Party,” *NBC News*, November 15, 1980, Vanderbilt Television News Archive (VTNA), Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

⁷⁰⁷ Letter, DPM to Tom Wicker, May 19, 1980, Moynihan papers, Part II, Box 2.

⁷⁰⁸ Tom Wicker, “Democrats In Search of Ideas,” *NYT*, January 25, 1981.

Certainly, Republicans were behaving as though they had won an intellectual battle for the future of the nation. In the days after his election, Reagan acted ‘as though he did indeed carry the mandate of heaven.’⁷⁰⁹ As Gareth Davies has written, ‘Whether or not there was a Reagan Revolution, there was at least a revolutionary movement during the first six months or so, when defenders of the welfare state were on the run, overwhelmed by the president’s popularity and by the widespread sense that excessive government spending lay at the heart of the nation’s inflationary crisis.’⁷¹⁰ Many Democrats agreed that Americans had embraced Reaganism, or at had at least endorsed the president’s contention in his inaugural address that ‘[i]n this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.’⁷¹¹

In March 1981, with Reagan in full pomp and the Democrats in disarray, Moynihan spoke at the first Gridiron Club dinner of the new administration. A light-hearted, white-tie affair held at the Capital Hilton in Washington, D.C., the dinner traditionally featured a bipartisan pair of speakers delivering a humorous talk each, alongside songs and sketches. It was, wrote one journalist, ‘a cozy evening of high-powered, off-the-record high jinks’ for Washington’s political establishment.⁷¹² That year, Moynihan was the Democratic speaker, with newly-appointed OMB director David Stockman representing the GOP. Moynihan began by joking that Reagan was a mole planted to destroy the Republican Party from within: ‘Mr. President, you’ve been perfect, and by the time *you’re through*, we Democrats will be all set for yet another

⁷⁰⁹ Hodgson, *World Turned Right Side Up*, 3.

⁷¹⁰ Gareth Davies, “The Welfare State,” in W. Elliot Brownlee, Hugh Davis Graham (eds.), *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies* (Lawrence, KS, 2003), 211.

⁷¹¹ U.S. Office of the Federal Register, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981, January 20 to December 31, 1981* (Washington, D.C., 1982), 1.

⁷¹² Mary Battiata, “Gridiron Dinner: Labor of Lampoonery,” *WP*, March 30, 1981.

half century.’ His speech ended on a more serious note, with a full-throated defence of the ‘great idea’ at the heart of the Democratic tradition, ‘that an elected government can be the instrument of the common purpose of a free people; that government can embrace great causes; and do great things.’ Moynihan cast himself and his fellow Democrats as guardians of a faith whose day would come again. ‘We *believe* in American government and we fully expect that those who now denigrate it, and even despise it, will sooner or later find themselves turning to it in necessity, even desperation. When they do, they will find the Democratic party on hand to help.’⁷¹³

Few ordinary Americans may have taken note of the remarks of one middle-aged senator at a back-slapping Washington gala. Nevertheless, it was rare to find a high-profile liberal in those months making such a forthright defence of government. Unsurprisingly, Moynihan thought highly of the speech. ‘Somewhere in those last few paragraphs,’ he wrote to Theodore White, ‘the audience seemed to sense that the Democrats still had something to say.’⁷¹⁴ With this speech, Moynihan arguably made the decisive break with his neoconservative brethren. In the same month, Norman Podhoretz declared in a public lecture that following years of resisting the label ‘neoconservative’ he was ‘willing now, however reluctantly, to accept the designation.’⁷¹⁵ Reagan’s confrontational anti-government populism now defined Washington politics, and Moynihan was coming down on the opposing side to many old allies. Within a matter of months, however, Republicans would discover the limits of that anti-government credo and Democrats would find an issue that gave their faltering coalition new impetus.

⁷¹³ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Came the Revolution: Argument in the Reagan Era* (San Diego, New York, and London, 1988), 5-7.

⁷¹⁴ Letter, DPM to Theodore White, April 29, 1980, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 3.

⁷¹⁵ NP, Lecture, “Liberalism and Neoconservatism,” March 11, 1981, NP papers, LOC, Box 2.

It was fitting that Moynihan's fellow speaker at that Gridiron dinner was David Stockman, perhaps the most impassioned revolutionary in Reagan's vanguard. Born into a conservative Republican farm family in central Texas, Stockman had drifted into the New Left while at Michigan State University, becoming 'a full-fledged (if half-baked) neo-Marxist.'⁷¹⁶ In 1968, he embarked on both graduate studies at Harvard Divinity School and his long trek from New Left radical to supply-side crusader. An ambitious student, Stockman developed a fascination with Moynihan, who was then dividing his time between Cambridge and the Nixon White House. Hoping to advance his political ambitions by proximity to a 'Washington-connected rabbi,' Stockman obtained a place as the Moynihans' live-in babysitter. His association with Moynihan led to a position on the staff of liberal Republican John Anderson. From there, Stockman moved deeper into Republican politics. In 1976, he was elected as the Republican congressman from Michigan's 4th district and would remain there until poached by the Reagan campaign.

Stockman's legislative experiences transformed his politics. By the end of the 1970s, Stockman had concluded that '[t]he politicians were wrecking American capitalism. They were turning democratic government into a lavish giveaway auction. They were saddling workers and entrepreneurs with punitive taxation and demoralizing and wasteful regulation.'⁷¹⁷ In 1980, he was enlisted by Reagan campaign officials to act as a debate rehearsal stand-in for third-party candidate John Anderson, his former boss. Impressed by his talent and ideological commitment,

⁷¹⁶ John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2005), 52-3; David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics: How The Reagan Revolution Failed* (New York, 1986), 21.

⁷¹⁷ Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, 2.

Reagan offered him a cabinet-level post after the election. Thus, at age 34, Stockman found himself director of the Office of Management and Budget, the youngest person ever to hold that post. Youthful, wholesome, and self-confident, Stockman made an immediate impression with the political media. Newspaper profiles soon began to appear and Stockman was the first administration official featured on the cover of *Newsweek*.⁷¹⁸

Few could match Stockman for tax-cutting or state-slashing zeal. During the transition, he recommended that Reagan declare an economic state of emergency and push through a package of measures akin to the reforms of FDR's Hundred Days. He warned the president that the nation faced an 'economic Dunkirk' without swift and decisive action. Part of the sweeping package of cuts he recommended included \$260 billion to be taken from Social Security.⁷¹⁹ On February 18, 1981, Reagan used a nationally-televised address to unveil his economic programme, a mixture of tax and spending cuts aimed at turning the \$55 billion budget deficit into a surplus by 1984.⁷²⁰ The first component of that programme, tax reduction, proved comparatively straightforward to achieve. The unsurprisingly popular Economic Recovery Tax Act, a universal reduction in marginal income tax rates, was signed into law in August 1981. The pernicious 'bracket creep' created by inflation had been squeezing the American taxpayer for much of the 1970s and some form of relief was long overdue. The Finance Committee oversaw the bill and Moynihan joined with a clutch of Senate Democrats in voting for it.

⁷¹⁸ Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 53; Hedrick Smith, "Stockman Is Ruffling Feathers in Seeking Budget Cuts," *NYT*, February 4, 1981; Walter Shapiro, "The Stockman Express," *WP*, February 8, 1981.

⁷¹⁹ Eric Laursen, *The People's Pension: The Struggle to Defend Social Security Since Reagan* (Oakland, CA, and Edinburgh, 2012), 36; Gar Alperovitz, Jeff Faux, "An Alternative Policy To Prevent 'Dunkirk'," *NYT*, January 7, 1981.

⁷²⁰ Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 54-5.

The tax cut's brother, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, had a markedly stormier passage through Congress. Reagan sought \$47 billion in spending cuts for FY 1982 and would receive \$35 billion, with only the defence budget explicitly protected. In May, the administration sent proposals to Congress to sharply reduce Social Security benefits for those who retired before age 65. From the leadership down, the congressional Democrats were energised by the proposals. Robert Byrd denounced them as 'precipitous, harsh and very unfair,' while to Tip O'Neill they were 'a rotten thing to do.' Moynihan's position as ranking Democratic member on the Finance Committee's Social Security subcommittee made this his opportunity. He claimed later that Social Security represented the Democratic Party's 'best issue with the new president ... This was my responsibility and our moment.' At a press conference in Rochester, Moynihan condemned the proposed reforms as 'a breach of contract, startling in magnitude as well as content.' With his chivvying, the Republican-dominated Senate voted to reject the proposals in their entirety, 96-0.⁷²¹

While Democrats opposed Reagan's proposed cuts to Social Security benefits, they belonged to a consensus that recognised that some reform was vital. The stagflationary economy of the 1970s had exacerbated a terrible convergence of crises for Social Security. Obstinate high unemployment meant that able would-be workers were not contributing, while the pool of scheduled retirees continued to expand, placing more pressure on the programme. Congress had worsened the situation by enacting popular, but fiscally unsustainable, increases to the programme's benefits.

⁷²¹ The House rejected the proposals by the equally overwhelming margin of 405-13. Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 298; Martin Tolchin, "Byrd Assails Cuts in Social Security as 'Harsh' and Breach of Promise," *NYT*, May 16, 1981; Alison Muscatine, Mary Thornton, "House Democrats Attack Reagan Social Security Plan," *The Washington Star*, May 14, 1981, offprint in the TPO papers, JJBL, Box 25; Daniel P. Moynihan, "Beyond 96-0," *NYT*, May 22, 1981.

After automatic cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) were instituted in 1975, for instance, runaway inflation caused benefit payments to grow precipitously. The programme began to record its first deficits since being created.⁷²² A 1980 report by the trustees warned that, without congressional intervention, the Social Security trust fund would be insolvent by early 1982 at the latest.⁷²³

Since its enactment, Social Security had all but been woven into the national fabric. Even as other components of the New Deal settlement came in for increased criticism, Social Security remained ‘the Democrats’ ace in the hole at election time.’⁷²⁴ In some conservative quarters, scepticism about the programme had grown since 1970. However, such opposition remained outside mainstream political discourse and those politicians who aspired to a national stage embraced the programme. During the 1980 campaign, Reagan had promised to ‘support and defend’ Social Security. The system would be ‘strong and reliable and protected under a Reagan Administration.’⁷²⁵ Nonetheless, as early as 1964, Reagan had expressed his opposition to ‘forcing all citizens, regardless of need, into a compulsory government program’ and suggested introducing ‘voluntary features’ for those that sought to opt out.⁷²⁶ It was therefore hardly surprising that in the early years of the Reagan administration that Social Security emerged as ‘a leading fault line of partisan politics’ in a way it had not been since its creation.⁷²⁷

⁷²² Martha Derthick, *Policymaking for Social Security* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 381-411; Laursen, *The People’s Pension*, 34.

⁷²³ Martha Derthick, Steven M. Teles, “Riding the Third Rail: Social Security Reform,” in Brownlee, Davis (eds.), *The Reagan Presidency*, 183.

⁷²⁴ Laursen, *The People’s Pension*, 5.

⁷²⁵ Douglas E. Kneeland, “Reagan Vows To Support Social Security Program,” *NYT*, September 8, 1980.

⁷²⁶ Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (London, 1990), 31.

⁷²⁷ Derthick, Teles, “Riding the Third Rail,” 182.

In advancing a controversial reform so early, the Reagan White House had hoped to make the most of its political capital. However, it had overreached badly and the stumble played into Democratic hands. The hasty and far-reaching nature of the reforms, and the lack of initial congressional consultation, doomed the proposals. Even many Republicans resented the fact that the administration had dropped the putative benefit reductions upon them without prior warning. Stockman, who had been principally responsible for devising the reforms, claimed later that he had ‘screwed up.’⁷²⁸ Democrats were gifted a popular issue that they exploited ruthlessly. Liberals, Moynihan among them, contended that the programme’s funding crisis was a temporary aberration brought about by the exigencies of the moment. They pointed to predictions that Social Security was expected to go into surplus from around 1990 to prove that radical reform was unnecessary.⁷²⁹

Opposition came from without Congress as well as within. Like all distributional government programmes, Social Security had developed its own special interest faction, dubbed the ‘gray lobby.’ It comprised several dozen organisations, among them National Council on the Aging, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and the National Black Caucus on Aging. Moreover, older citizens had higher political participation rates than other demographic segments. They voted and petitioned their representatives. Older voters were also concentrated in Sunbelt states, giving them considerable leverage over significant portions of the GOP.

⁷²⁸ William Greider, “The Education of David Stockman,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1, 1981; Jack Germond, Jules Witcover, “Social Security Plans Caught GOP Off Guard,” *Washington Star*, May 18, 1981, offprint in the TPO papers, JJBL, Box 25.

⁷²⁹ Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State*, 74.

The latter years of the Carter administration had seen the formation of Save Our Security (SOS), in response to a similar push for reform. Led by Wilbur Cohen, a civil servant nicknamed ‘Mr. Social Security’ who had been involved in the programme since its creation, the coalition drew on the support of some 115 groups. Alongside those mentioned above, backers included AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland, UAW president Douglas Fraser, social welfare expert Elizabeth Wickenden, retired congressman Wilbur Mills, the National Conference of Catholic Charities, and Disabled American Veterans. In early 1981, members of the dormant coalition began flexing their muscles again.⁷³⁰ When the proposed cuts were revealed, SOS convened an emergency meeting to plan a major lobbying campaign. Cohen denounced the proposals as ‘a calamity, a tragedy and a catastrophe.’⁷³¹

From his perch on the Social Security subcommittee, Moynihan was particularly zealous in pushing back against the White House. In early July, when hearings began, Moynihan went on the attack again. He condemned the administration’s tactics as ‘political terrorism,’ arguing that the true purpose was to balance the budget by 1984, not to safeguard the programme.⁷³² Despite initial setbacks, Reagan did not abandon the issue. The president planned to defend his plans in a nationally televised speech scheduled for July 27, 1981, and Moynihan was chosen to deliver the official response. It was a potent symbol of his having been welcomed back into the Democratic fold. Ultimately, Reagan yielded to appeals from

⁷³⁰ Edward D. Berkowitz, *Mr. Social Security: The Life of Wilbur J. Cohen* (Lawrence, KS, 1995), 297-307; Causey, “Gray Power Lobby Set to Fight Cut in COLA,” *WP*, June 17, 1981.

⁷³¹ Warren J. Weaver, Jr., “Coalition Plans Drive Against Move to Trim Social Security Benefits,” *NYT*, May 14, 1981.

⁷³² Spencer Rich, “Plight of Social Security is Being Exaggerated, Democrats Charge,” *WP*, July 8, 1981.

Republican congressional leaders, and skirted the issue in the speech, in favour of the tax cut package then making its way through Congress.⁷³³

Under a fierce onslaught from Democrats, Republicans, and an assortment of extra congressional advocacy groups, the White House sought a way out of the melee. In an effort to calm the situation, on December 16, Reagan created a presidential commission.⁷³⁴ The National Commission on Social Security Reform was chaired by economist Alan Greenspan – who had been chairman of Gerald Ford’s Council of Economic Advisors – and its membership was chosen by the president and the congressional leadership of both parties. Moynihan was one of the commissioners, serving alongside Senator Robert Dole, Long’s successor as chairman of the Finance Committee, Congressman Claude Pepper, chair of the House Select Committee on Aging and a leading spokesman for the elderly, and Robert Ball, the former Commissioner of Social Security who had been helping to husband the programme since the 1930s.⁷³⁵ Due to report in December 1982, if nothing else the commission offered the president and Republicans a face-saving way to avoid answering questions on the administration’s plans for Social Security until after the midterms.

Though the Democrats could be justly proud of a successful counteroffensive, the problem of Social Security’s solvency remained pressing. The potential bankruptcy of the programme took on greater urgency as the scale of the federal budget deficit became apparent. Despite the rosy projections of Stockman’s OMB, the 1981 tax cut did not yield a booming economy and endless budget surpluses. In fact, 1982-3 saw the worst recession since the 1930s (in large part because of the inflation-

⁷³³ David S. Broder, “Reagan Backs Off Televised Speech on Social Security,” *WP*, July 26, 1981.

⁷³⁴ Letter, Reagan to O’Neill, September 24, 1981, TPO papers, JJBL, Box 26.

⁷³⁵ Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State*, 74.

busting tight money policies of Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker) and ballooning deficits.⁷³⁶ Moynihan's principal concern was the impact that the deficits would have on the options available to policymakers. '[T]he politics of the next decade,' Moynihan wrote in a 1981 newsletter, 'risk becoming an endless, joyless, pointless squabble about how big the budget cuts must be in order that the budget not be even bigger.'⁷³⁷

He blasted the Reagan administration for failing to grapple with the deficit, accusing the president of neglecting the duties of his office: 'He wanted the job, and he ought to do the hard part as well as the fun part.'⁷³⁸ He became increasingly convinced that this fiscal incontinence had been a calculated strategy on the part of the supply-siders, and in particular his old protégé, Stockman. These deficits had been 'purposeful' and the result of 'a hidden agenda' to create a fiscal crisis that would force the retrenchment of social spending.⁷³⁹ This suspicion was confirmed by an infamous profile of Stockman published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in December 1981, in which, among other incendiary quotations, he had described the ERTA as 'a Trojan horse.'⁷⁴⁰

Amidst these battles, newspapers began to describe Moynihan as a 'liberal' again, or sometimes as a 'neo-liberal,' much to his delight. He forwarded one clipping from the *New York Times* to its publisher and his friend, Arthur Sulzberger, exulting, 'A Neo-Conservative no more! Never underestimate the power of the Reagan

⁷³⁶ For an account of Volcker's Fed policies, see Iwan Morgan, "Monetary Metamorphosis: The Volcker Fed and Inflation," *The Journal of Policy History*, 24:4 (2012), 545-571.

