

CHAPTER 1

The Rhetorical Presidency and Public Deliberation in the Progressive Era

*... the wisest thing to do with a fool is to encourage him
to hire a hall and discourse to his fellow citizens. Nothing
chills nonsense like exposure to the air; nothing dispels
folly like its publication.*

CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT
IN THE UNITED STATES, 1908

Writing in his shorthand diary during his freshman and sophomore years at Princeton, “Tommy” Wilson reflected on baseball, the “fairer sex,” and the character of the professors and students he met during these important, formative years of his life. Along the way, he also wrote about oratory, politics, and the future of the American republic. In brief yet surprisingly bold political commentaries, Wilson predicted that the American republic, as conceived by the Founders, would “never celebrate another centennial,” at least not “under its present Constitution and laws.” In 1876, he even marked Independence Day by proclaiming the “English form of government” the “only true one” and by again predicting that America would “never celebrate another centennial” under its existing Constitution: “How much happier [?] she would be now if she had England’s form of government instead

of the miserable delusion of a republic. A republic too founded upon the notion of abstract liberty!"¹

No wonder historian Richard Hofstadter branded Wilson a "thorough Anglophile."² Yet Wilson's embrace of the British model was but his first answer to a question that he struggled with throughout his career: How might the federal government be both energized and made more accountable to the people? Convinced that the Founders had impractically separated the legislative and executive branches, Wilson sensed that Congress had become too absorbed in administrative tasks to perform its most important purpose: debating the great issues of the day "in the presence of the whole country." A British-style cabinet government would respond more efficiently to pressing national problems yet still remain accountable to the voters. Moreover, it would assure that only the best men—genuine "orator-statesmen"—would rise to positions of leadership. As Wilson wrote in one of his most famous schoolboy reflections: "The cardinal feature of Cabinet government . . . is responsible leadership—the leadership and authority of a small body of men who have won the foremost places in their party . . . by evidence of high ability upon the floor of Congress in the stormy play of debate."³

Wilson later abandoned the British model and instead imagined a uniquely American solution to the problem of a government dominated by Congress: an active, *rhetorical* president who presided over great national debates and served as the voice of "the whole people." Inspired by the example of Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson envisioned the president as a leader and interpreter of public opinion who, in great national debates, would speak both *to* and *for* the American people. Rising above partisan politics, Wilson's rhetorical president would be an "orator-statesman," upholding neoclassical standards of "responsible" speech and engaging the public in "common counsel." According to Jeffrey Tulis, Wilson's vision of a more energetic and rhetorically active president—Wilson's "rhetorical presidency"—departed so radically from the Founders' plan that it constituted, in effect, a "second constitution." More importantly, in Tulis's view, it had a number of deleterious effects on the American political system, including an "erosion" of the

deliberative process and the unrealistic expectation that all presidents would be great orators.⁴

In blaming Wilson for the modern rhetorical presidency, Tulis not only exaggerated Wilson's influence but also the magnitude of the "revolution" that he brought to the presidency. As Richard Ellis has argued, recent historical research has shown that the popularization of various forms of presidential discourse—acceptance speeches, inaugural addresses, and campaign speeches, to name just a few—actually began long before Wilson arrived on the scene. A number of Wilson's predecessors, including Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, Grover Cleveland, and William McKinley, did not hesitate to "go public," and at least one president who came later, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, arguably did more than Wilson to shape the modern rhetorical presidency. At most, Wilson represented the "culmination" of a number of changes in the "rhetorical patterns" of the presidency that had been evolving for years, according to Ellis. He just happened to be in office when "all the pieces" came together in a "recognizably modern" pattern.⁵

Nor did Wilson envision today's rhetorical presidency—the presidency of "sound bites," focus groups, and poll-driven speeches. To the contrary, Wilson shared Tulis's concern with demagoguery, and he complained about many of the same trends in popular speech that troubled Tulis. Like Tulis, Wilson worried that an overly popular style of presidential leadership might degrade public discourse and subvert deliberation.⁶ Wilson envisioned a president who gave voice to public opinion, yet who also moderated "the heats and the hastes, the passions and the thoughtless impulses" of the people.⁷ In addition, Wilson never advocated that presidents routinely go "over the head" of Congress. To the contrary, he was "centrally concerned with safeguarding traditional institutional arrangements against the very sort of demagogic populist leaders and appeals that so trouble Tulis."⁸ Far from encouraging the excesses of the modern rhetorical presidency, Wilson upheld standards of responsible speech grounded in the neoclassical tradition—a tradition that was "at base an ethical tradition that required its adherents to live up to an exalted code of conduct."⁹