⁷³⁷ Moynihan, Weisman (ed.), *Moynihan: Portrait in Letters*, 438.

⁷³⁸ Richard L. Strout, "Senator Moynihan, A Liberal-Conservative Hybrid," *CSM*, March 26, 1982

⁷³⁹ DPM, "Reagan's Bankrupt Budget," *TNR*, December 31, 1983.

⁷⁴⁰ Geider, "Education of David Stockman."

administration!’⁷⁴¹ In October 1981, the senator from New York featured on the cover of *The New Republic*, smiling benignly under the headline “Pat Moynihan, Neo-Liberal.” It was a stark contrast to *The Nation*’s philippic of two years earlier.⁷⁴²

Some who had once counted Moynihan as an ally were disappointed. *National Review*, which had named Moynihan ‘Man of the Year’ in 1975, declared him ‘a national disaster’ in 1983. ‘Since his election to the Senate,’ huffed its editorial, ‘Mr. Moynihan would be a suitable subject for a series of engravings by William Hogarth: “The Decline of a Politician”.’⁷⁴³ Checker Finn concluded that Moynihan had ‘gradually moved leftward’ on several issues in preparation for his 1982 re-election bid, reinforced by the ‘shrewd counsel’ of Tim Russert. Moreover, the recalibration ‘suited his countercyclical tendencies, given that Reaganism had replaced Carterism as Washington’s conventional wisdom.’⁷⁴⁴ Stockman inclined to a similar interpretation, telling presidential aide Dick Darman, ‘Moynihan’s got a problem. He went off and got himself elected Senator from New York. He just can’t get away with holding a sound view of economic policy. New York is the welfare state.’⁷⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, Moynihan had undergone a shift of sorts. However it would be too crude to dismiss this as solely the product of calculation or contrarianism. Arguably, Moynihan’s shift was one of emphasis rather than essence. He had always protested to doubters, with varying degrees of success, that he was a liberal Democrat, and the polarised context of the early 1980s had sharpened his political identity.

⁷⁴¹ Letter, DPM to Arthur O. Sulzberger, July 28, 1981, Enclosed clipping: “Democratic Unity Faces Test on Tax,” *NYT*, July 28, 1981, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 3. Moynihan had ringed the paragraph in the enclosed article that identified him as one of the ‘liberals from the Northeast.’

⁷⁴² Fred Barnes, “Pat Moynihan, Neoliberal,” *TNR*, October 21, 1981.

⁷⁴³ “Et Tu, Moynihan,” *National Review*, August 5, 1983.

⁷⁴⁴ Finn, *Troublemaker*, 92.

⁷⁴⁵ Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, 244.

Moynihan's growing reputation as one of Reagan's most effective liberal critics led to his being targeted for defeat by the same conservative advocacy groups that had enjoyed such success toppling liberal senators in 1980. The National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) launched a campaign of radio advertisements denouncing Moynihan as 'the most liberal United States Senator.' A local branch of NCPAC, New York State Taxpayers Fed Up With Daniel Moynihan, sprang into life. NCPAC had targeted Democratic senators in 1980 – including McGovern, Church, and Bayh – and Moynihan joined its list of senators to be unseated in 1982.⁷⁴⁶ For his part, Moynihan hoped to use his re-election campaign to demonstrate that the New Right could be stopped electorally, just as it had been obstructed in the Congress. He held groups such as NCPAC in particular contempt. 'They're the bane of a good strong party-system,' he had told NBC, when interviewed soon after the 1980 election. 'You just have to fight them off, that's all ... You beat 'em.' But, prompted the interviewer, they've been winning. 'Wait'll they get to New York,' replied the senator with a wink.⁷⁴⁷

His Republican opponent was Florence M. Sullivan, a State Assemblywoman from the Bay Ridge area of Brooklyn with little state-wide profile. Sullivan was a Roman Catholic widow with a law degree from St. John's University, which she had earned as a mature student. She had come to politics late, winning her assembly seat in 1978 after friends commended her to a local Republican leader.⁷⁴⁸ Sullivan had run an underdog campaign in the primary, with a budget of around \$42,000, significantly less than both of her better-financed opponents. Nonetheless, she carved out a clear niche for herself as the most conservative candidate. She positioned herself alongside

⁷⁴⁶ Maurice Carroll, "Conservatives Open an Anti-Moynihan Drive," *NYT*, November 22, 1981.

⁷⁴⁷ Headline, "Democratic Party," NBC News, November 15, 1980, VTNA.

⁷⁴⁸ Frank Lynn, "In New York, An Invisible G.O.P. Race," *NYT*, July 20, 1982.

Reagan – a bold move considering the president’s sinking popularity – and described her own candidacy as the ‘final conflict between what’s left of the old Rockefeller-Javits segment of the G.O.P. and the new team of Reaganites.’ Sullivan won the endorsements of the Conservative and Right to Life Parties months before the primary and so was able to style herself as not only the most conservative, but the ‘unity’ candidate. The strategy paid handsome dividends, and on primary day, Sullivan took 42 percent of the vote to the 29 percent apiece taken by her opponents.⁷⁴⁹

With the Greenspan commission scheduled to report on December 31, the spectre of Social Security reform loomed over the election. At a *Times*-organised candidate debate, Sullivan hailed Reagan’s ‘courageous’ reform efforts and condemned Moynihan for ‘trying to scare the life out of senior citizens.’ ‘[T]here should be actuarial policies followed that have not been followed,’ she added, ‘that have succeeded in insurance business.’ Leaning forward and frowning over the top of his reading glasses, Moynihan replied, ‘What are you talking about? ... This is not the Prudential Life Insurance Company. This is the United States Government.’⁷⁵⁰ A few weeks later, the Moynihan campaign obtained several ‘ballot cards’ circulated with Republican fundraising letters that invited contributors to indicate what reforms to Social Security that they would favour; one of the possible reforms was to transform it into a ‘voluntary’ programme. Moynihan denounced the suggestion as ‘an outrage’ and, despite the protestations from the RCCC that the letter did not represent settled policy, asserted that it reflected the views of ‘a surprising number of people in the party.’⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁹ Maurice Carroll, “Mrs. Sullivan and Moynihan Trade Charges,” *NYT*, October 12, 1982; Josh Barbanell, “Mrs. Sullivan Attacking Moynihan as Too Liberal,” *NYT*, September 25, 1982.

⁷⁵⁰ Carroll, “Mrs. Sullivan and Moynihan Trade Charges.”

⁷⁵¹ Maurice Carroll, “Moynihan Assails G.O.P Fund Ballot,” *NYT*, October 30, 1982.

When election day came, with the Reagan administration fighting to shed the blame for supposedly causing the worst downturn since the Depression, NCPAC found itself unable to replicate the successes of 1980. Not one of the senators it had targeted was defeated in 1982. Of the Democratic incumbents targeted, only one failed to win by more than 60 percent of the vote in the general election. Moynihan defeated Sullivan by a thumping one-million vote margin, the biggest majority ever recorded in a New York Senate race. ‘I’m one of the five millionaires of the Senate,’ he exulted in his victory speech.⁷⁵² Returned to the Senate, Moynihan was facing the prospect of a final showdown over Social Security.

For most of 1982, the Greenspan commission had deadlocked, ‘too riven by partisan and ideological differences to produce a plan.’⁷⁵³ To Moynihan’s dismay, in the vacuum created by inaction, even some Democrats began to embrace radical reforms to the programme. At a ‘working’ Washington breakfast with a group of political journalists in August 1982, aspirant presidential candidate John Glenn idly floated the idea that consideration be given to a voluntary ‘quasi-private’ alternative to Social Security for younger Americans.⁷⁵⁴ ‘When a candidate seeking the Democratic nomination for President,’ Moynihan wrote despondently to Lane Kirkland, ‘proposes that Social Security be made voluntary (Ronald Reagan circa 1960), you can be sure we’re losing the argument.’⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵² CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, Vol. II, 1439, 1448-49, 1452, 1457, 1469; Maurice Carroll “Moynihan Wins Overwhelming Victory,” *NYT*, November 3, 1982.

⁷⁵³ Derthick, Teles, ‘Riding the Third Rail,’ 198.

⁷⁵⁴ Judith Miller, “Breakfast Stir: Glenn on Social Security,” *NYT*, August 13, 1982.

⁷⁵⁵ Letter, DPM to Lane Kirkland, August 13, 1982, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 5.

By the end of the year, it seemed plausible that the Greenspan commission would simply fizzle out. ‘I’m afraid our bipartisan commission has failed us,’ Reagan noted gloomily in his diary.⁷⁵⁶ Badly burned by the poor Republican showing in the midterms, and fearing a debacle if the commission failed to produce something workable, the White House began liaising with Moynihan and Robert Ball. Now anointed as the administration’s Democratic conduit to the Congress, Moynihan enlisted Finance Committee chairman Robert Dole on the Senate floor. With Republican congressman Barber Conable of New York, these four formed a micro-commission that began meeting secretly with White House representatives, among them Stockman. Moving swiftly, the micro-commission accepted the liberal Democratic interpretation of the crisis, and concentrated on formulating a stopgap measure that would keep Social Security solvent until 1990, ‘when relief would come from demography.’ The commission deadline was extended to January 20 and a hastily-designed reform package was presented to Congress. Among other provisions, the commission recommended delaying several COLAs and moving up certain tax increases, with an additional amount being made up by unprecedented new taxes on the benefits of high-income earners.⁷⁵⁷

In April 1983, the Greenspan commission’s reform proposals were finally passed by Congress, which also shocked many observers by passing later amendments to raise the retirement age to 67 to tackle the programme’s longer term deficit. The general response to the commission’s recommendations was positive. The *Washington Post* editorialised that the reforms were ‘as close to absolute fairness as any Social

⁷⁵⁶ Ronald Reagan and Douglas Brinkley (ed.), *The Reagan Diaries* (New York, 2007), 119.

⁷⁵⁷ Edward Cowan, “Dole Holds Meeting to Seek A Social Security Concession,” *NYT*, January 5, 1983.

Security revision can ever be.’⁷⁵⁸ Moynihan claimed to see a different, deeper moral. The real lesson of the compromise, he argued, went beyond a patch-up of a threatened welfare programme. It was a rebuke to the idea ‘that there are fundamental issues that our system cannot resolve ... There is a center in American politics. It can govern.’⁷⁵⁹

Moynihan had been deeply troubled by what he perceived as the sclerosis afflicting the workings of American government. This was partly due to the limiting of policy options brought about by recession and budget deficits, but also due to the unintended consequences of attempts to expand the capacities of the legislative and executive branches. ‘The Congress is in awful shape,’ Moynihan had written to James Reston in late 1982. ‘Each new increment of staff raises the level of entropy, as they say in thermodynamics. The White House is worse. The President spends his time managing his staff, which spends its time trying to manage him, and you have the institutional equivalent of the dog chasing its tail.’⁷⁶⁰ This reform demonstrated that, albeit imperfectly, the system could be made to work. Reform had been enacted and a welfare service that millions of Americans relied upon had been secured for decades. The faith which Moynihan had articulated in his Gridiron speech had been vindicated.

‘Ratified and Affirmed’

Surveying the aftermath of the Social Security confrontation, David Stockman placed much of the blame with the president. ‘The Reagan Revolution,’ as he understood it, ‘required a frontal assault on the American welfare state ... forty years’ worth of promises, subventions, entitlements, and safety nets issued by the federal government

⁷⁵⁸ “A Reasonable Compromise,” *WP*, January 17, 1983.

⁷⁵⁹ DPM, “More Than Social Security Was At Stake,” *WP*, January 18, 1983.

⁷⁶⁰ Letter, DPM to James Reston, December 16, 1982, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 5.

to every component and stratum of American society would have to be scrapped or drastically modified.’ It needed ‘an iron chancellor’ and Reagan ‘wasn’t that by a long shot.’⁷⁶¹ Stockman’s critique has some merit, but it drastically overstates the sort of power any president can wield. Without a cooperative Congress, even the most determined and politically astute president would struggle to pass a controversial reform. Moreover, the nature of Reagan’s victory in 1980, and the myth-making that followed it, has obscured the extent to which many components of his political agenda lacked a popular mandate. Many Americans resented what they saw as a profligate, deadbeat-coddling government in the abstract, but when the question became which benefits should be cut or which services withdrawn, anti-statism tended to wither. Moynihan understood this political reality. ‘The problem, of course, lay in [Reagan’s] simple misunderstanding of what is in the budget,’ he reflected in 1984. ‘There is no line item for \$270 billion worth of waste, fraud, and abuse. It is filled with programs which, whatever their merits, have their reasons and their constituencies.’⁷⁶²

Stockman was in no doubt as to the significance of the outcome. ‘The centrepiece of the American welfare state had now been overwhelmingly ratified and affirmed in the white heat of political confrontation,’ he wrote in his memoirs.⁷⁶³ With the Reagan administration at its strongest, the failure to enact such a publicly significant cut to the welfare state was striking. For all the administration’s protests, a concerted effort spearheaded by liberal Democrats had prevented a more serious restructuring of the programme. Social Security became a stick that Democrats could beat Republicans with for decades to come. Tip O’Neill took to referring to Social

⁷⁶¹ Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, 7, 11.

⁷⁶² Letter, DPM to Jim Wright, January 27, 1984, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 7.

⁷⁶³ Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, 193.

Security as the ‘third rail’ of American politics. You touch it, you die.⁷⁶⁴ Even under the administration of George W. Bush, when one might have assumed a more deeply solidified conservative hegemony, a Republican attempt to reform the programme would founder on a similar alliance led by Democrats and dependent pressure groups.⁷⁶⁵ In this, the durability of the New Deal settlement was manifest, even after the chaos and crises of the 1970s.

If the Reagan administration had a polarising effect on the politics of the nation, it sundered the neoconservative faction. When the CDM convened a forum in mid-1981 in Washington’s Hyatt Regency Hotel one reporter noted that the group seemed afflicted ‘with at least a touch of *schizophrenia politica*’ as members struggled to reconcile the desire to stay ‘true to their Democratic Party traditions’ with the inclination ‘to try to mold their Democratic Coalition around Ronald Reagan’s White House.’⁷⁶⁶ Nonetheless, it would be wrong to surrender to the narrative advanced by those Republican converts that portrays a post-1960s Democratic Party in which the ascent of middle-class New Politics liberals, whose rejection of class-based pocketbook issues for the politics of identity, drive neoconservative Democrats, already disillusioned and set on a rightward trajectory, along with a once-reliable blue collar constituency, into Reagan’s big tent. Such interpretations do not account for the experiences of Democrats like Moynihan who would have felt ill at ease in the GOP, despite ongoing disagreements with members of their own tribe. In their own minds, they were less neoconservatives than paleoliberals.

⁷⁶⁴ Derthick, Teles, “Riding the Third Rail,” 184, 203-204.

⁷⁶⁵ See Nelson Lichtenstein, “Ideology and Interest on the Social Policy Home Front,” in Zelizer (ed.), *Presidency of George W. Bush*, 169-198.

⁷⁶⁶ Martin Schram, “Schizophrenia Politica,” *WP*, June 29, 1981.

Moynihan's role in the passage of the Social Security amendments revealed just how far he had moved away from many 'neoconservatives' (or perhaps how far they had moved away from him). As Godfrey Hodgson has written, by 1983 Moynihan was 'speaking unambiguously as a Democrat, and indeed as a New Deal Democrat, willing to make adjustments and corrections to the public finances, but only within the limits of a commitment to the role of government in advancing the people's interests.'⁷⁶⁷ In part, the exigencies of the moment were enhancing Moynihan's own liberalism. Yet his determination to defeat any more radical reform to Social Security was also a product of his position as a Democratic senator from a Northeastern state. Iconoclasm is far easier when one does not have to explain one's decisions to aggrieved constituents and grudge-holding interest groups. In much the same way, Gary Hart could run a campaign on ending New Deal government activism and become a tenacious defender of his state's water projects while in office. The logic of legislative politics has a tendency to produce a defence of the *status quo*.

The clash over Social Security reform exemplifies the limits of the Reagan Revolution. Reagan's pursuit of Social Security cuts was one of the most catastrophic political missteps of his administration. The same inertial forces and institutional shortcomings that frustrated the efforts of congressional Democrats to create a public philosophy for the post-New Deal order, also enabled the Democrats to fight a rearguard action in defence of the legacy of the New Deal and Great Society. Democrats would experience surprising success when beating back a Reaganite onslaught on existing government programmes, in particular middle-class entitlements. However, as the next chapter will show, even as congressional

⁷⁶⁷ Hodgson, *Gentleman from New York*, 299.

Democrats, under the leadership of House Speaker Thomas P. ‘Tip’ O’Neill, obstructed the anti-statist ambitions of the Reagan revolutionaries, they proved unable to define a public philosophy that could incorporate or counteract widespread *ideological* dissatisfaction with the federal government. As a result, the remarkable Democratic successes of Reagan’s first term would pay few dividends in the 1984 presidential election.

6. Who's In Charge Here? Grappling with the 'Reagan Revolution'

The 1980 elections represented the Democratic Party's worst defeat in a generation. Jimmy Carter became the first incumbent Democratic president to lose his re-election bid since Grover Cleveland. So clear was the rout that Carter conceded to Reagan before the polls had closed on the West Coast, infuriating congressional colleagues one last time ('You guys came in like a bunch of jerks, and I see you're going out the same way,' seethed Tip O'Neill to Frank Moore).⁷⁶⁸ In Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Nevada, both Dakotas, Oregon, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, Carter received a smaller popular vote percentage than McGovern had eight years earlier. Carter also resembled McGovern in the coalition partners that he lost. As well as falling back among traditionally Republican-leaning groups where he had once shown atypical strength (white Protestants, for instance), Carter lost crucial New Deal constituencies to Reagan. He was deserted by Roman Catholics and Southerners, maintained an anaemic 5 point edge in union households (49-44 percent), and managed only the plurality of Jewish voters (47 percent; McGovern had won 66 percent eight years earlier).⁷⁶⁹

Whereas in 1972 Democrats could draw comfort from their continued hold on the Congress, there was no such consolation in 1980. 'Quite a few savvy folks ... seemed simply to assume that some earlier Act of Tenure authorized Democratic control of Congress in perpetuity,' editorialised the *Washington Post*.⁷⁷⁰ Such assumptions were swept aside in 1980. The Republicans gained control of the Senate,

⁷⁶⁸ Julian E. Zelizer, *Jimmy Carter* (New York, 2010), 125.

⁷⁶⁹ The demographic figures came from a NYT/CBS poll conducted in October 1980. CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. Elections, Volume I*, 792, 794; "Woe Is The Democrats," *WP*, November 11, 1980; Adam Clymer, "The Collapse of a Coalition," *NYT*, November 5, 1980.

⁷⁷⁰ "Woe Is The Democrats," *WP*.

picking up 12 seats, the largest swing in their favour in that chamber since 1946. In the process, Republican challengers unseated numerous high-profile Senate liberals, a series of decapitations that seemed to symbolise the American people's repudiation of Democratic liberalism. Among the casualties were Gaylord Nelson, Warren G. Magnuson, Frank Church, John Culver, and George McGovern. 'You cannot look at the defeat of such stalwart liberals,' reflected David Broder, '...and not get the [ideological] message.'⁷⁷¹ The mood was despondent. An aide to Senator John Culver greeted one visitor by asking, 'Can we offer you a cup of tea? A broken beer bottle?' Another senator had reportedly queried his staff, 'How's a minority supposed to act?'⁷⁷²

The outlook was rosier in the House, but only comparatively. The Republicans won 34 seats, far short of the 60 needed to take control. Nominally the Democrats maintained a comfortable advantage (243 seats to the Republicans' 192) insulated by the bumper majorities that they had consolidated in the previous decade. Nonetheless, halving an opposition party's considerable majority in one cycle must be regarded as a significant achievement. In only four instances did Democrats gain seats that had previously been in Republican hands. By contrast, 37 elections saw the opposite outcome: Democratic seats won by Republican challengers. For the first time since Reconstruction, the GOP won the majority of representatives in the congressional delegation of a Deep South state, South Carolina. As in the Senate, several prominent Democrats were ejected, including Ways and Means chairman Al Ullman, DCCC chairman James Corman, and party whip John Brademas.

⁷⁷¹ David S. Broder, "Is It A New Era?" *WP*, November 19, 1981.

⁷⁷² Lynn Rossellini, "In Capital, Stunned Democrats Lament Amid Republicans' Glee," *NYT*, November 6, 1980.

There were other signs that the Republicans could expect to take the House soon enough and cement control of the national government. Demographic trends, for instance, were running in favour of the GOP. In the 1980 census, the states of the Republican-leaning Sunbelt gained 15 Electoral College votes and congressional seats, at the expense of Northeastern and Midwestern states, which lost 16. The biggest loser was New York, which saw its share of the Electoral College and congressional delegation decrease by 5. Some commentators began to talk of a Republican ‘lock’ on the presidency, with some 29 states (that would between them award 295 Electoral College votes in 1984) having voted for the Republican candidate in 6 of the previous 8 elections.⁷⁷³ ‘Eisenhower took the West away from the Democrats, and Goldwater and Nixon took away the South,’ said Horace Busby, former aide to LBJ.⁷⁷⁴ ‘[I]t has come to pass that the electoral base of the party is now in the East,’ wrote Pat Moynihan the following January.⁷⁷⁵

Even more troubling than these looming disadvantages was the rusting of the once formidable party machinery. The results of the 1980 elections, wrote consultant Sheryl Losser to new DNC chairman Charles Manatt, revealed ‘the underlying problem of a deteriorating base of support at a grassroots level.’ In recent years, reported Losser, the party had been neglecting races at the precinct and ward level (state legislative, city council, and county commissioner seats).⁷⁷⁶ Consequently, in

⁷⁷³ “Political Shift to Right – Will It Last in ‘80s?” *USN*, February 23, 1981.

⁷⁷⁴ David S. Broder, “A Sharp Right Turn,” *WP*, Nov 6, 1980.

⁷⁷⁵ Moynihan was trying to impress on the incoming DNC chairman the importance of the East, and of New York in particular, to the Democratic Party, but his data were persuasive. For instance, of the ten states the Democratic candidate had won in four of the previous six presidential elections, seven were Eastern (Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and, included though not a state, the District of Columbia). DPM, “The East Is Now The Electoral Base of the Democratic Party,” Memorandum for the Candidates for Chair of the Democratic National Committee, January 22, 1981, DPM papers, LOC, Part II, Box 3.

⁷⁷⁶ Memo, Sheryl Losser to Charles Manatt, January 27, 1981, TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, Kirk O’Donnell Files, Sub-Subseries 4, Box 3.

1980, Democratic Party officials had been comprehensively out-organised and out-fundraised by their Republican counterparts. The RNC, nearly bankrupt in the mid-1970s, had, under chairman Bill Brock, devoted the years leading up to 1980 to rebuilding the national Republican Party from the ground up, seeking out new contributors to replenish the party coffers and focusing efforts to an unprecedented extent on local and state races.⁷⁷⁷ Democrats had been caught on the hop by this unexpected organisational challenge. ‘The Democratic Party has been suffering from slow erosion,’ wrote Pamela Harriman. ‘[A]n erosion without a rallying point to prevent it.’⁷⁷⁸

All observers agreed that the elections of 1980 represented a watershed, and insofar as there was a consensus on the character of that watershed, it was that America was swinging from Democratic liberalism to Republican conservatism. ‘This could be the breakpoint election in bringing about a party realignment,’ boasted RNC chair Bill Brock.⁷⁷⁹ Political commentator Hedrick Smith summarised his profession’s conventional wisdom when he wrote that the new president, Ronald Reagan, had ‘won the opportunity ... to lead a conservative reformation that seeks to redirect the role of government in American life and perhaps to reshape the national political landscape for the rest of the century.’⁷⁸⁰ David Broder was emphatic about Reagan’s mandate. ‘You had to be very shrewd to discern the shape of the New Deal in the rhetoric of FDR’s campaign,’ he wrote. ‘But you had to be dense to miss the message of Reagan’s campaign: a flat-out repudiation of basic economic, diplomatic and social

⁷⁷⁷ Edward Walsh, “Bill Brock: Architect of Republican Revival,” *WP*, November 20, 1980.

⁷⁷⁸ Pamela C. Harriman, “Rebuilding the Party From The Grass Roots Up,” *WP*, November 26, 1980.

⁷⁷⁹ Hedrick Smith, “A Turning Point Seen,” *NYT*, November 6, 1980.

⁷⁸⁰ Hedrick Smith, “Reformer Who Would Reverse The New Deal’s Legacy,” *NYT*, January 21, 1981.

policies of the reigning Democratic liberalism.⁷⁸¹ Massachusetts senator and Watergate Baby Paul Tsongas offered even blunter assessment: ‘Basically, the New Deal died yesterday.’⁷⁸²

This was certainly the contention of the incoming Reagan administration, and on January 20, 1981, Democrats had to watch as a president many had dismissed as either an extremist or a clown pronounce the last rites over a central tenet of the liberal faith: the efficacy of activist government as an ameliorator of social and economic ills. From the podium on that bright winter day, Reagan attacked the hubris and profligacy of governmental power. ‘For decades we have piled deficit upon deficit, mortgaging our future and our children’s future for the temporary convenience of the present.’ In the inaugural address’s most memorable sentence, Reagan laid the calamities of the 1970s at the feet of government excess. ‘In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.’⁷⁸³

More circumspect observers declined to be swept along in the heady – and often self-serving – talk of revolution. They pointed to the fact that Reagan had won a bare majority of the popular vote (50.8 percent). His nearly 10 point margin over Carter was due in large part to the third party candidacy of John Anderson, a Republican congressman from Illinois who had remade himself as the option for liberal voters disillusioned with Carter. *The New Republic* had endorsed Anderson and

⁷⁸¹ Broder, “Is It A New Era?”

⁷⁸² Bill Peterson, “Democrats Hope, But Mostly Hurt After Worst Beating In 28 Years,” *WP*, November 6, 1980.

⁷⁸³ USOFR, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1981, January 20 to December 31, 1981*, 1

many prominent liberals lent him their support.⁷⁸⁴ The presidential election could thus be construed as an anti-Carter, rather than a pro-Reagan, landslide. This was the conclusion of Democratic pollster Peter Hart. The election, according to his post-mortem report, was not a ‘strictly ideological’ win for Reagan. ‘Voters perceived that the status quo – on economics, defence, and foreign policy – was failing and the non-incumbents were the beneficiaries of this dissatisfaction.’⁷⁸⁵ Morton Kondracke crystallised liberal hopes when he wrote that ‘political dominance’ was ‘still up for grabs.’ ‘The Republicans certainly have a great opportunity now to become the country’s dominant party. But the GOP has had the opportunity before and has blown it.’⁷⁸⁶

If Democrats were to ensure the Republican Party blew that second opportunity, they needed a platform. As Reagan-dominated Washington was to be the front line of the conservative legislative revolution, the Congress, one chamber of which was still in grateful Democratic hands, presented the likeliest base from which to coordinate the resistance. In October 1980, *The New Republic* had endorsed ‘Democrats for Congress.’ Declining to endorse Carter, whom it dismissed as ‘a tinkerer and a muddler, an ideological wanderer,’ the editorial concluded that if the Democratic Party was to rebuild ‘it must retain a strong congressional base, a locus of power and also of debate.’⁷⁸⁷ Badly battered, that base was still standing, just about. The *Washington Post* noted that ‘the House will become the national Democratic Party

⁷⁸⁴ “John Anderson for President,” *TNR*, October 4, 1980; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Andrew Schlesinger, and Stephen Schlesinger (eds.) *Journals, 1952-2000* (London, 2007), 503-6; Letter, Rauh to John Anderson, June 22, 1981, Rauh papers, LOC, Box 1.

⁷⁸⁵ Peter D. Hart, “The Regeneration of the Democrats,” n.d., TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-subseries 4-5, Box 5.

⁷⁸⁶ Morton Kondracke, “A Doubtful New Order,” *TNR*, November 15, 1980.

⁷⁸⁷ “Democrats for Congress,” *TNR*, October 25, 1980.

to the extent that it exists as a combat force.’⁷⁸⁸ For some liberals, this outcome was preferable to a continuation of the *status quo*. Before the election, Arthur Schlesinger had mused in his diary that, ‘Reagan, contained by a Democratic Congress, would be no worse than Carter compromising and confusing a Democratic Congress.’⁷⁸⁹

The Democratic Party would prove very adept at using that ‘locus of power’ during the early years of the Reagan administration. Under the leadership of Speaker Tip O’Neill, the House in particular was able to successfully resist many conservative attempts to significantly reduce the scope of the welfare state. This counteroffensive would lead to an impressive Democratic recovery in the midterm elections of 1982 that seemed to imperil Reagan’s re-election prospects. However, the party’s congressional base proved a less useful locus of debate during the same period. New Caucus chairman Gillis Long would attempt to co-ordinate such a debate through his Committee on Party Effectiveness, but those who invested such hopes in that body would turn to an extra-congressional vehicle after 1984, the Democratic Leadership Council. Democrats searching for a popular alternative to Reaganism would alight first on the issue of ‘fairness,’ which had a particular potency during the recession of 1981-82. As the economy improved, however, many Democrats endeavoured to recast themselves as deficit hawks, leaving the party with a gloomy message for the 1984 election that was overwhelmed by the fuzzy optimism of the Reagan campaign.

⁷⁸⁸ Richard L. Lyons, “House Democrats Retain Power, but With Limits,” *WP*, November 6, 1980.

⁷⁸⁹ Schlesinger, *Journals*, 491.

A Divided and Punch-Drunk Caucus

Congress at the beginning of the 1980s was a very different beast to that of even a decade earlier. The reforms of the 1970s had, paradoxically, diffused and centralised power. The vesting of power in the party caucuses, particularly in the House, had strengthened the prerogatives of the congressional leadership at the expense of committee barons. At the same time, the reforms had created an expanding constellation of committees and subcommittees, each laying claim to fragmenting areas of policy jurisdiction. By 1984, there were some 326 committee or subcommittee chairmanships available to members. That year, *The Atlantic Monthly* calculated that, allowing for those who occupy more than one chair, 202 of the 535 members of Congress (or 38 percent) were ‘in charge of something.’⁷⁹⁰ This had been accompanied by a dramatic expansion of resources and staff members for both individual representatives and committee members. It was estimated that some 1,000 Democrats, belonging to personal congressional and committee staffs, lost their jobs as a result of the 1980 elections.⁷⁹¹ The new positions and resources had been enthusiastically seized upon by the ambitious Watergate Babies, and their successor classes, as a means of cultivating their own profiles and policy concerns. ‘You begin to see Tim Wirth taking on the telecommunications industry,’ reflected Pennsylvania’s Bob Edgar in 1984. ‘You see Jim Florio [of New Jersey] making an imprint on superfund legislation. Henry Waxman plays a role on health policy and clean air. We’ve each taken on a specialty area.’⁷⁹²

⁷⁹⁰ Gregg Easterbrook, “What’s Wrong With Congress?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1984.

⁷⁹¹ Rossellini, “In Capital, Stunned Democrats Lament Amid Republicans’ Glee.”

⁷⁹² Granat, “Whatever Happened to the Watergate Babies.”

Moreover, Congress existed in a transformed media climate. Legislators found themselves under greater scrutiny, and with more avenues for self-promotion, than ever before. In 1964 there were 1,649 journalists accredited to cover Congress. By December 1984 that figure had more than doubled, to 3,748 – approximately seven journalists for each congressperson.⁷⁹³ C-SPAN (the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network), a non-profit cable network broadcasting ‘gavel-to-gavel’ coverage of proceedings in the House, had launched in 1979. The Senate followed suit in 1986 and a second channel, C-SPAN2, was born. It was a modest operation to begin with; initially its programming alternated with a wrestling channel and it hoped to reach some five million homes. The House maintained considerable control over the broadcasts. It could ensure that the unflattering shots of, for instance, members dozing at their desks never made it to air. Nonetheless, it represented a watershed in the American public’s relationship with their legislature.⁷⁹⁴

If the House was to become the vanguard of the Democratic resistance, then the most obvious leader was the senior official of that body: Speaker Tip O’Neill. Indeed, days after the election, aide Burt Hoffman had written to O’Neill that, ‘Until such time as we nominate a new presidential candidate, you are the leader of the Democratic Party, as well as the highest public official of that party.’ Hoffman advised the Speaker to take ‘a major role in rebuilding party strength,’ working with the Campaign Committee and the DNC to devise a legislative programme.⁷⁹⁵ The quintessential Boston ward heeler, an unabashed relic of New Deal machine politics,

⁷⁹³ Easterbrook, “What’s Wrong With Congress?”

⁷⁹⁴ Marjorie Hunter, “Televised Coverage of the House Begins Today on a Limited Basis,” *NYT*, February 19, 1979; Barbara Matusoio, “Congress on TV; Look Out, Mork and Mindy,” *WP*, July 29, 1979; Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington*, 212-3.

⁷⁹⁵ Memo, Burt Hoffman to O’Neill, November 10, 1980, TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-Subseries 4, Box 4.

O'Neill was an improbable leader for the new Democratic Party. Since his election as Speaker in 1976, his political fortunes had fluctuated, often wildly. He had proven himself a gifted legislative tactician in shepherding Carter's agenda through the Congress. One 1978 profile dubbed him 'the least likely cult hero of Carter-era Washington' enjoying 'a protective press, an image of integrity and an awesome reputation for competence.'⁷⁹⁶ He had better relations with younger members than many others in the congressional leadership, having come out early as an opponent of the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, he was also known to greet deputations of Watergate Babies entering his office with the question, 'What do you sons-of-bitches want now?'⁷⁹⁷

However, O'Neill had been tainted by a succession of grubby scandals, most notably 'Koreagate' (though he was exonerated of corruption charges). Concerns also mounted over his image as the representative of an earlier era. Some members worried that he was too attractive a punching bag for Republicans. He had been the principal target of a \$5 million ad campaign mounted by the RNC in 1980. One ad had featured an O'Neill lookalike driving a black Lincoln along a deserted highway, cheerfully dismissing his passenger's warnings about the low fuel gauge, until the car sputtered to a halt.⁷⁹⁸ O'Neill was, in the words of Republican congressman John Leboutillier of New York, 'big, fat and out of control – just like the federal government.'⁷⁹⁹ However, O'Neill was a prodigiously talented legislative tactician, and, in defiance of low

⁷⁹⁶ William A. Henry, III, "The Unlikely Cult Figure," *TNR*, February 11, 1987.