During his first term as president, Wilson embodied that neoclassical tradition. Pushing his New Freedom legislation, Wilson carefully balanced his appeals to public opinion with constructive bargaining with Congress. Wilson again modeled what he had in mind in his academic writings as he campaigned for preparedness in 1916. During his first “swing around the circle” as president, Wilson eschewed the passionate, partisan appeals of the “spellbinders” of the era and instead cast himself as the facilitator of a great national debate and a spokesman for the “whole people.” When war came, of course, the Wilson administration launched the most massive propaganda campaign in history, betraying the president’s commitment to public deliberation by silencing dissent and manipulating public opinion. For the most part, however, Wilson’s presidency reflected the ideals of his scholarly writings. In general, Wilson strove to be the orator-statesman of the neoclassical tradition.

This chapter establishes the context for my reexamination of Woodrow Wilson’s Western tour by revisiting the theory and practice of Wilsonian politics. Examining both his scholarly writings and the theory implicit in his political leadership, I outline the attitudes toward oratory, presidential leadership, and public deliberation that defined Wilson’s vision of a responsible rhetorical presidency. First, I examine how, in his earliest reflections on politics, Wilson grappled with the question of how the American system might be made both more energetic and more accountable to public opinion. As a student of politics in the Gilded Age, Wilson wrote and spoke prolifically about the need for oratorical leadership and a revival of public deliberation. Imagining a revival of oratory and debate under a cabinet-style government in America, he also cultivated his own rhetorical skills in anticipation of the role he might someday play in American politics. Second, I examine how, in the context of the Progressive Era, Wilson revised his earlier reform program and developed his theory of a rhetorical presidency. Taking a close look at his most mature scholarly work, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908), I show how Wilson actually anticipated many of the objections to today’s rhetorical presidency and proposed something quite different: a presidency that transcended partisanship, eschewed personal and passionate appeals to public opinion, and instead aimed

to educate, unite, and give voice to the people through a process of “common counsel.” Finally, I examine how Wilson, as president, generally embodied his own vision of a responsible rhetorical presidency. Recalling Wilson’s campaign for New Freedom legislation and his “swing around the circle” on behalf of preparedness in 1916, I argue that during his first term Wilson generally lived up to his ideal of a president who both led and followed public opinion. As a wartime president, however, Wilson would betray his own principles by presiding over one of the most notorious propaganda campaigns in history: the Committee on Public Information’s efforts to build a prowar consensus.

Oratory, Statesmanship, and Public Deliberation

In a prize-winning oration that he delivered as a student at Princeton on January 30, 1877, Woodrow Wilson painted a famous portrait of the “Ideal Statesman.” Declaring that there was “no worthier ambition,” Wilson described the “True Statesman” as “a man of conspicuous business ability and a profound lawyer,” but also a man of principle. “No *partizan* can be a statesman,” Wilson declared, for unless he could “rise above party and act from broad and fixed principles” he could not “aspire to the exalted name of statesman.” The “true statesman” possessed Shakespeare’s “divine insight into human nature,” along with Benjamin Franklin’s “deep sympathy with all the efforts and strivings of the common mind.” He had to leave “self out of every question,” always upholding the common good over selfish interests. In addition, the ideal statesman was “in advance of his age,” pointing “the true way” with his “prophetic finger.” This prophetic insight—this ability to foresee the future—was “one of the most important” characteristics of Wilson’s “ideal statesman.” Above all, however, the true statesman was an orator; he displayed “an orator’s soul, an orator’s words, an orator’s actions.”¹⁰ For Wilson that meant something much different, something much more, than it might to the modern reader. Drawing upon the classical tradition, Wilson’s ideal orator was a man of broad liberal learning and high moral character. Wilson’s orator-statesman was Quintilian’s “good man skilled in speaking.”

The story of the young “Tommy” Wilson’s own remarkable efforts to make himself into an orator-statesman has been told many times. The son of a Presbyterian minister renowned for his preaching, Wilson began studying the great British and American orators in history at a young age. His father, the Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson, taught rhetoric at Jefferson College and “sacred oratory” at Columbia Theological Seminary. Nostalgic for “the bygone era when oratory had a more central place in American society,” the elder Wilson “never tired of telling how he had seen the great Webster speak in person, nor of bemoaning the fallen state of contemporary public discourse.”¹¹ The Reverend Wilson believed (as his son would later argue) that all young men aspiring to leadership should train in oratory and debate, and for him that meant much more than developing a pleasing style or an effective delivery. For the Reverend Wilson, there was a strong philosophical and ethical component to the study of rhetoric. In his view, oratory was a “lifelong vocation,” and the orator had to strive not only to appear to be but actually to *be* the “good man skilled in speaking.”¹²