⁷⁹⁷ Ungar, "Bleak House."

⁷⁹⁸ Farrell, *Tip O'Neill*, 534; Robert McLean, "GOP Aiming at Tip O'Neill," *Boston Globe*, January 16, 1980; Alan Ehrenhalt, "O'Neill's Look-Alike Stars In GOP Film for Hill Races," *The Washington Star*, January 30, 1980, offprints in the TPO papers, JJBL, Press Relations, Clippings, Box 24.

⁷⁹⁹ "Youngest House Member Lodges Attack on O'Neill," *WP*, July 12, 1981.

expectations, he would become perhaps Reagan's most formidable Democratic adversary.

Alongside disquiet about his abilities, O'Neill had to contend with an increasingly disgruntled conservative faction in his Caucus. A Conservative Democratic Forum was swiftly established within the House, and boasted some 34 members by the end of November. The group's leader, Rep. Charles W. Stenholm of Texas, announced that conservatives had been 'ignored for too long' and they intended 'to moderate the liberal leanings of the House leadership.'⁸⁰⁰ These representatives, mostly drawn from the West and the South (the latter were known as the 'boll weevils'), would habitually turn against their party leadership over the next few years, often giving Reagan a 'philosophical majority' in the lower house. Indeed, in March 1981, a delegation of conservative Democrats, led by Congressman Stenholm, requested an additional \$11.2 billion in spending cuts from the administration at a breakfast meeting with the president. In response, a delighted Reagan quipped, 'I might consider becoming a Democrat again.'⁸⁰¹

With the Reagan administration exultant, with the congressional Democratic Party in disarray, and with the conventional wisdom proclaiming the arrival of a conservative revolution, the question had to be asked: what was the place of the Democrats in Reagan's America? Moreover, what should the Democratic Party stand for in the 1980s? Asked that question by a reporter for *U.S. News and World Report*, the Iowa state party chairman replied, 'I imagine most Democrats mumble to

⁸⁰⁰ Edward Walsh, "Conservative Democrats In House Signal Change," *WP*, November 28, 1980.

⁸⁰¹ Lou Cannon, Richard L. Lyons, "40 Conservative House Democrats Ask Reagan for More Budget Cuts," *WP*, March 6, 1981.

themselves when you ask that.’⁸⁰² Should the party accept repudiation and prepare to adapt to a post-Reagan policy context, much as the Republicans had to adapt to the New Deal, and even to the Great Society? Or should it engage in a policy of scorched earth resistance to the new president – obstruct, harass, and sabotage – in an effort to rescue a liberal order that had seemingly failed to address the problems of the 1970s?

Most Democrats, O’Neill principal among them, agreed that Reagan should be given an opportunity to test his policy agenda. Even if one believed that the Republicans had not won an ideological mandate, there was little doubt that the Democrats had lost one. ‘The American people wanted to give Reagan a chance ... and they had voted for a change,’ recalled the Speaker’s aide Kirk O’Donnell. ‘There had been a strong repudiation of Democratic leadership.’⁸⁰³ Indeed, some were relieved that responsibility had devolved away from them for a spell. ‘I feel psychologically lighter than I have in years,’ said Representative Gillis Long of Louisiana.⁸⁰⁴ The sabre-rattling of the conservatives in their own caucus was also a powerful inducement to cooperate with the administration, at least temporarily. When the political context made resistance a more viable strategy, the Democrats rediscovered a degree of cohesion and common identity that we have rarely seen in the previous chapters of this thesis. First, though, came a period of defeat and disorientation.

The Reagan administration seized the initiative with a speed and adroitness that stunned its political opponents and the Washington press corps. In the previous

⁸⁰² John W. Mashek, “Democrats’ First Step On Road Back,” *USN*, March 9, 1981.

⁸⁰³ Farrell, *Tip O’Neill*, 544-45.

⁸⁰⁴ Steven V. Roberts, “Democratic Legislators, Shaken By Losses, Hoping to Rebuild Ties With the Middle Class,” *NYT*, November 15, 1980.

decade, several scholars, faced with the Nixon-Ford-Carter trifecta, had mused that perhaps the presidency itself was somehow constitutionally hardwired to fail.⁸⁰⁵ Reagan's first months in office were a decisive rejoinder to such thinking. Unlike Carter, whose administration had devoted itself to a plethora of worthy legislation, the Reagan administration made the economy its sole focus, delivering a budget to the Congress in record time. Reagan's goal was twofold: to reduce both the tax burden and federal government spending. The American taxpayer, he had declared in 1973, had 'become the pawn in a deadly game of government monopoly whose only purpose is to serve the confiscatory appetites of runaway government spending.' That monopoly was maintained by the selfishness and greed of legislators, bureaucrats, and special interest groups. Speed was essential to prevent those interests from mobilising against the Reagan agenda.⁸⁰⁶

In 1980, the political scientists Joseph White and Aaron Wildavsky wrote that Americans were living 'in the era of the budget. The budget has been to our era what civil rights, communism, the depression, industrialization, and slavery were at other times.'⁸⁰⁷ In the Reagan years, the budget process would become an arena in which conservatism and liberalism contested the future of the nation. The initial skirmishes were not promising for the Democrats. On issues of taxing and spending, Reagan seemed to have the wind at his back.⁸⁰⁸ With the assistance of the 'boll weevil'

⁸⁰⁵ Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things To All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency* (London, 1980), 15-16; Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York, 1982).

⁸⁰⁶ Iwan Morgan, *Age of Deficits Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS, 2009), 79-80.

⁸⁰⁷ White and Wildavsky quoted in Morgan, *Age of Deficits*, 1.

⁸⁰⁸ An NBC/News/Associated Press poll from May 1981 found that 69 percent of respondents believed that federal income taxes were 'too high' or 'much too high.' A Cambridge Reports National Omnibus Survey poll from April had found that 58 percent of respondents believed that federal income taxes 'discouraged [people] from working harder.' NBC News/Associated Press Poll, May, 1981. Cambridge Reports National Omnibus Survey, April, 1981. Retrieved Oct-2-2014 from the iPOLL Databank.

Democrats, the Reagan White House was able to engineer the passage of the major tax reduction legislation, the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA), and the Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act (OBRA), which reduced funding to over 200 domestic programmes.⁸⁰⁹ Before long, many congressional Democrats were complaining at the lack of a coordinated response to Reagan's juggernaut. 'It's as if Reagan has slipped tranquilizers into the water,' despaired one.⁸¹⁰

Few emerged from the first budget scrap with a worse reputation than O'Neill. The Speaker had unwisely opted to head out on a junket to the South Seas while the president had rounded up votes.⁸¹¹ O'Neill was, Wisconsin Democrat Les Aspin wrote to his constituents, 'reeling on the ropes ... he's not part of what is happening, and has no idea of where to go.'⁸¹² One Melville-inspired cartoon portrayed O'Neill as a fed-up 'great white whale' speared by the mariners on the good ship 'Reagan Budget.'⁸¹³ By March, there was press speculation that O'Neill might not stand for re-election in 1982.⁸¹⁴ Embattled as he was, the Speaker remained confident that the budget cutbacks would prove the Reagan Revolution's undoing. 'Wait till Middle America realizes what's happened with these budget cuts,' O'Neill told *Time*. 'Am I going to get some Republican scalps down the road? You bet I am.'⁸¹⁵

http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3170/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

⁸⁰⁹ Morgan, *Age of Deficits*, 84-5.

⁸¹⁰ John W. Mashek, "Democrats' First Step On Road Back," *USN*, March 9, 1981.

⁸¹¹ Adam Clymer, "Democrats Lie Low – for Good Reason," *NYT*, July 5, 1981.

⁸¹² Robert Ajemian, "Tip O'Neill on the Ropes," *Time*, May 18, 1981, offprint in the TPO papers, JJBL Press Relations, Clippings, Box 24.

⁸¹³ John Ohman cartoon, May 9, 1981, TPO papers, JJBL, Press Relations, Clippings, Box 24

⁸¹⁴ David Farrell, "Speaker O'Neill To Retire Next Year?" *Boston Globe*, March 30, 1981, offprint in the TPO papers, JJBL, Press Relations, Clippings, Box 24.

⁸¹⁵ Ajemian, "Tip O'Neill on the Ropes."

Grasping for New Directions

Reagan's successes, and the apparent inability of establishment liberals to resist them, created a space for revisionist thinkers within the Democratic ranks to make their case. By the end of February, a group of liberal Democrats had established the Center for Democratic Policy (CDP) to develop new policy ideas to counter the party's 'crisis of confidence.'⁸¹⁶ The Center had an operating budget of some \$500,000 for the first year of its existence, rising to \$1.5 million in 1982.⁸¹⁷ Along with New York's Pat Moynihan, many Democrats were astonished to discover that the Republicans had become the 'party of ideas.' The Center's purpose, as its president Ted van Dyk put it, was 'to plant many seeds among which some will undoubtedly grow and some won't.'⁸¹⁸ The first sowing came in October, with the release by the CDP of three studies of strategies to combat inflation. Each paper was styled as a 'counterpoint' to the work of the American Enterprise Institute, inadvertently underlining the game of intellectual catch-up which the Democrats were being forced to play.⁸¹⁹

A similar grasping for a new direction was underway within the Congress itself. At the head of these endeavours were veterans of the class of 1974. The Watergate Babies had arrived in Congress as self-conscious iconoclasts and were heartened to find events confirming their diagnoses. Their inchoate yearning for new directions and new solutions would soon acquire its own moniker: 'neoliberalism.' In June 1980, Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts gave a speech to the ADA's national

⁸¹⁶ "97th Congress – Young, Energetic, Pragmatic," *USN*, January 12, 1981; Mashek, "Democrats' First Step On Road Back."

⁸¹⁷ "Democrats Set Up Study Group Aimed at Developing New Ideas," *NYT*, March 1, 1981.

⁸¹⁸ Adam Clymer, "Democrats: New Views," *NYT*, Sept 24, 1981.

⁸¹⁹ Adam Clymer, "Democrats Propelling 3 Strategies On Economics Into Battle of Ideas," *NYT*, October 15, 1981.

convention which was hailed as a distillation of the neoliberal creed. After two terms in the House, Tsongas had successfully challenged liberal Republican Edward Brooke for one of Massachusetts's Senate seats in 1978. In the Senate, Tsongas distinguished himself as a dogged policy entrepreneur, with a portfolio that covered energy, urban affairs, and Africa policy, a legacy of his days in the Peace Corps. The immersive political scientist Richard Fenno wrote that Tsongas was 'the most issue-oriented, issue-driven senator of all those with whom I traveled.'⁸²⁰ Tsongas's speech to the ADA – delivered months before Carter's defeat – was of a piece with his desire to be ahead of the curve. He castigated liberals in Congress for rejecting Carter's proposals to increase gasoline taxes, for coddling unions, and for leaving 'the cause of Afghan freedom fighters' to conservatives. Liberals were revealing themselves as unfit to govern, he said, by clinging to dogmas at the expense of new realities.⁸²¹ He later told Fenno that the speech was 'the most important thing I've ever done and the thing I'm proudest of.'⁸²²

A similar critique came from Tsongas's colleague from Colorado, Gary Hart. From his first election, Hart was determined to help his party rediscover 'the experimental pragmatism that had defined Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.'⁸²³ He showed himself as an adept policy entrepreneur, serving as a fiscally hawkish member of the Budget Committee, an enthusiastic environmentalist on the Environment and Public Works Committee, and a champion of military reform on the Armed Services Committee. At the same time, his office strove to build his national profile. In 1979, for instance, one Hart advisor, having discovered that NBC was looking for stories for

⁸²⁰ Fenno, *Senators on the Campaign Trail*, 47.

⁸²¹ David S. Broder, "Politically Passé?" *WP*, June 25, 1980; "Bunker Liberalism: Find Realistic Solutions For Tomorrow's Problems," *WP*, November 9, 1980.

⁸²² Fenno, *Senators on the Campaign Trail*, 51.

⁸²³ GH, "The End of the New Deal," GH papers, UCB, Box 54.

a new show it was creating to rival CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, recommended to Hart that they 'suggest the story of a Western senator who is being forced by circumstances and talent to take on the issues of the 80's' or a story about 'the frustrations of pragmatism in Washington and the attempts of several members to deal with it, with the focus on [Hart].'⁸²⁴

In 1980, facing re-election, Hart found himself, with other Senate liberals, targeted by a cadre of New Right groups. Hart's opponent was Colorado secretary of state, Mary Estill Buchanan, a relatively moderate Republican who had supported both the Equal Rights Amendment and federal funding for abortions for impoverished women. Fending off Buchanan's charge that he talked like a conservative and voted like a liberal, Hart stressed his fiscal conservatism and his support for a balanced budget, and accused Buchanan of being the puppet of sinister national conservative organisations.⁸²⁵ Unlike many of his Senate colleagues, Hart would survive this challenge, and both the fact and the narrowness of his victory confirmed, to him, the rightness of his course. Hart understood the redefinition of the Democratic Party as essentially an intellectual, rather than an institutional, exercise. Political leadership in the 1980s, he told a journalist soon after his re-election, 'will come more from a person's mind than from traditional organization.'⁸²⁶

What then was 'neoliberalism'? What were the new ideas that self-consciously intellectual and policy-oriented party leaders, like Tsongas and Hart, felt would remake the Democratic Party? At the heart of their thinking was a commitment to pro-

⁸²⁴ Memo, Rick Brown to GH, May 25, 1979, GH papers, UCB, Box 55.

⁸²⁵ Kenneth T. Walsh, "Colorado: Hart Trouble," *TNR*, October 25, 1980; GH, Nomination acceptance speech, n.d., GH papers, UCB, Box 55.

⁸²⁶ Hedrick Smith, "Senator Hart Tackles Party Renewal," *NYT*, December 28, 1981.

growth, pro-business economics, as opposed to the redistributive thinking that had undergirded, for instance, such initiatives as the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act. ‘If you have an expanding economic pie there is room for generosity,’ said Tsongas. ‘There is room, if you will, for liberalism.’⁸²⁷ Tsongas would often cite his efforts as a city councilman in regenerating the Massachusetts town of Lowell, a victim of the decline of the textile industry. Dissatisfied with his first move, the creation of a national park that would protect the town’s historic architecture (‘It became obvious that we would end up with a national park – five restored buildings – in the middle of decay’), Tsongas had devised the Lowell Plan, to involve local business concerns in the long-term development of the city.⁸²⁸

Allied to this, the neoliberals expressed particular faith in technological advancements as the key to enduring economic success, speaking excitedly of the transition to a ‘post-industrial economy.’ They were far more sanguine than many older Rustbelt Democrats about the costs of deindustrialisation. As Gary Hart wrote later, ‘Let the Japanese and Germans compete in our automobile markets. We would build their telecommunication systems.’⁸²⁹ A similar sentiment animated Hart’s commitment to transforming U.S. defence policy. His vision was centred on ‘maneuver warfare,’ advocating technologies and tactics to make the U.S. armed forces more mobile and adaptable, and to make weaponry simpler and more effective.⁸³⁰ Tsongas declared that the federal government had to ‘set the agenda and establish the framework for igniting the individual initiative and enterprise’ to ‘meet

⁸²⁷ Rothenberg, *Neoliberals*, 45; “Bunker Liberalism,” *WP*.

⁸²⁸ Tsongas, Statement of U.S. Senate Candidacy, May 18, 1978, PET collection, CLH, Box 51B; Steven V. Roberts, “Democrats: An Aye For Business,” *NYT*, March 1, 1981.

⁸²⁹ Hart, *Thunder and the Sunshine*, 40.

⁸³⁰ R. James Woolsey, “The Kind of Critic the Military Needs,” *WP*, June 18, 1980; Michael Kramer, “Where Does Hart Stand?” *New York*, April 9, 1984.

the challenges of the new technological era.’⁸³¹ The more enthusiastic technophiles in the neoliberal ranks, who advocated government support of high tech industries as a spur to economic growth, were nicknamed ‘Atari Democrats,’ after the widely known consumer electronics business.⁸³²

However, like many doctrines, neoliberalism was better defined by what it was *not* than what it was. It was not ideological, it was not inflexible, and it was not unfeeling. It was, instead, pragmatic, realistic, and compassionate. To this extent, it positioned itself in opposition to the heartless extremism of Reagan and the reflexive liberal defence of the leviathan state. ‘Compassion is not just getting red in the face and waving the arms,’ said Hart. ‘Compassion is solving problems.’⁸³³ This kind of sleeves-rolled-up pragmatism appealed to those Watergate Babies who had constructed their political identities around an explicitly non-ideological stance.

Some critics wondered how distinct the ‘neoliberals’ were from orthodox liberals, apart from in their positioning. Tsongas, after all, had endorsed Ted Kennedy in the 1980 primaries. Indeed, he had publicly toyed with the idea of entering the Massachusetts primary as ‘a stand-in or “stalking horse”’ for Kennedy.⁸³⁴ Such questions, in turn, gave rise to the most potent criticism of neoliberalism: that it was essentially vacuous, ‘a bloodless, technocratic type of politics.’ Michael Scully, the editor of the AEI’s house journal, *Public Opinion*, scoffed that ‘if neoconservatives are liberals who got mugged by reality, then neoliberals are liberals who got mugged by

⁸³¹ Tsongas, Speech at the Centennial Celebration of the Department of Electrical Engineering at M.I.T., Cambridge, MA, October 2, 1982, PET collection, CLH, Box 60C.

⁸³² Thomas B. Edsall, “‘Atari Democrats’ Join Party Conflicts Revived by Gains,” WP, November 7, 1982.

⁸³³ TRB, “Neoliberals, Paleoliberals,” *TNR*, April 9, 1984.

⁸³⁴ Statement of Senator Paul Tsongas, September 24, 1979, PET collection, CLH, Box 62C.

reality but refused to press charges.’ The journalist Robert Kaus dubbed it ‘Reaganism With A Human Face’ in his review of Tsongas’s 1981 mission statement, *The Road From Here: Liberalism and Realities in the 1980s*. Tsongas, wrote Kaus, had ‘abandoned ideology altogether, replacing it with a bland futurism.’ For all of the senator’s reliance on ‘compassion’ (one of ‘the two workhorses of his vocabulary,’ the other being ‘realism’) ‘there would not be much difference between a rational [i.e. non-ideological] Ronald Reagan and the Democrats as Tsongas would remake them.’⁸³⁵ Arthur Schlesinger wrote that neoliberalism reminded him of ‘the old Chinese proverb: There is a lot of noise on the stairs, but no one enters the room.’⁸³⁶

The Committee on Party Effectiveness

In their efforts to remake the party, the neoliberals found an ally in Congressman Gillis Long, the new chairman of the House Democratic Caucus. Long belonged to one of Louisiana’s most feted political families, counting among his relations both the populist firebrand governor Huey Long, and the courtly ex-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Russell Long. Originally elected to the House in 1962, Long had lost his primary two years later, to another cousin, who accused him of inconsistent opposition to civil rights (though Long, like the entire Louisiana delegation, had opposed the Civil Rights Act, he had supported the expansion of the Rules Committee that eased its passage). In 1972, after a brief spell fighting the War on Poverty in LBJ’s Office of Economic Opportunity and a failed bid for the Louisiana governorship, Long reclaimed his seat. Hard-working and conciliatory, Long

⁸³⁵ Scully quoted in Rothenberg, *Neoliberals*, 19; Robert M. Kaus, “Reaganism With A Human Face,” *TNR*, November 25, 1981.

⁸³⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “American Politics On A Darkling Plain,” *WSJ*, March 16, 1982, offprint in the PET collection, CLH, Box 57A.

commanded much respect in the House. When, in 1979, he decided not to resign his seat for another tilt at the governorship, some 50 of his colleagues took the unusual step of paying public tribute, either on the floor or in the Congressional Record, to his decision to remain.⁸³⁷

Without the preternaturally energetic Phillip Burton at the helm, and with a Democratic president setting the legislative agenda, the Caucus had become largely moribund as an instrument of policy formation. This neglect reached a surreal apotheosis on August 20, 1980, when the Caucus convened at 9.04am before being adjourned at 9.05am when the chairman, Thomas Foley, explained that the meeting was a *pro forma* affair without an agenda.⁸³⁸ Though Long lacked Burton's legislative ambitions, he did not intend to preside over further decay. This was reflected in his appointee to the post of executive director, Al From. An Indiana native who had trained in journalism in Northwestern University, From had served, like Long, in the Office of Economic Opportunity from 1966-69. Afterwards he moved to the Capitol, working for Ed Muskie on the Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations. In that role, From had been instrumental in drafting the Budget and Impoundment Control Act. Before his appointment as director, From served for two years as deputy advisor on inflation to President Carter. Physically unprepossessing, From possessed an astute political mind. From recalled that on his first visit to the Caucus office he 'found a windowless room on the seventh floor of the Longworth Building with nothing but a pile of rubble – telephones, telephone wires, and other junk – in the middle of the

⁸³⁷ "On Capitol Hill," *WP*, April 7, 1979.

⁸³⁸ Karl Gerard Brandt, "The Ideological Origins of the New Democrat Movement," *Louisiana History*, 48:3 (Summer, 2007), 281.

floor.’ He had it cleaned out and commandeered a conference table from a Republican neighbour.⁸³⁹

The new chairman aimed to provide a talking shop for the discussion of issues and the resolution of disputes. One of Long’s first acts was to close caucus meetings to the media and the public. However, Long showed little interest in directly influencing the party’s legislative agenda. ‘Gillis is an *inclusive* politician, one who reaches out to his colleagues, invites them to participate ... a conciliator in a party of diversity,’ said New York congressman Matthew McHugh.⁸⁴⁰ Maintaining caucus unity, and minimising boll weevil defections, ranked high on his list of priorities. Long’s own defeat in 1964 had made him sympathetic to the plight of members in conservative districts who had, on occasion, to run against their party in order to survive.

Long did have an ambitious project for the caucus, but it involved increasing the representation of elected officials in the affairs of the national party. As the journalist Adam Clymer had written, ‘the issue of who is in charge never plagued the [Democratic] party so much as it has in recent Presidential campaigns. The so-called reforms that followed the 1968, 1972, and 1976 elections have, in sum, opened the party to activists and often made the nomination process and party platforms independent of the needs and desires of office-holders.’⁸⁴¹ Long and From shared this critique. Activist groups were not subject to the imperatives of electoral politics, or the need to balance often contradictory interests to maintain coalitions. This made them absolutist and myopic as party members, liable to fragment the presidential primary process and demand unworkable pledges from candidates as the price of support.

⁸³⁹ From, *The New Democrats and the Return to Power* (New York, 2013), 32.

⁸⁴⁰ Brandt, “Ideological Origins,” 278, 283.

⁸⁴¹ Adam Clymer, “Democrats: New Views,” *NYT*, Sept 24, 1981.

Increasing the influence of elected officials would have a stabilising effect on the party, reasoned Long and From, giving a decisive edge to those who, theoretically, would be inclined to take a broader and more mature view of the party.

As part of this effort, Long established the Committee on Party Effectiveness (CPE). The CPE was an outgrowth of a conference held by a group of reform-minded younger Democrats – among them Tim Wirth, Geraldine Ferraro of New York, Al Gore of Tennessee, and Richard Gephardt of Missouri – in January 1981. Long hoped that the CPE would engender ‘general consensus positions on the most important national issues that form the thread that gives our party meaning.’⁸⁴² The CPE enjoyed broad support from the caucus, drawing members from the DSG, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the Conservative Democratic Forum.⁸⁴³ In general, its membership skewed young. Of the 37 members of the CPE, only 11 had been first elected prior to 1974, and only five before 1970. A little over a quarter were in their first or second terms in the House. The Committee would meet weekly, and later biweekly, during Long’s chairmanship to plan and strategise.

The CPE’s first intervention into the public debate came in April 1981, when it issued the ‘Statement of Democratic Economic Principles,’ in the midst of the congressional debate over Reagan’s budget proposals. The statement touched on some familiar Democratic themes. It condemned the ‘Kemp-Roth’ tax cut as ‘the fiscal equivalent of a free lunch,’ rebuffed the assumption that government excess was the principal cause of inflation, and condemned high interest rates for exacerbating economic hardship. However, it also doubled down on the Reagan administration’s

⁸⁴² Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 40.

⁸⁴³ Brandt, “Ideological Origins,” 284.

determination to cut spending, calling for ‘a lean federal budget – which puts us on the path to balancing the budget and provides for the human needs of our people.’⁸⁴⁴ The ideas of the statement would be elaborated upon with the publication, in September 1982, of *Rebuilding the Road to Opportunity: A Democratic Direction for the 1980s*, sometimes nicknamed the Yellow Book.⁸⁴⁵ Columnist Joseph Kraft hailed the Yellow Book as ‘the muddy expression’ of a new spirit of ‘economic realism’ in a party where ‘the belief in throwing government programs at problems still predominates.’⁸⁴⁶ Through the Caucus and the CPE, Gillis Long and Al From were laying the foundations of what would later become the Democratic Leadership Council. Indeed, From wrote in his memoirs that he considered Long ‘in many ways, the godfather of the New Democrat movement.’⁸⁴⁷

The ‘Fairness’ Issue

While various groups manoeuvred to direct the future of the party, the economy seemed to conspire to push it back towards its New Deal comfort zone. The Reagan economic programme – a mix of supply-side tax cuts, deregulation, and retrenchment of social programmes – was supposed to initiate a resurgence of growth within the US economy. In fact, the first years of Reagan’s presidency were marred by the deepest and sharpest recession since the 1930s. The unemployment rate reached 10.8 percent at the nadir and the recession ‘destroyed the harvest of new revenues that economic

⁸⁴⁴ House Democratic Caucus press release, April 8, 1981; Statement of Democratic Economic Principles, April 8, 1981, TPO papers, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-Subseries 4, Box 4.

⁸⁴⁵ Caucus Committee on Party Effectiveness, *Rebuilding the Road to Opportunity: A Democratic Direction for the 1980s*, September, 1982, HDC papers, LOC, Box 63.

⁸⁴⁶ Joseph Kraft, “Economic Realism is Back,” *WP*, September 28, 1980.

⁸⁴⁷ From, *New Democrats*, 31.

growth was supposed to deliver with the tax cut fertilizer.⁸⁴⁸ As tax revenues collapsed, the budget deficit exploded. The administration had initially projected a deficit of \$45 billion for FY 1982. In fact, by FY 1984, when the administration had pledged to deliver a balanced budget, the deficit would reach \$127.9 billion.⁸⁴⁹ The recession itself was less Reagan's fault than it was of the Federal Reserve, whose chairman, Paul Volcker, was determined to administer a dose of 'monetary castor oil' to finally douse the inflation that had bedevilled the American economy for a decade. Nonetheless, it badly damaged the Reagan White House's reputation for near-supernatural political skill and the president's personal ratings went into freefall.

The worsening economic climate, and concomitant souring of the public mood, afforded congressional Democrats their first real opportunity to frustrate the Republican agenda. 'The political battle has arrived on a changed landscape of public opinion,' wrote pollster Pat Caddell. 'The flat lowlands, so amenable to spring's Republican juggernaut have given way to the rocky, broken, dark marshlands and shrouded wilderness so conducive to political guerrilla sweeps and large force issue ambush. In such terrain oppositions thrive.'⁸⁵⁰ The New Deal might have expired, but liberals could at least prevent conservative revolutionaries from dismantling the welfare state which stood as its monument. There were few liberals better able to lead such a rearguard action than Speaker O'Neill. Though arguably unsuited for the intellectual thrust-and-parry work required to redefine the Democratic mission, he was

⁸⁴⁸ Iwan Morgan, "Reaganomics and Its Legacy," in Hudson, Davies (eds.), *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s*, 103-4.

⁸⁴⁹ Louis Fisher, "Reagan's Relations With Congress," in Dilys M. Hill, Raymond A. Williams, Phil Williams (eds.), *The Reagan Presidency: An Incomplete Revolution?* (Basingstoke, 1990), 97.

⁸⁵⁰ Memo, Patrick H. Caddell to the Democratic Leadership, February 20, 1982, TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O'Donnell Files, Sub-subseries 13-14, Box 12; Farrell, *Tip O'Neill*, 585.

more than qualified to fill the role of, as his biographer puts it, ‘a Travis for their Alamo, a Kutuzov to lure Napoléon into a Russian winter, a Horatius at the bridge.’⁸⁵¹

O’Neill’s staff had been planning a public relations counteroffensive since the Speaker’s flatfooted response to Reagan’s first budget. Advisor, and former television producer, Jerry Colbert urged O’Neill to use a TV-centric strategy to push back against Reagan. ‘[T]elevision is being used as the main battleground for the Administration in its attempt to convert the American people to his Republican philosophy,’ Colbert told O’Neill. The Democratic Congress’s response was woeful by contrast, an especially dangerous situation when one reflected that Americans now received some 70 percent of their news from television.⁸⁵² In June 1981, O’Neill made his first appearance on a network interview show in three years as a guest on ABC’s *Issues and Answers*. He let Reagan have it with both barrels. The president, he declared, had ‘no concern, no regard, no care for the little man of America ... Because of his lifestyle, he never meets those people.’ While denying that he thought the president ‘callous’ (‘I’ve never met a finer fellow’), O’Neill argued that he had surrounded himself with ‘very, very selfish people ... those who have made it along the line and forgotten from where they’ve come.’⁸⁵³ The image of Reagan as a complacent elitist cosseted with his clueless rich friends was one to which O’Neill would return frequently, to the president’s mounting frustration.

⁸⁵¹ Farrell, *Tip O’Neill*, 24.

⁸⁵² Memo, Jerry Colbert to TPO, n.d., TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-Subseries 4, Box 3.

⁸⁵³ Steven V. Roberts, “O’Neill TV Appearances A Major Shift in Strategy,” *NYT*, June 9, 1981; Transcript (rush), ABC, *Issues and Answers*, June 7, 1981, TPO papers, JJBL, Press Relations, Speeches, Box 6.

Like Reagan's, O'Neill's political principles were clear and straightforward, underpinned by an unshakeable faith in the ameliorative powers of government. This made him a powerful media performer. The greatest policy success that emerged from this forceful public relations strategy was the rescue of Social Security, which was due as much to O'Neill's rhetorical framing of the issue as the machinations of the Greenspan Commission. When the proposals were revealed in May, O'Neill denounced them as 'despicable' and a 'breach of faith' given Reagan's campaign promises. It was, he added, 'a rotten thing to do.' Asked whether the proposals would command significant support in the Congress, O'Neill replied that he doubted many members were 'stone-hearted enough' to vote for them.⁸⁵⁴ Whether the members' soft hearts or hard heads proved more influential, O'Neill was right about the plan's poor prospects. Perhaps more than any individual politician, O'Neill must take the lion's share of the credit, or blame, for turning Social Security into a 'third rail' issue of modern American politics.

The Social Security fight established a template for O'Neill's staff: identify the 'real world' impact of any government cuts and fashion it into a cudgel to beat the administration. A little over six months after Reagan's inauguration, they were strategising to use the House committee system to undermine Republican ambitions. 'Committees must travel out of Washington to listen to real people with real concerns,' Kirk O'Donnell wrote to O'Neill. 'For example we cannot assume the cuts will be felt ... We must identify where they are going to occur and who is going to be hurt. In short the House, through its Committees and hearings, must inform Americans about what is happening ... With control of the House the Administration's failures

⁸⁵⁴ Art Pine, "Democrats Vow To Fight on Social Security Cuts," *WP*, May 14, 1981.

and misguided policies can be exposed in a forum we control and they have no choice but to respond to.’⁸⁵⁵ Another nautically-themed cartoon, published in the conservative *Chicago Tribune*, depicted O’Neill as a grimly determined saboteur in a small wooden rowing boat dropping sea-mines in the path of Reagan’s warship, the ‘U.S.S. Mandate.’⁸⁵⁶

As the 1982 midterms approached, it became clear, to journalists and Republicans, that the Democrats had discovered an issue in ‘fairness’ that had considerable valence with a recession-battered electorate. As early as June 1981, a CBS/New York Times poll showed a slim plurality (41-39 percent) agreeing that the Democrats in Congress cared more than Reagan about the ‘needs and problems’ of ‘people like yourself.’ One poll from January 1982, showed that 53 percent of respondents agreed that Reagan cared about ‘rich people’ over other income groups. By the end of the year, another poll discovered that 61 percent ‘mostly agree[ed]’ with the statement, ‘Reagan represents the interests of the rich rather than the average American like myself.’⁸⁵⁷ O’Neill was the most adept at pursuing this line of attack, with a career’s worth of practice in the politics of class. He became a regular presence on the Sunday morning talkshows, denouncing the president and his ‘Beverly Hills’ pals’ for leading a government ‘of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich.’⁸⁵⁸ The Democratic case was two-pronged: tax relief, they charged, had been unfairly skewed towards the wealthy while budget cuts fell disproportionately on the poor. In support,

⁸⁵⁵ Memo from O’Donnell to TPO, August 4, 1981, TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-subseries 14-1, Box 13.

⁸⁵⁶ Richard Locher cartoon, *Chicago Tribune*, June 23, 1981, offprint in the TPO papers, JJBL, Press Relations, Clippings, Box 24.