Wilson drilled incessantly to develop his own speaking skills, and he spent many hours studying the great orators in history. In late adolescence, he could be found practicing his elocution by reading great speeches aloud in his father’s empty church.¹³ As a student at Davidson College, Wilson was elected to the Eumenean Society, a college debating club,¹⁴ and he began to more seriously pursue his life’s ambition: to “make himself into an oratorical statesman of the first rank—an American Gladstone.”¹⁵ Wilson would later claim that his intellectual awakening came during his freshman year at Princeton, but as historian John Milton Cooper Jr. has noted, his “realization of his interests and abilities” appears to have been more gradual and “occurred particularly during the two years before he entered Princeton,” when he was a student at Davidson.¹⁶

At Princeton (then the College of New Jersey), Wilson’s study of oratory became a more serious scholarly pursuit, as well as the focus of his extracurricular activities. While pursuing his regular studies, Wilson read Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,¹⁷ and he copied passages from the speeches of Edmund Burke, John C. Calhoun, and Webster, among others, into his

Index Rerum.¹⁸ During his first two years, he also was very active in the American Whig Society, one of two literary and debating societies at Princeton, and he helped found the Liberal Debating Club by drafting a constitution based on the British parliamentary model.¹⁹ Wilson also kept a shorthand diary in which he commented on orators and oratory, as well as on his own “efforts to improve his style in writing and speaking.”²⁰ Typical of Wilson’s diary entries was his commentary on one of the rhetoric texts he had read, Louis Bautain’s *The Art of Extempore Speaking*: “Read good deal of Bautain’s Art of Extempore Speaking. It is an excellent book and I enjoyed reading it more than I have enjoyed any book in some time. The style is extremely pleasing and every page contains advice which every speaker would do well to follow to the letter.”²¹

Wilson became a campus leader at Princeton and, “within decorous limits, a bit of a rebel.”²² In 1877, he wrote a series of editorials complaining that “very little attention” was paid to oratory at Princeton and calling for a “systematic course of instruction” in the “Ciceronian art.”²³ In one editorial, he even criticized Princeton’s only professor of elocution for dividing his time between Princeton and “several preparatory schools and young ladies’ seminaries.” Calling for the hiring of “some eminent professor of declamation and voice-training,” Wilson concluded that “systematic and intelligent training” was “all important” to the development of the orator.²⁴ In his editorials at Princeton, Wilson wrote mostly about the practical skills of composing and delivering a speech, but before long he would place more emphasis on issues of character, leadership, and democratic deliberation.

In his final year at Princeton, 1878–79, Wilson published a prize-winning essay on William Earl Chatham, “the first of Parliamentary orators,”²⁵ as well as an essay frequently cited as the culmination of his early political thought: “Cabinet Government in the United States.” In some ways, “Cabinet Government” was more about rhetoric than politics, and it marked the beginning of Wilson’s long scholarly journey toward a comprehensive theory of rhetoric and political culture. Proclaiming “*debate* . . . the essential function of a popular representative body,” Wilson introduced the central issue in much of his scholarship

over the next decade: How might the American constitutional system be reformed to assure “responsible government,” government that legislated “in the presence of the whole country,” in an atmosphere of “open and free debate.” Insisting that the “very life of free, popular institutions” depended on their “breathing the bracing air of thorough, exhaustive, and open discussions,” Wilson complained that there was “little real deliberation” in the Congress of his day. He then proposed a radical solution: a British-style cabinet government. Proclaiming the “most despotic government under the control of wise statesmen” preferable to “the freest ruled by demagogues,” Wilson concluded that only a cabinet-style government could restore genuine debate and attract “men of real ability” to public service:

The cardinal feature of Cabinet government . . . is responsible leadership,—the leadership and authority of a small body of men who have won the foremost places in their party . . . by evidence of high ability upon the floor of Congress in the stormy play of debate. None but the ablest can become leaders and masters in this keen tournament in which arguments are the weapons, and the people the judges. . . . To keep men of the strongest mental and moral fibre in Congress would become a party necessity. Party triumph would then be a matter of might in debate, not of supremacy in subterfuge.²⁶

After graduating from Princeton, Wilson studied law at the University of Virginia for a year and a half before dropping out to complete his law studies on his own. He found the practice of law disappointing, however, and after a tough year in Atlanta he embarked upon doctoral studies at the Johns Hopkins University. Throughout this period he continued to write about “responsible” government, and by the time he was awarded his Ph.D. in June of 1886 he already had begun to establish a reputation as a promising young scholar of American politics and history.