⁸⁵⁷ CBS News/New York Times Poll, Jun, 1981; Los Angeles Times Poll, Jan, 1982; Time/Yankelovich, Skelly & White Poll, Dec, 1982. Retrieved Sep-28-2014 from the iPOLL Databank, http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3170/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

⁸⁵⁸ Martin Tolchin, “O’Neill Leading Party Offensive Against Reagan,” *NYT*, June 10, 1983; Martin Tolchin, “After Three Years, Kindred Enemies,” *NYT*, October 7, 1983.

they could cite numerous studies, one of which, by the Congressional Budget Office, found that 85 percent of revenue lost in tax cuts was to households with incomes over \$20,000, while over two-thirds of the budget reductions were coming from programmes benefitting those with incomes under \$20,000. The same study showed that in FY 1983 households with incomes over \$80,000 would pay on average \$15,000 less in income tax while households with incomes of less than \$10,000 would recoup only \$120.⁸⁵⁹

Recognising that they were being, in the words of one aide, ‘savaged’ by the fairness issue, administration officials sought to push back.⁸⁶⁰ ‘Ronald Reagan is a fair man,’ asserted the White House press office in a revealingly bald response. ‘He believes his policies are fair.’⁸⁶¹ David Stockman blamed ‘professional purveyors of envy.’ Such accusations hit an exposed nerve for the Republican Party, which had been fighting hard to dispel the notion that it was the handmaiden of plutocrats. On the campaign trail in 1980, Reagan had declared, ‘Let us reveal to the people that we are not a stodgy, fraternal organization beholden to big business and the country club set.’⁸⁶² The policies pursued by the Reagan administration, or at least the public understanding of those policies, combined with the economic downturn, conspired to undermine that conservative populism. The impact of this criticism was underscored when even some leading Republicans, notably Senate Finance Committee chairman Robert Dole and Senate Budget Committee chairman Pete Domenici, began to acknowledge that the president had a ‘perception’ problem.⁸⁶³

⁸⁵⁹ Robert Pear, “The Fairness Issue: Reagan Battles His Image as a ‘Rich Man’s President,’” *NYT*, July 25, 1983.

⁸⁶⁰ Robert Pear, “Aide Bids Reagan Stress His Fairness,” *NYT*, Sept 27, 1982.

⁸⁶¹ Carl T. Rowan, “Does Reagan Really Care?” *WP*, October 6, 1982.

⁸⁶² Adam Clymer, “The Collapse of a Coalition,” *NYT*, November 5, 1980.

⁸⁶³ Robert Pear, “Fairness Is Issue In Budget Debate,” *NYT*, March 15, 1982.

Such spirited resistance might ultimately prove futile, however, if Republican organisational superiority enabled the party to take the House in 1982 anyway. To that end, the GOP's painstakingly cultivated logistical advantages had to be counteracted, and fast. In 1980, Republicans had outraised Democrats by a ratio of 5:1 at all levels. As early as 1978, Carter's congressional liaison Frank Moore was reporting that the DNC was facing 'a severe financial crunch' and struggling to meet its daily payroll.⁸⁶⁴ Democrats also lacked the technological expertise – in such techniques as direct mail – that New Right groups had been honing throughout the previous decade.⁸⁶⁵ Spearheading the fundraising drives was the new chair of the DCCC, Tony Coelho. A California boy born to parents of Portuguese extraction, Coelho was raised on his family's dairy farm. After an epilepsy diagnosis scotched his plans to enter a Jesuit seminary, Coelho joined the staff of Rep. Bernie Sisk, and when Sisk announced his retirement in 1978, Coelho was his chosen successor. In his first term, Coelho was appointed to a seat on the House Agricultural Committee, and by his second he was chairing the DCCC. The speed of Coelho's promotion was in part a calculated snub by O'Neill and Wright to his senior in the California delegation, Phillip Burton. Coelho was, according to Guy Martin, a former official in the Carter administration and partner in the law firm which represented the DCCC, 'not the kind of guy like Tsongas who stays up at 2 a.m. pondering the future of the party.'⁸⁶⁶ Nonetheless, he brought considerable strategic skills to his new position. 'I don't mind going up to people and asking them for money,' he confessed.

⁸⁶⁴ Memo, Moore to Hamilton Jordan, February 16, 1978, "Campaign Matters – 1978 (trips, etc) [CF 414]" folder, Hamilton Jordan's Confidential Files, Office of the Chief of Staff (OCS), JCL, Box 41.

⁸⁶⁵ John W. Mashek, "Democrats' First Step On Road Back," *USWNR*, March 9, 1981.

⁸⁶⁶ David Hoffman, "Rep. Coelho: Democrats' Fundraiser Extraordinaire," *WP*, August 26, 1982.

The Democrats had raised only \$1.7 million for House races in 1979-80; Coelho set an ambitious target of \$6 million for the 1982 cycle. He brought substantial experience and a bulging contact book, a legacy of his time with Sisk. More so than previous DCCC chairs, Coelho embarked on an aggressive strategy of courting contributions from business interests – including defence contractors, oil producers, venture capitalists, and other non-traditional Democratic constituencies – using the regulatory powers of the relevant House committees as inducements. Coelho's most significant innovation was the establishment of the Speaker's Club, a fundraising organisation that offered access to the House Democratic leadership in exchange for donations. Members would have the opportunity to share their 'interests and concerns' in 'the relaxed intimacy of social events with Speaker O'Neill and his Congressional Leadership colleagues.' By mid-1982, Coelho's efforts had raised some \$6.5 million for the DCCC, a record at that point, though still trailing far behind the \$58 million raised by the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC).⁸⁶⁷

Alongside Coelho, others focused on matching the Republican's extra-party finance infrastructure, which had proved so advantageous to the conservative cause in 1980. December 1980 saw the formation of a Democratic political action committee, Democrats for the '80s, to combat NCPAC. The group's chair, Pamela Harriman, told a news conference that its creation had been necessitated by the threat presented to the political process 'by a maverick organization that scorns both parties and makes a travesty of civility, fair play, and accountability.'⁸⁶⁸ By June, Democrats for the '80s had raised \$200,000 (of a \$1m goal for 1981) and financed one radio campaign for

⁸⁶⁷ Invitation, The Speaker's Club, n.d., TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O'Donnell Files, Sub-subseries 5-6, Box 6; Farrell, *Tip O'Neill*, 590-3.

⁸⁶⁸ Hedrick Smith, "Democrats Organize to Combat Conservative Drive," *NYT*, May 1, 1981.

incumbent Senator Paul Sarbanes of Maryland, who had been targeted for defeat in 1982 by NCPAC.⁸⁶⁹

The sputtering economy, the ‘fairness issue,’ and the partially reinvigorated party infrastructure paid off handsomely for the Democrats in the 1982 midterms. The party picked up two new seats in the Senate (although the Republicans retained their advantage, 54-46) and gained 26 seats in the House, increasing their majority to 102. Majority Leader Jim Wright exulted that these new members were ‘real Democrats – not your boll weevil types’ and *Newsweek* declared Reagan had lost his ‘philosophical majority’ in the House.⁸⁷⁰ Of particular satisfaction was the defeat of Republican congressman John LeBoutillier, who had so memorably analogised O’Neill to the bloated leviathan state and had gone on to personally finance a ‘Repeal O’Neill’ campaign.⁸⁷¹ One poll conducted a month before the election showed that a plurality of respondents (36-28 percent) preferred to see the Democrats win ‘the majority in Congress’ in the upcoming elections. Perhaps the more revealing statistic, however, was the 29 percent who replied ‘Don’t care which party gains the majority.’⁸⁷² After two years of fierce partisan confrontation in Washington, in which each side had denounced the other in urgent and melodramatic terms, close to a third of the electorate felt no investment in the outcome of the elections.

⁸⁶⁹ Jacqueline Trescott, “Pac’d House,” *WP*, June 10, 1981.

⁸⁷⁰ Peter McGrath, Gloria Berger, Howard Fineman, John J. Lindsay, Rich Thomas, “The Next Two Years In The New Congress,” *Newsweek*, November 15, 1982, offprint in the TPO papers, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-subseries 4-5, Box 5.

⁸⁷¹ Farrell, *Tip O’Neill*, 595-96; Letter from John LeBoutillier, TPO papers, JJBL, Staff Files, O’Donnell Files, Sub-subseries 14-1, Box 13.

⁸⁷² Merit Report, Oct, 1982. Retrieved Sep-28-2014 from the iPOLL Databank, http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3170/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

Only two years into office and Reagan had arguably reached the lowest point of his presidency. His approval ratings had fallen sharply and, given his advanced years, it was by no means clear that he would even seek a second term.⁸⁷³ For one brief moment, it seemed to Democrats that the GOP had once again squandered the opportunity to consolidate their majority, only this time with economic mismanagement rather than political skulduggery. However, as the economy began to improve steadily from 1983 onwards, and with it Reagan's poll ratings, the Democrats were left with a dilemma. 'Fairness' was an effective issue in a climate of pervasive economic insecurity, but began to lose its potency as distress lessened. Moreover, the Democrats had never succeeded in resolving the question of how to offer an alternative to Reagan's 'unfair' agenda without risking accusations that they had returned to their big spending ways. With tax revolts fresh in the memory and mounting public mistrust of the government's bookkeeping abilities, Democrats were anxious to demonstrate not only compassion but fiscal responsibility.

In an effort to square that particular circle, leading Democrats seized on the issue of the deficit. The unrestrained budget deficits, they charged, were inflationary and prolonged economic misery by 'crowding out' private investment. If the precise causal relationship between the deficit and those economic outcomes was hard to prove, the deficit itself was the most glaring example of Reagan's mismanagement. After all, at the beginning of his term, Reagan had assured the nation, with the economy primed by tax cuts, that the deficit would fall to \$45 billion by 1982, leading

⁸⁷³ Steven M. Gillon, *The Democrats' Dilemma: Walter F. Mondale and the Liberal Legacy* (New York, 1992), 310.

to a balanced budget in 1984.⁸⁷⁴ Some Democrats, most notably Pat Moynihan, feared that a structural deficit would straitjacket the nation's politics and cripple social welfare policy for decades. Gary Hart called the deficit 'this Administration's Vietnam,' while Paul Tsongas accused the administration of having 'devil-may-care attitude' and called upon the president to 'convene a summit of political and business leaders to hammer out a compromise solution.'⁸⁷⁵ The preferred Democratic remedy, insofar as one was ever settled, relied heavily on tax increases, especially on high incomes, and significant cuts to defence expenditures.⁸⁷⁶

Reagan disavowed responsibility for the deficits, blaming Democratic 'profligacy.' He called for bipartisan cooperation on a deficit reduction plan and endorsed a balanced-budget amendment to the constitution.⁸⁷⁷ Despite solid support among the public, such an amendment drew widespread opposition from elite opinion-formers. Both Jude Wanniski, conservative and coiner of the term 'supply-side economics,' and Alice Rivlin, director of the Congressional Budget Office and centrist Democrat, opposed it, and the *New York Times* denounced it as 'ignorant economics, foolish administration and cynical politics.'⁸⁷⁸ The Democratic congressional caucuses were largely opposed and leading Democrats preferred to noisily outbid Reagan's budget-cutting proposals. When, in early 1984, the president proposed bipartisan negotiations to find \$100 billion worth of cuts, House Majority Leader Jim Wright

⁸⁷⁴ Edward Cowan, "Reagan Aides Defend Deficits," *NYT*, December 9, 1981.

⁸⁷⁵ Peter T. Kilborn, "Democrats Search for a Winning Issue," *NYT*, Feb 26, 1984; Paul Tsongas, "Only A Summit Will Do," *Boston Globe*, December 13, 1983, offprint in the PET collection, CLH, Box 1B.

⁸⁷⁶ Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Democrats Insist on Military Cuts in Deficit Talks," *NYT*, Feb 10, 1984.

⁸⁷⁷ Francis X. Clines, "President Denies Blame for Deficit," *NYT*, October 8, 1983; Herbert H. Denton, William Chapman, "Reagan Backs Balanced-Budget Amendment," *WP*, July 13, 1982.

⁸⁷⁸ Jude Wanniski, "The Balanced Budget Amendment: The Idea is Ludicrous," *WP*, August 1, 1982; Alice M. Rivlin, interview with the author, January 9, 2012; "Constitutional Con," *NYT*, August 1, 1982.

dismissed them as ‘cosmetic’ and revealed that he was leading a group that planned to present a package of some \$200 billion in reductions.⁸⁷⁹

Bellicosity over the deficit proved to be a political cul-de-sac for the Democrats, however. The deleterious economic consequences, at least in the short term, did not materialise. The economy and the deficit grew quite happily alongside one another from early 1983 onwards, and the Federal Reserve’s tight monetary policy choked off inflation. The size of the deficit just had too slight an impact of the daily life of the average American citizen to resonate in political terms. As one party worker, interviewed at a conference in St. Louis, put it, ‘[i]f people are back to work, they won’t care about the deficits.’⁸⁸⁰ Moreover, as political scientist James D. Savage argued in 1988, excessive concentration on the deficit had the effect of further undermining the neo-Keynesian doctrine that had underpinned Democratic economics since the New Deal and solidifying an effective consensus on matters of policy in Washington. Consequently, ‘without a measure that distinguished good from bad deficits, the Democrats lacked a macroeconomic explanation for opposing either the president’s efforts to add a balancing-budget amendment to the Constitution or to cut social spending when the budget was unbalanced.’⁸⁸¹

The limits of deficit politics would be decisively confirmed by the 1984 election. In advance of that cycle’s presidential primaries, the reform-minded Democrats who made up the CPE and its allies had largely succeeded in bringing elected officials into the candidate selection process. The 1980 national convention had established a Commission on Presidential Nominations – or the Hunt

⁸⁷⁹ Helen Dewar, “Democrats Vow Own Cuts,” *WP*, February 2, 1984.

⁸⁸⁰ Steven V. Roberts, “On the Deficit, ‘A World Turned Upside Down’,” *NYT*, December 28, 1984.

⁸⁸¹ James D. Savage, *Balanced Budgets and American Politics* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1988), 222-32.

Commission, for its chairman North Carolina governor Jim Hunt – which had reported in early 1982. The commission proposed shortening the primary season, strengthening the convention’s decision-making powers, and increasing the number of party officials serving as unpledged convention delegates. This final recommendation would prove the most consequential, leading to the creation of the ‘super delegates,’ unpledged delegate seats that would be filled by members of Congress and the state parties.⁸⁸² Party leaders sought to make their presence felt in less formal ways. For the first time, each of the major candidates was invited to make his case and take questions before a House Caucus meeting. Mondale, Hart, civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson, Florida governor Reubin Askew, South Carolina senator Fritz Hollings, and John Glenn all made an appearance.⁸⁸³ The reformers had hoped that officials would provide a stabilising influence on the party, bringing a party-wide, and indeed nationwide, perspective to a process that had become too dominated by special interests and single-issue activists. It must therefore have been something of a nasty surprise when the majority of those unpledged delegates came out in support of Walter Mondale, whom neoliberal Gary Hart was assailing as the prisoner of the special interests. As former senator and vice president, and often an unofficial legislative liaison for the Carter White House, Mondale could rely on long-established relationships with Capitol Hill lawmakers. Hart, by contrast, had marked himself out as a ‘loner’ early on. Though a talented policy entrepreneur, Hart had never cultivated particularly

⁸⁸² The Commission recommended, and received some backing for, 30 percent of the convention to be made up of unpledged delegates. In the event, the DNC opted for 14 percent super delegates. “Excerpts from the Democratic Commission’s Report on New Convention Rules,” *NYT*, March 27, 1982; Adam Clymer, “Democrats Alter Delegate Rules, Giving Top Officials More Power,” *NYT*, March 27, 1982.

⁸⁸³ Minutes, Democratic Caucus, Regular Meeting, July 20, 1983; Minutes, Democratic Caucus, Regular Meeting, July 13, 1983; Minutes, Democratic Caucus, Regular Meeting, November 15, 1983; Democratic Caucus, Regular Meeting, June 12, 1984, HDC papers, LOC, Boxes 18, 19.

enduring bonds with his colleagues and he paid for it as the campaigns pursued delegates.⁸⁸⁴

The 1984 Hart-Mondale contest was, in some senses, a rerun of the McGovern-Humphrey fight of twelve years earlier, another iteration of the struggle that party factions had been engaged in since the 1960s. Mondale had been a protégé of Humphrey's as Hart had been of McGovern's. Mondale represented the traditional Democratic coalition, augmented by growing minority groups, with organised labour at the bedrock. Fearful of its diminishing influence within the party, the AFL-CIO had announced after the 1982 midterms (in which its favoured candidates had done surprisingly well) that it intended to take the unprecedented step of endorsing a presidential candidate before primary season was underway.⁸⁸⁵ Mondale thus became the first Democratic presidential candidate to receive explicit AFL-CIO support before receiving the nomination.

Hart's coalition reflected many of the demographic changes the nation had undergone in the preceding decades and relied on the atypical Democratic voters who had delivered the Democratic Party its landslide in 1974. As Hart's Colorado colleague Tim Wirth reflected, 'Our constituents are changing ... [They] used to be labor, blue-collar and minority-oriented. Now, as in my case, they are suburban, with two working parents – a college-educated, information-age constituency.'⁸⁸⁶ Beyond the party, this gave Hart an appeal that Mondale could never hope to match. In March

⁸⁸⁴ Farrell, *O'Neill*, 678-9.

⁸⁸⁵ In 1982, 237 of the 376 House candidates endorsed by the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE) won their elections. So too did 20 of the 31 senatorial and 24 of the 33 gubernatorial candidates endorsed. Kathy Sawyer, "List Labor As One of the Midterm Winners," *WP*, November 9, 1982.

⁸⁸⁶ Roberts, "Democrats: An Aye For Business."