While at Virginia, Wilson won election to the Jefferson Society and went on to become the society’s president and the principal author of

its new constitution. In orations and debates before the society, Wilson fashioned himself a practical speaker who appealed to reason rather than emotion. Following a debate with a future Pulitzer Prize winner and U.S. Senator, William Cabell Bruce, Wilson was disappointed when he was named best orator rather than best debater. For Wilson, “oratory” still had connotations of emotional and stylistic excess.²⁷ Wilson also reflected on oratory in a speech about John Bright delivered before the Jefferson Society at Virginia. Declaring the orator who maintained “complete sovereignty over his emotions . . . a thousandfold more powerful and impressive than he who ‘saws the air’ and ‘tears a passion to tatters,’” Wilson defended Bright against charges of demagoguery, claiming that he actually possessed those “qualities of eloquence and single-minded devotion” that marked those great American statesmen, Webster and Calhoun. In describing Bright’s virtues, Wilson emphasized how he never allowed his “passions” to “master him.” His “marvelous powers of public speech” were grounded not in physical or emotional display but in praiseworthy principles and noble ideas:

No orator ever more signally illustrated the truth that eloquence is not of the lips alone. Eloquence is never begotten by empty pates. Groveling minds are never winged with high and noble thoughts. Eloquence consists not in sonorous sound or brilliant phrases. *Thought* is the fibre, thought is the *pith* of eloquence. Eloquence lies in the thought, not in the throat. . . . It is persuasion inspired by conviction.²⁸

Wilson’s distaste for passionate display reflected his faith in public opinion. In an unpublished essay on “Congressional Government” written during his first year at Virginia, he responded to fears that a cabinet government would be dominated by “artful dialecticians,” producing a “reign of sophists rather than of wise men.” These were “assuredly the objections of ignorance,” Wilson argued, for “sophistry” could not walk “openly in the cloak of wisdom and truth unchallenged and undiscovered.” As Wilson explained: “Subtle word-play, dialectic dexterity, rhetorical adroitness, passionate declamation cannot shield

him from the searching scrutiny to which his principles and his plans will be subjected at every turn of the proceedings of the Houses. . . . A charlatan cannot long play the statesman successfully while the whole country is looking critically on." Few persons had any "just conception" of the "informing and unmasking disclosures of thorough debate," he argued, and he disagreed forcefully with those who believed that the masses could not be "brought to exercise intelligent discretion." From that opinion "I utterly dissent," Wilson declared; "I believe . . . the people's choice will be deliberate and wise."²⁹

In December 1882, Wilson submitted a book-length polemic titled "Government by Debate" to Harper and Brothers. As Wilson described the book in a preliminary outline, "Government by Debate" addressed two essential questions: "Why have we no great *statesmen*?" And "Why have we no great political *orators*?" For Wilson, part of the answer was to be found in the lack of great moral and constitutional issues since the Civil War. We have no great orators, he argued, because "there is no inspiration—there are no *themes* to inspire—no *causes* to incite."³⁰ Yet the problems were also structural and institutional, and to address those problems Wilson proposed not only a cabinet government but also a host of other changes in the powers and terms of the president and members of Congress. Wilson's call for "sweeping constitutional changes" proved too "radical" for the publishers.³¹ He subsequently conceived of a "different kind of book," a historical and descriptive study of the American system inspired by Walter Bagehot's classic comparison of the British and American systems.³² The result was the work that served as Wilson's doctoral dissertation and, when published in 1885, immediately established his reputation as a political scientist: *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*. Although largely cannibalized from his earlier writings, this work remains the fullest explication of Wilson's early views on rhetoric and politics.

Divided into discussions of the House, the Senate, and the Executive, *Congressional Government* did not so directly advocate reform, but it explored at even greater depth the defects that Wilson sensed in the Founders' design. In his chapter on the House, for example, Wilson again lamented the lack of genuine debate in Congress, complaining

that debates on the floor of the House had none of the “searching, critical, illuminating character of the highest order of parliamentary debate.” Public opinion could not be “instructed or elevated” by congressional debate because Congress had become “divorced” from the “general mass of national sentiment.” In his chapter on the Senate, Wilson emphasized another of his old complaints: the lack of great orator-statesmen. It was only “natural” that “orators should be the leaders of a self-governing people,” he wrote, for representative government was, by definition, government by advocacy, discussion, and persuasion. Yet since the Civil War, the Senate had produced more “artful dialecticians” than genuine orators—men skilled at “tricks of phrase” and “rushing declamation,” but lacking the character and instincts of great orators. “Men may be clever and engaging speakers,” Wilson observed, but they could “scarcely be orators without that force of character, that readiness of resource, that clearness of vision, that grasp of intellect, that courage of conviction, that earnestness of purpose, and that instinct and capacity for leadership which are the eight horses that draw the triumphal chariot of every leader and ruler of free men.” Recalling the great British orators, Wilson argued that in nations where oratory was valued, only the best men rose to leadership—as evidenced by Sir Robert Walpole, Chatham, Burke, William Pitt, and William Gladstone. This, then, was the surest protection against demagoguery, according to Wilson: a class of men educated to be “orator-statesmen,” along with a public sufficiently informed and engaged to demand leadership by men of character and vision.³³

In *Congressional Government*, Wilson had yet to recognize the potential of the presidency to provide the public leadership that he found lacking in a system dominated by Congress. At this point, he remained focused on the shortcomings of Congress and the implications of the lack of genuine debate for public opinion and representative democracy. “An effective representative body,” Wilson wrote, “ought . . . not only to speak the will of the nation, . . . but also to lead it to its conclusions, to utter the voice of its opinions, and to serve as its eyes in superintending all matters of government,—which Congress does not do.” Congress not only failed “to embody the wisdom and will of its constituents”;

it also failed to seize “opportunities for informing and guiding public opinion.” As a result, those tasks had fallen to the press, which spoke “entirely without authority” and privileged the “gossip of the street.” The only hope was that men with “something very like genius”—men with that “extraordinary gift of eloquence”—might return to Congress and once again “captivate” the public. Unfortunately, that was not something that every generation could hope to see, Wilson lamented, as “genius and eloquence” were too “rare to be depended upon for the instruction and guidance of the masses.”³⁴

The publication of *Congressional Government* capped an eventful year in which Wilson married and also accepted his first faculty position at Bryn Mawr College. After an uninspiring three years at Bryn Mawr, Wilson moved to Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where he remained until his return to Princeton in 1890. At Princeton, Wilson’s academic reputation soared as he developed a reputation as an outstanding classroom lecturer and published prolifically. Between 1893 and 1902, Wilson published nine books and thirty-five articles, beginning with a history of the Civil War, *Division and Reunion*, and ending with his five-volume *History of the American People*. These works lacked the scholarly merits of *Congressional Government*, but with their emphasis on broad themes and American heroes, they attracted a more popular readership and earned Wilson a national reputation.³⁵

As a professor at Princeton, Wilson helped develop an undergraduate curriculum to prepare students for public service. He also earned a noteworthy reputation as a public lecturer. Wilson’s papers from the 1890s are filled with reports of public lectures and addresses before alumni groups, historical and literary clubs, professional and community organizations, and churches on such topics as “Leaders of Men” and “Patriotism in Time of Peace.” Wilson’s triumphal moment came at Princeton’s sesquicentennial celebration in 1896, when he delivered what the editors of the Wilson Papers have called “the outstanding speech of his academic career and one of the noblest of his lifetime”: “Princeton in the Nation’s Service.”³⁶ Partly a celebration of the school’s history and partly a statement of his own educational philosophy, the address recalled the long list of public men associated with Princeton

and celebrated its “spirit of service.” Yet beyond such platitudes, the address challenged the Progressive Era’s faith in science and defended “the old drill, the old memory of times gone by, the old schooling in precedent and tradition.” Imagining his “perfect place of learning,” Wilson described “a free place” where “sagacious” and “hard-headed” men debated the “world’s questions” and became accustomed to the “rough ways of democracy.” It was a place of high ideals but “no fool’s paradise.” Wilson wanted students to “hear the truth about the past and hold debate about the affairs of the present,” but they were to do so “with knowledge and without passion.”³⁷ Echoing his schoolboy reflections on the ideal statesman, Wilson advocated combining an old-fashioned liberal arts education with the rough-and-tumble of political debate. It was, in some ways, a bold departure from prevailing pedagogical thought. But as the editors of the Wilson Papers have concluded, the sesquicentennial address made him one of the most “highly favored” professors at Princeton and eventually “echoed far beyond the Princeton campus.”³⁸