1984, pollster Bill Hamilton reported to O'Neill and Coelho that hypothetical match-ups showed Hart leading Reagan 47-44, while Mondale lost to the president 55-37 (eerily close to the eventual result). Hart's secret, argued Hamilton, was his appeal to 'the more independent, affluent in our society – those malleable voters Democrats needed to win most elections.'⁸⁸⁷

In an effort to reach out to these voters, Mondale – who ultimately emerged as the Democratic nominee – sought to counterbalance his image as a liberal big-spender by returning to the issue that had defined Democratic politics throughout Reagan's first term: deficit reduction. His acceptance speech at the party's national convention in New York promised the American people a 'new realism.' 'We are living on borrowed money and borrowed time,' warned Mondale, inadvertently echoing Reagan's inaugural address. 'These deficits hike interest rates, clobber exports, stunt investment, kill jobs, undermine growth, cheat our kids, and shrink our future.' By the end of his first term, he promised, the 'Reagan budget deficit' would have been reduced by two-thirds. Given the size of the deficit, that was an ambitious goal and Mondale needed a dramatic gesture to demonstrate his seriousness. 'Mr Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I,' the nominee told the delegates. 'He won't tell you. I just did.' This pledge overshadowed all the others in Mondale's speech.⁸⁸⁸ Mondale's sober realism, though admirable, was hardly good politics. The administration restated

⁸⁸⁷ Underlined text as in original. Memo, Bill Hamilton to TON, Coelho, March 23, 1984, TPO papers, Party Leadership/Administrative Files, Democratic Party, Box 30.

⁸⁸⁸ Dan Balz, Milton Coleman, "Accepting Nomination, Mondale Offers Voters Era of 'New Realism,'" WP, July 20, 1984; Rich Jaroslovsky, Jeanne Saddler, "Mondale Accepts The Nomination, Vows to Raise Taxes, Shrink Deficit," WSJ, July 20, 1984.

its commitment to tax reduction and privately Reagan's senior officials were jubilant ('I haven't seen even a mayor get elected that way,' said one).⁸⁸⁹

The 1984 Election and Reagan's 'Mushy Mandate'

With the economy recovering, Mondale's 'somber Norwegian mien' proved entirely out of step with the spirit of the nation in 1984.⁸⁹⁰ That was best embodied by the incumbent. As Gil Troy put it, in 1984 Reagan was 'the Wizard of America's Id,' a leader who 'wanted Americans to feel good, not think too hard.'⁸⁹¹ The most memorable ad of the 1984 campaign, for instance, was that which proclaimed it to be 'morning again in America,' a soft-focus vision of the wholesome prosperity and stability that a Reagan presidency had brought to the nation.⁸⁹² This campaign had been the result of a conscious decision on the part of its managers, Chief of Staff James Baker in particular.⁸⁹³ Many conservatives resented the Reagan campaign's unwillingness to seek a clear ideological mandate (activist Richard Viguerie accused the staffers of having 'double-crossed' lower-level Republican candidates), but it was effective.⁸⁹⁴ While the president campaigned on a platform of America resurgent and the promise of sacrifice-free boom times, the Democratic challenger promised cold showers and hardship. It was the reappearance of Jimmy Carter's liberalism of limits and the American people had no stomach for another crisis-manager in the White

⁸⁸⁹ David Hoffman, John M. Berry, "Reagan, Mondale Tax Brawl Defies Political Convention," *WP*, July 29, 1984.

⁸⁹⁰ Alterman, Mattson, *The Cause*, 317.

⁸⁹¹ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2005), 148-9.

⁸⁹² "Prouder, Stronger, Better," 1984, *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials, 1952-2012*, Museum of the Moving Image, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1984>.

⁸⁹³ Farrell, *Tip O'Neill*, 646.

⁸⁹⁴ Richard A. Viguerie, "Reagan's Campaign Double-Crossed the G.O.P.," *NYT*, November 12, 1984.

House. However, the consequence of this, as Troy argues, was that Reagan's 'mushy mandate for peace and prosperity' effectively doomed his second-term agenda.⁸⁹⁵

Mushy though it may have been, that mandate was undoubtedly emphatic. With 525 electoral votes, Reagan had amassed the largest Electoral College total in history. While his 18.2 percentage point margin of victory over Mondale was lower than Nixon's 23.2 percent in 1972 or LBJ's 22.6 percent in 1964, it still represented a comprehensive rout. It was, editorialised the *Washington Post*, 'an awesome victory' for Reagan and a 'Dunkirk' for the Democrats. The president 'told the nation what he hoped to do, and the nation said Yes – in a very big and wholly convincing way.'⁸⁹⁶ 'All indications are that it is no longer possible to think of the Democrats as the nation's normal majority party,' wrote the *National Journal*. 'That they have managed to hold on as well as they have below the presidential level is due not so much to partisan popularity as to the advantages of incumbency.'⁸⁹⁷

The Democrats had gambled on the 'fairness' issue and on the deficit in 1984 and as a result had failed to lay a glove on Reagan. This was not to say that the American people found those criticisms unjustified. Polling suggested that Americans had not been convinced that the president was more egalitarian than his opposition. An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll from January 1985 showed that 52 percent believed Reagan 'care[d] more about serving ... upper income people' than middle or lower income people.⁸⁹⁸ Without the recession to sharpen that iniquity in voters' minds,

⁸⁹⁵ Troy, *Morning in America*, 172.

⁸⁹⁶ "The Reagan Triumph," *WP*, November 7, 1984.

⁸⁹⁷ William Schneider, "An Uncertain Consensus," *National Journal*, November 10, 1984.

⁸⁹⁸ 35 percent believed that the president cared about all income classes equally. *ABC News/Washington Post* Poll, Jan, 1985. Retrieved Sep-23-2014 from the iPOLL Databank, http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3170/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

however, it was not enough to unseat a president who could boast of having healed the economy, kept the country at peace, and restored national pride. To that extent, as James Q. Wilson argued in the aftermath, 1984 was ‘a perfectly ordinary election.’⁸⁹⁹ Albert R. Hunt echoed that conclusion: ‘One simple maxim of American political history is that when an incumbent president enjoys party unity, prosperity, and peace, he wins reelection.’⁹⁰⁰

There were some signs that Democrats could turn to for comfort. The party held its House majority (253-182) and had high hopes of retaking the Senate in 1986. They held a 34-16 lead in governorships and controlled over two-thirds of the state legislatures, facts which augured well for the redrawing of constituency boundaries after the 1990 census. Kevin Phillips wrote that no Republican president had ever taken office with his party controlling so few House seats, governorships, and state legislatures. Moreover, according to Gallup, Democrats still held a decisive party identification advantage over Republicans of 40-31 percent.⁹⁰¹ According to a Harris Survey, only 40 percent were enthused by the prospect of the GOP becoming the nation’s majority party, while 51 percent were opposed.⁹⁰²

Consequently, bruised Democrats were inclined to interpret Reagan’s victory, publicly at least, in personal terms. The president, they suggested, was just too handsome, too charismatic, and too good on TV. However well-thought-out his policy

⁸⁹⁹ James Q. Wilson, “Realignment at the Top, Dealignment at the Bottom,” in Austin Ranney (ed.), *The American Elections of 1984* (Durham, NC, 1985), 297.

⁹⁰⁰ Albert R. Hunt, “The Campaign and the Issues,” in Ranney (ed.), *Elections of 1984*, 130.

⁹⁰¹ Admittedly, this had shrunk from 48-26 percent in 1980 and the high of 49-20 percent in 1977, the first year of Carter’s presidency. George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972-1977: Volume Two, 1976-1977* (Wilmington, DE, 1978), 1172; George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1980* (Wilmington, DE, 1981), 249; George Gallup, Jr., *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1985* (Wilmington, DE, 1986), 24.

⁹⁰² Harris Survey, Nov, 1984. Retrieved Sep-23-2014 from the iPOLL Databank, http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3170/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

prescriptions, the worthy and colourless Mondale simply could not compete. Despite shattering a glass ceiling by putting New York congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro on the ticket – the first female vice-presidential candidate in U.S. history – Mondale could not generate enough excitement for his candidacy to overcome the Reagan mystique.⁹⁰³ The conclusion of some, therefore, was that the party should hold tight and wait for the administration to run into difficulties again. After all, Reagan's name would not feature on the ballot in 1988. Robert Strauss, whose paramount concern as DNC chair had been unity, argued that the party should cease navel-gazing: 'If Democrats continue to paint themselves as politically and ideologically bankrupt, this perception could become reality: people will begin to believe that something is fatally wrong with the party.'⁹⁰⁴

Nonetheless, many remained convinced that something *was* fatally wrong with the party, and Mondale's defeat had only buttressed that conclusion. Not only had the Democrats lost four of the last five presidential elections, in two of those it had been able to carry only one state. In only one of them had the Democrat won more than 13 states. After 1980, the Democratic Party had anticipated that the implosion of Reaganism would return them to power, and it had not come to pass then. Fred Barnes dismissed those Democrats waiting for Reagan to retire or screw up as the victims of a 'majority complex, the notion that they are, now and forever, the true and only representatives of the people.'⁹⁰⁵ A more rigorous accounting of the party's flaws was in order.

⁹⁰³ Troy, *Morning in America*, 147.

⁹⁰⁴ Robert S. Strauss, "Enough Hand-Wringing by the Democrats," *NYT*, May 24, 1985.

⁹⁰⁵ Fred Barnes, "The Majority Complex," *TNR*, August 5, 1985.

There was no shortage of diagnosticians. The most commonly-advanced explanation for the party's travails had been in circulation since before the Reagan presidency: that Democratic leaders were in hock to narrowly-focused interest groups who undermined party appeals to the American people as a whole. As *The New Republic* put it, days after Mondale's defeat,

the Democratic Party thinks it cannot stand for equal rights for blacks unless it meets the specific demands of black leaders – this year, the Congressional Black Caucus and next year, perhaps, the Reverend Jesse Jackson. To be for women's equality means it must dance to the tune played by the National Organization for Women. Being for the interests of working people requires obeying the A.F.L.-C.I.O., being for education means following the N.E.A., being against discrimination against gays means adopting the affirmative action agenda of the National Gay Rights Task Force, etc., etc.

The party had become unbalanced. Though some voices had objected to the increased presence of elected officials in the nominating process, *TNR* was largely supportive, suggesting they offered a 'keel.' In fact, the editorial hoped that another class of official would be given more influence in shaping the party's future: 'If any one group ought to be elevated in influence, it is the party's governors, who have shown a remarkable ability to win elections while national and Congressional candidates have been losing.'⁹⁰⁶

In many respects, governors *were* far better equipped for recasting the party's public philosophy than were members of Congress. Of necessity, their governing agendas were broad rather than specialised; they were required to manage the demands of competing interest groups to reach workable consensuses; and they had a far easier time embodying the rising anti-Washington animus around the nation. There were,

⁹⁰⁶ "What Now?" *TNR*, November 26, 1984.

said pollster Peter Hart, ‘so many good stories coming out of the gubernatorial mansions.’ If Republicans were running rampant in Washington, Democrats could point to Mario Cuomo in New York or Michael Dukakis in Massachusetts or the baby of the governors’ conference, thirty-eight year old Bill Clinton of Arkansas. Both of the nation’s female governors – Martha Layne Collins of Kentucky and Madeleine M. Kunin of Vermont – were Democrats, as too was the only Hispanic governor, New Mexico’s Toney Anaya.⁹⁰⁷

The gubernatorial publicity boomlet revealed growing disillusionment among many Democrats with the Congress as an arena for the discussion and refinement of a post-New Deal Democratic agenda. The surprising resilience of the party’s congressional presence had ensured that it was able to deny a final victory to conservatism. However, it had been of little use for those with ambitions to redefine the party. It was with that goal in mind that a group of moderate Democrats created the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in 1985, a vehicle independent of traditional party structures to coordinate their reform efforts. An outgrowth of the Committee on Party Effectiveness, the DLC raised hackles almost immediately. Its highest profile detractor was the newly elected DNC chairman Paul G. Kirk, who had already begun to establish his own Democratic National Policy Group (DNCP) and was suspicious of an alternative power base developing within the party. Co-founder Richard Gephardt countered that the DLC was ‘not [conceived] as a rival to any other party entity but as a way station or bridge back into the party for elected Democrats.’⁹⁰⁸ This was

⁹⁰⁷ Milton Coleman, Dan Balz, “34 Governors Strut as Democrats’ New Hope,” *WP*, February 24, 1985; Maurice Carroll, “Cuomo Sees Larger Role for Democratic Governors,” *NYT*, Feb 17, 1985.

⁹⁰⁸ Dan Balz, “Southern and Western Democrats Launch New Leadership Council,” *WP*, March 1, 1985; Phil Gailey, “Dissidents Defy Top Democrats; Council Formed,” *NYT*, March 1, 1985; Michael Kinsley, “See Dick Run,” *WP*, January 28, 1988.

disingenuous, however, and for the next decade, the DLC slowly became the group against which other contenders for the party's future would define themselves.⁹⁰⁹

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Congress demonstrated a remarkable facility for undermining iconoclasm and stalling policy experimentation. The features of the Congress that enabled the Democrats to wage such an effective guerrilla campaign against the Reagan administration – the influence of special interest groups, the stubborn durability of existing programmes – militated against the formation of a coherent public philosophy. The focus on re-election (an almost constant imperative in the House) ensured that members of Congress remained cautious, localist, and short-term in outlook. The institutional reforms of the early 1970s, supposed to reinvigorate both the Congress and the congressional Democratic Party, succeeded only in intensifying the centrifugal forces. In particular, the proliferation of subcommittee places and the dramatic expansion of resources after 1974 which enabled every legislator to mark out their own policy fiefdom proved decisive. The transformation of the campaigning environment gave legislators new incentives to seek personal success, even at the expense of party coherence. Politicians scrambled to exploit new forms of political media, as journalists sought exciting stories to fill newspapers and nightly bulletins. As party organisations receded at state level (and despite the efforts of fundraisers like Coelho, Democratic fundraising consistently lagged that of their Republican counterparts), ambitious politicians were forced to turn to new sources of financing and new footsoldiers to staff their campaigns. The net result was a growing trend towards entrepreneurial politics, the need for candidates to cultivate distinct personas with which they could attract new donors and new activist supporters. This

⁹⁰⁹ For more on the DLC's campaign to refashion the Democratic Party in their own image, see Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*.

impulse became ever more urgent as the cost of campaigns spiralled upwards. In 1974, Colorado's Tim Wirth had spent \$134,000 to win his seat in the House of Representatives. Twelve years later, he spent \$3.4 million (over 28 times as much) to move into the Senate.⁹¹⁰

These institutional changes interacted with the new breed of politician who had begun to arrive in Congress in the 1970s. As Burdett Loomis wrote, these 'new American politician[s]' – 'a new generation of attractive, impatient, and issue-oriented national politicians' – were able to dramatically reconfigure 'the role of the rank-and-file legislator' as the public face of a political and legislative 'enterprise' composed of congressional staffers, campaign organisers, and other associated confederates. Loomis had seen this first-hand working in the office of Illinois congressman Paul Simon (elected 1974), where he was immersed in the 'enterprise' that transcended 'any formal organization ... revolv[ing] totally around the person and the unfolding political career of Congressman Simon.' Increasingly, Congress was enabling legislators to place their favoured issue on the agenda and, Loomis noted, agenda-setting was emphasised by these entrepreneurs 'to the point that the notion has become a cliché.'⁹¹¹

The consequence was a congressional Democratic Party in which a variety of legislative factions and interests jostled for control of 'the agenda' without ever satisfactorily settling the argument. Ordinarily, legislators would take their cue from

⁹¹⁰ Loomis, *The New American Politician*, 3-4.

⁹¹¹ Though Simon brought more conventional political experience than many of his colleagues – having served in the Illinois State House and Senate for over a decade, and run unsuccessfully for governor – he exhibited 'characteristics typical of the new style.' Not the least of which was that, with his overlarge glasses and bow tie, he understood how to craft a distinctive public image. Loomis, *The New American Politician*, 6, 9, 11-12, 15-18.

outside actors – think tanks, academia, and advocacy groups – but even here the party was poorly served. Since 1980, a network of moderate and liberal-leaning think tanks and policy institutes had sprung up to help Democrats catch up with the GOP, the new ‘party of ideas.’ These included the Center on National Policy, the Policy Exchange, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., the Democracy Project in New York, and the Institute for National Strategy in Los Angeles. Having immersed himself in the output of these institutions, journalist Robert Kuttner was unimpressed. ‘If policy-wonks a political program made, the Democrats would be home free,’ he wrote. Unlike conservative think tanks, which built their research around a clear set of organising principles, these liberal-leaning idea factories seemed uninterested in the political. ‘[T]he idea of “new ideas” for the sake of new ideas serves as a convenient stand-in for the coherent worldview the Democrats no longer have.’ Values, he concluded, did not flow from ideas, ideas flowed from values.⁹¹²

In contrast to the conservative groups mobilising in the 1970s and earlier, the Democrats lacked a clear order to overturn. Those who criticised the Democratic Party as a collection of selfish special interests often ignored the fact that the GOP, like any political party, was also composed of special interest groups. Whatever the differences of the National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), the Federalist Society, the Chamber of Commerce, the Moral Majority, the Family Research Council, and the Committee on the Present Danger, among others (all of which made up the Republican coalition), they agreed that they were facing a monolithic liberal establishment that had to be dethroned. Internal dissension was a

⁹¹² Robert Kuttner, “What’s The Big Idea?” *TNR*, November 18, 1985.

second order problem; they were a minority that aspired to become the majority and other disputes could wait. Democrats never lost the sense of themselves as belonging to the nation's majority party, even in their Reagan-era doldrums.