In 1902, the trustees of Princeton unanimously elected Wilson the thirteenth president of the college. By that time, he already had become well known as an educator and a scholar, and his views on oratory and statesmanship had been widely published. As Dayton David McKean noted in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, “Wilson never published any systematic statement of his views on the art of public speaking,” but he did develop an implicit theory of rhetoric in his writings on history and politics. First, “content” was “fundamental to eloquence,” for Wilson believed that eloquence could never be achieved in the absence of “high and noble thoughts.” Second, he stressed the need to adapt to one’s audiences, yet he most admired those orators who did so without compromising their principles and convictions. Third, he advocated emotional self-restraint, for an excess of passion could undermine even the best ideas and frighten more moderate and practical men. According to McKean, these principles were not only implicit in Wilson’s scholarly writings, but they also guided his own oratorical practices, both as an academic and a politician.³⁹

Yet Wilson's theory of rhetoric went well beyond such textbook principles of effective public speaking. Distinguishing the genuine orator-statesman from the artful dialectician, Wilson recognized that sophistry might win over an audience, but only the orator-statesman exhibited the true spirit of eloquence—a spirit rooted in broad, liberal learning, an understanding of the “character, spirit, and thought of the nation,” and knowledge of “the history and leading conceptions” of the nation's political institutions. Wilson did not view such popular “spellbinders” as William Jennings Bryan or Robert La Follette as true orator-statesmen. To the contrary, he found it troubling that the likes of Bryan could compete for the White House with only “a good voice and a few ringing sentences.” He complained more generally about the popularity of speakers who “disturb without instructing” and who “exaggerate, distort, [and] distract.”⁴⁰ If one hoped to “catch some of the true spirit of oratory,” if one hoped to “bring back to the ears and hearts of the American people some of the old strains of eloquence which used to delight them,” there was only one way, according to Wilson: by studying and emulating the great orators of history, particularly Demosthenes and the “great English orators.” Calling “the imitation of classical models” the “chief and best means of training the orator,” Wilson used his editorials at Princeton to champion the oratorical pedagogy that he himself followed: “Only as the constant companions of Demosthenes, Cicero, Burke, Fox, Canning, and Webster can we hope to become orators.”⁴¹

During the Progressive Era, Woodrow Wilson would continue to refine his views on oratory and political leadership. He also would put those theories to the test, first as president of Princeton, then as a rising young star of the Democratic Party. Consistent with his early writings, Wilson seized his “opportunities for informing and guiding public opinion.”⁴² Embodying his own ideals as an orator-statesman, he earned a reputation as a reformer with extraordinary oratorical talents. Yet Wilson also learned that there were limits to what one could accomplish through oratory—something he had recognized in his undergraduate writings. “In a free government founded on public opinion,” Wilson observed in his biographical sketch of Chatham, the “great principles

must be worked out cautiously, step by step.” Public opinion “must not be outstripped,” he observed, “but kept pace with.”⁴³ In his zeal as a reformer, Wilson sometimes lost sight of that principle.

Rhetoric and Public Opinion in the Progressive Era

The Progressive Era was “a very different age,” as Woodrow Wilson himself put it during the 1912 campaign. It was a “new social age,” a “new era of human relationships.”⁴⁴ In textbook accounts, the Progressive Era has been defined as a period of rapid social change as reformers restored government “to the hands of the people,” then used that “popularly controlled government to regulate industry, finance, transportation, agriculture, and foreign policy in the interest of the many rather than the few.” In the conventional view, journalistic “muckrakers” pointed the way during this period of democratization and social progress, and the reform impulse “reached a climax” under the leadership of Woodrow Wilson.⁴⁵

Serious historical scholarship has long complicated this conventional wisdom. As early as 1955, Hofstadter described progressivism as “a rather vague and not altogether cohesive or consistent movement” that aimed at “some not very clearly specified self-reformation.” Hofstadter was also among the first to sense “much that was retrograde and delusive” in the spirit of the progressivism—even “a little that was vicious.”⁴⁶ In the 1960s, New Left revisionists went even further, arguing that “the period from approximately 1900 until the United States’ intervention in the war”—the period “labeled the ‘progressive’ era by virtually all historians”—was “really an era of conservatism.” According to Gabriel Kolko, for example, businessmen “defined the limits” of governmental intervention into economic affairs, and political capitalism “redirected the radical potential of mass grievances and aspirations” by channeling them into reform efforts that were “frequently designed by businessmen to serve the ends of business.”⁴⁷

Historians today generally recognize the Progressive Era as a complex mix of diverse and often contradictory impulses. As Ellen Fitzpatrick has argued, the “heterogeneity” of progressives across the nation has