Thus, the absence of a clear realignment proved perhaps the biggest barrier to efforts to reconceptualise the Democratic Party's mission between 1972 and 1984. The fact that the Democrats were able to dodge the knockout blow (rescued by political crisis and recession or sometimes both) meant that the party did not enter the same trough as the Republicans in the mid-twentieth century, and thus never had a strong incentive to formulate a post-New Deal philosophy. In other words, the party never experienced a prolonged period of minority status; for every lost presidential election, there was a new congressional majority as consolation. They were also never required to construct an alternative infrastructure to advance their cause. Democrats could expect to control at least one branch of government as a matter of course.

At the beginning of 1981, when conservative revolution was in the air, it seemed that the Democrats would be forced to confront the apparent bankruptcy of liberalism. Apparently sliding towards minority status, the party would have to accommodate itself to the new settlement, whatever that was, much as the Republicans had been compelled to adapt to the New Deal. In such a climate, new thinking could flourish. However, when the Reagan Revolution ran aground much earlier than anticipated, the calculus changed abruptly. It became far easier to adopt a defensive posture, to settle for defending the New Deal state from further retrenchment, and wait for Republican missteps to bring about another Democratic restoration.

Conclusion

How should we think of the years between 1972 and 1984? Certainly not as a period in which the United States moved decisively to the right. The record of conservative successes is too haphazard to sustain such a conclusion. Admittedly, the ‘Reagan Revolution’ was not without its triumphs. Tax reform was vigorously and successfully implemented; private sector unions were emasculated; deregulation advanced steadily; government-sponsored affirmative action was essentially halted; and defence outlays were dramatically increased. The GOP occupied the White House for the entire 1980s, the Senate was in Republican hands until 1987, significant inroads were made into the House of Representatives, fully half of federal judgeships were filled with Reagan-approved nominees, and three new Supreme Court Justices were appointed. In 1984, the Reagan campaign declared that it was ‘morning again in America’ and Americans agreed in their millions, with majorities opting for the president over his Democratic challenger in 49 out of 50 states.

Yet Reagan’s victory in 1984 was essentially the result of his campaign’s ‘scrupulous avoidance of ... substantive issues in favor of mood and personality.’⁹¹³ It was a campaign that celebrated the return of prosperity, stability, optimism, and the indomitable triumph of the American spirit. It pitted a genial and accomplished incumbent against a less charismatic opponent who promised to raise taxes. It was, as Theodore Lowi has written, ‘a personal triumph of inestimable proportions.’ Beyond Reagan’s smashing defeat of Mondale, the Republican win had been less emphatic. The mandate was ‘broad but shallow; broad enough to capture the electoral vote of

⁹¹³ Hecla, “Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan,” 559.

forty-nine states but so shallow that it hardly penetrated political life below the outer crust of presidential politics.⁹¹⁴ The Democrats retained control of the House and the Republican Party lost seats in the Senate. Democratic strength proved remarkably robust in gubernatorial mansions and statehouses across the nation. It presented a stark contrast to, for instance, the elections of 1936, when Franklin Roosevelt's coattails helped cement the New Deal, with gains in both chambers of Congress that buttressed Democratic majorities and marginalised Republican opposition.

The DLC-associated academics William Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck have dismissed such an interpretation of the 1984 elections as wishful thinking. In their seminal 1989 paper, *The Politics of Evasion*, they claimed that the nation was witnessing 'a slow-motion, trickle-down realignment' in which Republican success at the presidential level would erode Democratic strength in Congress and beyond.⁹¹⁵ This assessment certainly has merit. Democrat Michael Dukakis (a leading neoliberal and a governor) would fare little better in 1988 against the less charismatic George H. W. Bush, and the startling Republican successes at the congressional and sub-congressional level in 1994 and 2010 are somewhat suggestive of a 'rolling realignment' spread out over decades.⁹¹⁶ Nonetheless, if true, that only reaffirms this thesis's central contention: that the years between 1972 and 1984 cannot be understood as years of uncomplicated conservative triumph.

⁹¹⁴ Theodore J. Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1985), ix

⁹¹⁵ William Galston, Elaine C. Kamarck, *The Politics of Invasion: Democrats and the Presidency*, Progressive Policy Institute, September 1989, www.ppionline.org, 12.

⁹¹⁶ The term 'rolling realignment' was coined by pollster Richard Wirthlin, who served as Reagan's chief political strategist from 1968 to 1989. Fred Barnes, "Earthquake," *TNR*, October 17, 1994.

Judging Reagan by the policy ambition he privileged above all others – the reduction of an overbearing federal bureaucracy – further confirms that case. As Hugh Heclo has written, the Reagan administration ‘did little to enact – or even prepare the groundwork for – an agenda of limited government.’ If there was any assault on the responsibilities of the federal government, it was effectively in retreat by the midterm elections of 1982.⁹¹⁷ Promises of balanced budgets and renewed fiscal discipline were quietly shelved by the 1984 election, with the blame shifted to obstructionist Democrats. Why did the Reagan revolution achieve so little in this area? Undoubtedly, the wrangling in Congress that has occupied the later chapters of this thesis is part of the explanation. The failure to radically reform Social Security had demonstrated the near-impossibility of dismantling any of the major entitlement programmes. Ambitious schemes became entangled and immobilised in webs of legislators, activists, and special interest groups. When it comes to social welfare provision, expansion is far easier than rollback. However, this is by no means the whole story. The Reagan administration’s failure to fundamentally reduce the size of the government reflects continued and enduring support for much the New Deal and Great Society state among Americans. In spite of a sinking opinion of government in the abstract, Americans still expect some protection from the ‘hazards and vicissitudes of life.’ Effectively excluding entitlements, along with defence, from negotiations left the Reagan administration able only to trim discretionary spending from the federal budget, to the consternation of many of the president’s conservative supporters.

However, we can hardly pretend that these were years of liberal triumph. It seems undeniable that liberals squandered a valuable opportunity after 1974. The

⁹¹⁷ Heclo, “The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan,” 558-9

political realities of the 1976 elections – a Democratic president, supermajorities in both chambers of Congress, and a weakened and divided Republican Party – bear comparison with 1936 or 1964. And yet the Carter presidency is almost universally acknowledged as a datum point in liberalism’s collapse, while those of Roosevelt and Johnson represent liberalism’s high water marks in the twentieth century. Moreover, as this thesis has shown, the Democratic Party does not lack for would-be leaders looking to take advantage of an opportunity that most recognised as propitious. Its condition in these years (at least until Reagan’s victory) hardly suggests a beaten adversary resigned to exile. What went wrong?

Certainly Jimmy Carter was not the president to help his party meet the challenge. Though a gifted policy thinker, he was less adept when it came to what the elder Bush would later call ‘the vision thing.’ As his first speechwriter, James Fallows, remarked, ‘Carter believes fifty things but no one thing. He holds explicit, thorough positions on every issue under the sun, but he has no large view of the relations between them, no line indicating which goal ... will take precedence over which ... when goals conflict. Spelling out these choices makes the difference between a position and a philosophy, but it is an act foreign to Carter’s mind.’⁹¹⁸ It is noteworthy, for instance, that Carter was the first Democratic President since Grover Cleveland who did not leave behind an enduring label to define his presidential agenda (along the lines of the ‘New Freedom’, ‘New Deal’, ‘Fair Deal’, ‘New Frontier’ or ‘Great Society’). His one effort in this regard, the ‘New Foundation,’ vanished almost as soon as it was coined.

⁹¹⁸ James Fallows, “The Passionless Presidency,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1979.

However, this thesis has taken the Congress as its principal focus. It was the institutional bastion of Democratic strength, such as it was, in the 1970s and '80s, as the presidency remained largely out of reach and local and state party apparatuses decayed. It was the last place to fall to the Republican assault. Yet it proved ill-suited as the springboard for a Democratic revival. The high hopes of a more assertive legislative branch that accompanied the climax of the congressional reform movement evaporated with remarkable speed. A political culture centred on the president reasserted itself. Even with effective control of the legislature for most of this period (and uninterrupted control of the House throughout) there was little progress on a post-New Deal legislative agenda for the party, and little agreement on what such an agenda should look like.

Indeed, as this thesis has argued, it was the continued Democratic strength in Congress, coupled with institutional shifts in favour of liberal reformers, that were the most significant impediment to the formulation of a coherent agenda. Congress was a far from perfect arena for the development and testing of alternative policy solutions. Individual members are – if not quite ‘single-minded reelection seekers,’ as David Mayhew has portrayed them – concerned with re-election as an overriding incentive.⁹¹⁹ This was particularly pronounced in the 1970s, when the post-reform Congress made the congressional career a more easily achievable goal than ever before. The most obscure representative now commanded a significantly beefed up legislative office, with new resources and responsibilities. Many could become subcommittee chairs on an accelerated schedule. Even the self-consciously iconoclastic ‘Watergate Babies’ found their radicalism tempered by ambition. Political

⁹¹⁹ David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1974), 17.

reporter Hedrick Smith dubbed this ‘survival politics.’⁹²⁰ Incumbency worked against critical self-examination. Those congressional Democrats with grander ambitions often found them subordinated to the logic of legislative politics. Though the reforms of the early 1970s should have made innovation easier, radical actions provoked fierce hostility from important interest groups, and insurgents tended to be absorbed and become defenders of the *status quo*.

Unlike the Republicans at mid-century, Democrats never had to adapt to a prolonged period of minority status. Realignment was always threatened, but never quite manifested. Democrats were not moved, as Republicans had been, to construct an alternative infrastructure to advance their cause (at least until the formation of the Democratic Leadership Council in 1985). The Republican Party greeted the 1980s supported by an extensive network of politically-minded think tanks and policy institutes, while Democrats had to scramble to catch up. Opposition is often the best place for a political party to redefine itself, to develop and hone new ideas. The Democratic Party never truly had a taste of it.

By contrast, the very absence of a stable beachhead in the political establishment forced conservatives to pursue innovative strategies. The mentality of a minority party accompanied the Republicans into office and was supplemented in important ways by the Democrats’ failure to collapse in the face of the conservative juggernaut. The intellectual components of what would become Reaganism were tested in Congress (the Kemp-Roth tax cut is a case in point), but for the most part they did not originate there. Instead, they came from a blossoming network of

⁹²⁰ Smith, *Power Game*, 121.

conservative think tanks. These institutions were, as the Heritage Foundation's vice president once proudly told *Time* magazine, 'the intellectual shock troops of the conservative revolution.'⁹²¹ Liberals had nothing to match this ideological *levée en masse*. In this, the Democratic failure to truly come to grips with a majority platform for the post-New Deal era is laid bare. Conservatives acted as if they were engaged in a war of ideas and they brought artillery to the battle that the liberals did not possess.

It is at the level of political discourse that the Republicans enjoyed their greatest successes. In a fundamental sense, conservatives won the battle of ideas. Policy debates after 1984 were conducted amidst a culture that was increasingly hostile to government activism. As a result, the last quarter of the twentieth century was short on the kind of grand social welfare programmes that had defined the Great Society. The sight of a Democratic president declaring in a State of the Union that 'The era of big government is over' may be considered Reagan's most enduring success.⁹²² By the end of Reagan's presidency, this had the effect of draining debates on the Democratic side, rendering them particularist and technocratic. This was especially true in Congress, where cautious members had to keep a wary eye on a suspicious and tax-averse public. As Congressman George Miller, a Watergate Baby, complained in 1989, 'You replaced visions and dreams with questions like "How much does it cost?" There has been a decade here where, in some ways, you lost your voice. You really didn't quite want to speak out for universal health care or child care ... When the Reagan drumbeat came on the scene, it completely wiped out every other bit of noise. There was this ten-ton gorilla walking around town.'⁹²³

⁹²¹ Amy Wilentz, "On The Intellectual Ramparts," *Time*, September 1, 1986.

⁹²² U.S. Office of the Federal Register, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1996, Book I – January 1 to June 30* (Washington, D.C., 1997), 79.

⁹²³ Schneider, "JFK's Children."

Yet even with Democrats effectively conceding defeat by 1981, conservatives struggled to turn their ideological advantage into concrete policy achievements. As the Reagan revolutionaries endeavoured to roll back the welfare state in the early 1980s, the institutional bias that the Congress creates for the *status quo* worked decisively in liberalism's favour. Conservatives discovered that antipathy towards 'government' sat uneasily alongside stubbornly durable public support for much of the government's practical activities. As the economist Paul Samuelson wrote in late 1994, explaining away the Republican sweep in that year's midterms, the question of 'Big Government's existence' had been 'essentially settled.' It 'does too many people too much good and has created too many defenders.' The anti-government climate was 'less about undoing Big Government than reconciling our values to its permanence.'⁹²⁴ Indeed, as many anti-statist conservatives have embraced governmental power with surprising enthusiasm, historians have been compelled to confront the phenomenon of 'big-government conservatism.' The paradox was perhaps most pronounced in the field of national security, where the conservative movement's anti-communism prompted a massive build-up of defence capabilities under Reagan. However, conservatives have embraced government power in less expected policy areas. In education policy, for instance, many conservatives have 'come to accept the legitimacy of a substantial federal role' and indeed 'increasingly sought a share of the political credit.'⁹²⁵

⁹²⁴ Robert J. Samuelson, "Big Government Is Here To Stay," *WP*, June 21, 1995.

⁹²⁵ Gareth Davies, "Towards Big-government Conservatism: Conservatives and Federal Aid to Education in the 1970s," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43:4 (2008), 621-35; see also, Julian E. Zelizer, "How Conservatives Learned To Stop Worrying and Love Presidential Power," in Julian E. Zelizer (ed.), *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton, N.J., 2010).

The same Congress that obstructed Democratic efforts to formulate a coherent public philosophy for the post-New Deal order must also be acknowledged as the source of some of the most significant Democratic victories of the era. The institutional reforms of the 1970s both fragmented and stimulated liberal power throughout the Congress. The cautious and re-election conscious members were also 'policy entrepreneurs,' legislators keen to nurture substantial issue portfolios, for both self-interested and ideological motives. Whether it was Mo Udall's leadership on the Alaska Lands issue or the varied and prodigious career of Henry Waxman, liberal legislators could exploit new resources and new opportunities to pursue their policy agendas. Neither would likely have advanced far if they had been required to wait for seniority and patronage to favour them. At this level, the post-war achievements of American liberalism were defended, and even expanded, albeit in less dramatic ways. This should induce us to abandon the idea that American politics, at least from the 1960s onwards, can be explained with reference to theories that posit neatly demarcated cycles of reform and reaction. The American public's relationship with both Democratic liberalism and Republican conservatism is too complex and contradictory to sustain such a conclusion. By 1984, an American voter could cast his or her ballot for President Reagan (to provide the optimistic, resolute leadership that America sorely needed after years of crisis and drift) and for his or her district's Democratic representative (who would protect Social Security from the budget cutters) and see no contradiction.

What this thesis has sought to demonstrate is that the 1970s were not a waystation to a new conservative era. There was nothing inevitable about the 'Reagan revolution' of the 1980s and historians should resist such teleology. Indeed, as Julian

Zelizer has suggested, historians of American conservatism must adjust their narratives to show ‘how conservatism unfolded in a dialectical fashion with liberalism rather than as a replacement to liberalism.’⁹²⁶ Despite decades of apparent conservative ascendancy, Americans live comfortably with many of the legacies of New Deal and Great Society liberalism. Most notably conservatives have not been able to retrench the activist state, and have co-opted it to their own ends in some cases. It remains a significant presence in the lives of everyday Americans and largely because Americans want it there. The era of big government is not over.

The congressional Democratic Party, which remained remarkably resilient throughout this period, can take a sizable share of the credit for having preserved much of that welfare state. Yet, the same features of Congress that enabled the Democrats to mount an effective guerrilla campaign against the Reagan administration, when liberalism was at its lowest ebb for decades, also undermined efforts to reconceptualise the party’s public philosophy. The institutional biases which Congress creates for the *status quo* worked to defend the Democratic Party’s legacies and hamstring its future. Whereas the post-New Deal Republican Party was compelled to adapt to expansions of federal prerogatives that challenged its small government ideology, the Democrats never had to adapt to significant government rollback. The Democrats were the party of government and, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, government stayed big. Thus, the seeming weakness and flaccidity of the Democrats by the mid-1980s was an unhappy by-product of a more lasting victory.

⁹²⁶ Julian E. Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History*, 38 (2010), 380, 387-89.

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 - Papers of Phillip Burton
 - Papers of Alan Cranston

Boston, Massachusetts

- Boston College, John J. Burns Library
 - Papers of Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, Jr.
 - Papers of Robert F. Drinan
- John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
 - Papers of Adam Clymer
 - Papers of Nancy F. Korman
 - Papers of Frank Mankiewicz
 - Papers of Theodore C. Sorensen

Boulder, Colorado

- University of Colorado, Boulder
 - Papers of Gary W. Hart
 - Papers of Timothy E. Wirth

Los Angeles, California

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 - Papers of Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown, Jr.

Lowell, Massachusetts

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Interviews

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