“discouraged historians who have sought to define a singular Progressive movement.”⁴⁸ Moreover, historians now recognize that not “everything that happened in the period, or for that matter everything done under the banner of reform,” represented “progress”—at least by “any modern definition” of the term.⁴⁹ At home, blacks suffered through the worst period in race relations since the Civil War during the Progressive Era, while abroad “progressive” America “warred ruthlessly on subject peoples, dominated weaker neighbors, and exerted its power over much of the world.”⁵⁰ In race relations and foreign policy, what Hofstadter described as the “retrograde” impulses of the Progressive Era were especially obvious. For some historians, generalizations about “progressivism” are “meaningless and clear definition impossible.”⁵¹

Yet to emphasize the diversity and ideological contradictions of the Progressive Era is to overlook important commonalities that, at the time, defined the essential spirit of the age. Most notably, “practically all self-described progressives” believed in a “national interest” or “public good” superior to “special interests and market outcomes.”⁵² And however else they may have differed, progressives believed that this “national” or “public” good was best revealed, not through philosophical or scientific investigation, but through public deliberation. For many progressives, the essential problem of the age was not poverty, nor corruption in government, nor even industrialization and the trusts, but rather what John Dewey would later call “the problem of the public”: the need for improvements in “the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion.”⁵³ In an age of complex issues and unprecedented challenges, progressives worried that powerful special interests threatened to supplant the voice of the people, and they sought to revitalize and even reinvent government “by the people.” Assuming that people were “basically rational,” progressives believed that the “citizenry of America, if properly informed and empowered, would insist that government eschew special interests to pursue the common good.” An educated and informed citizenry, they believed, would demand “justice” and do what was “morally right.”⁵⁴

Many Progressive Era reforms, from the movement to open schoolhouses to town meetings to the founding of many of today’s civic and

volunteer associations, reflected this faith in democratic deliberation. In their efforts to educate the public, promote public discussion, and give more organized and efficient expression to public opinion, progressives turned settlement houses into community forums, revived the Chautauqua movement, and appointed “civic secretaries” to organize public meetings and debates in local communities. They also invented school newspapers and university extension programs to bridge the gap between educational institutions and the communities they served. Yet progressives did not just invent new institutions and deliberative forums, they also looked to the past, nostalgically recalling a bygone era that was “more perfectly democratic, when power was wielded not by irresponsible political machines and mammoth corporations, but by platform giants whose only real hold was their capacity to convince their fellow citizens to lay aside selfish and parochial interests.”⁵⁵ Progressives were thus both forward- and backward-looking. They invented new forums and new ways of talking about politics, yet they also longed for a return to the “golden age” of American oratory.

The result was what Robert Kraig has dubbed the “second oratorical renaissance”—an era in which oratory “that advanced issues and ideas became a more important part of the political landscape than it had been for a generation.”⁵⁶ In political campaigns, on the lecture circuit, and in a variety of crusades led by “a new breed of reform politician,” oratory again came to play a “determining role” in the political and social life of America. There were again “great debates” in Congress, and “in a development that would have significant repercussions for the rest of the century,” the presidency became “a mighty platform for oratorical leadership.”⁵⁷ All across America, ordinary citizens gathered in schools, in churches, and even in tents to listen to orators and to debate among themselves. By participating in such forums, ordinary Americans “learned the necessary skills of a democratic public: how to listen, how to argue, and how to deliberate.”⁵⁸ The Progressive Era, in short, witnessed a remarkable renaissance of oratory and public deliberation; it was a most “rhetorical” of times.

Yet some of the key terms of Progressive Era ideology—organization, efficiency, rationality, expertise, and science—also contained the seeds

of a very different view of democratic deliberation and public opinion. This view, rarely expressed early in the era but clearly manifested during World War I and in the postwar era, held that the “public good *could not* emerge from a democratic process that included everyone, because too many people lacked sufficient virtue and knowledge.”⁵⁹ Advocates of this view favored a large, paternalistic government, guided by experts rather than the collective will, and some pushed for tougher voter registration rules and even literacy tests in the name of “good government”—that is, as “progressive” reforms. According to these advocates, it fell upon government, experts, and other elites to organize, direct, and articulate public opinion. In this view, public opinion did not rise up out of collective deliberation but rather was manufactured and manipulated “from above.”⁶⁰

This view of democracy and public opinion did not emerge out of a reactionary backlash against progressive reform. To the contrary, it was implicit in the writings of some of the leading progressive thinkers, including Herbert Croly and the young Walter Lippmann. In one of the most influential political treatises of the era, *The Promise of American Life*, Croly endorsed the “superior political wisdom” of Alexander Hamilton and concluded that the “national public interest” must be determined by experts and affirmed by a strong, charismatic national leader through “positive and aggressive action.”⁶¹ In his 1914 book *Drift and Mastery*, Lippmann likewise proclaimed the “scientific spirit” the “discipline of democracy” and argued for a strong central government guided by experts rather than public opinion.⁶² Lippmann’s antidemocratic skepticism reached full flower after the Great War, in *Public Opinion*—“the most damaging critique of public opinion and democracy yet written.”⁶³ Yet the foundations of Lippmann’s skepticism were laid a decade earlier by what David Danbom has called “scientific progressivism.” Instead of the Christian principles that “fueled the initial thrust” of the progressive movement, scientific progressives had “faith in the expert rather than the goodness of the average citizen” and “yearned for an organized and efficient America rather than a morally regenerate one.”⁶⁴

Perhaps more than any other figure, Woodrow Wilson embodied

the tensions and contradictions of the Progressive Era. On the one hand, Wilson spent much of his scholarly life celebrating the classical oratorical tradition and advocating reforms to revitalize public debate and democratic deliberation. At every opportunity, he expressed his faith in public opinion and the wisdom of the “common man.” On the other hand, he was the Princeton-educated intellectual who, as president, declared himself “the sole arbiter of the public interest” and demanded “acquiescence rather than real consensus.”⁶⁵ As Hofstadter observed in *The American Political Tradition*, there was always “something insubstantial, . . . something forced” about Wilson’s attitude toward the common folk. The “fact that he strove so consciously to be a democrat,” in Hofstadter’s view, was the “best evidence that by instinct he was not.”⁶⁶

The tensions in Wilson’s political thought were clearly manifested in his most mature scholarly work, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908). Credited with inventing the modern rhetorical presidency, *Constitutional Government* reflected the Progressive Era’s nostalgia for great orators and debates. In its emphasis on empowering the common people, it also reflected the era’s faith in deliberative democracy and public opinion. At the same time, however, *Constitutional Government* stressed “the need for more energy in the political system,”⁶⁷ and it imagined a rhetorical presidency with enormous powers to lead and interpret public opinion. There is “but one national voice in the country,” Wilson wrote in one of the most famous lines in the book, and “that is the voice of the President.”⁶⁸

In elaborating his vision of a president who spoke for the “whole people,” Wilson recognized the potential for the president to dominate American politics. From “generation to generation,” Wilson observed, “we have grown more and more inclined . . . to look to the President as the unifying force in our complex system.” Elaborating on the sources of the president’s power and authority, Wilson wrote:

The nation as a whole has chosen him, and is conscious that it has no other political spokesman. His is the only national voice in affairs. . . . His position takes the imagination of the country. He

is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people. When he speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest.⁶⁹

If the president “rightly” interpreted “the national thought” and “boldly” insisted upon it, he could become politically “irresistible,” for the country never felt “the zest of action so much as when its President is of such insight and calibre.” The public had an “instinct . . . for unified action, and it craves a single leader,” Wilson concluded. By discerning, articulating, and enacting the “real sentiment and purpose of the country,” the president alone could satisfy the public’s “instinct” for “unified action”—that craving for leadership that went unsatisfied in a government dominated by Congress.⁷⁰

As Daniel Stid has argued, there can be “little doubt” that Wilson wrote *Constitutional Government* with Theodore Roosevelt in mind.⁷¹ At times, Wilson seemed to comment directly on Roosevelt’s leadership, and in his lectures during this same period he openly praised Roosevelt. “Whatever else we may think or say of Theodore Roosevelt,” he told his undergraduates at Princeton, “we must admit that he is an aggressive leader. He led Congress—he was not driven by Congress.”⁷² At the same time, however, Wilson considered Roosevelt “brash and strident”—too much the “spellbinder”—and he “shared the widespread misgivings about the ex-president’s supposed dictatorial tendencies.”⁷³ Prone to vituperative harangues and leading too far in advance of public opinion, Roosevelt lacked the discernment and prudence—that is, he lacked the *character*—of Wilson’s ideal statesman. He was an energetic and effective leader, but he was not of that “small class” of “wise and prudent” men Wilson imagined leading the country.⁷⁴

In *Constitutional Government*, Wilson recognized that there were practical limits to what a president could accomplish by “going public.” As Stid has argued, Wilson never suggested that appeals to public opinion should be “the sole, or even the primary, mode of leading Congress.” He envisioned presidents using popular rhetoric “to focus the political debate in order to foster a consensus behind their national agendas,” and when “feasible and appropriate” appealing “to the coun-

try for support.” Yet appeals to public opinion were not always feasible or appropriate, and the president’s leadership of public opinion had “to complement—it could not replace”—more “intimate communication” with Congress. Even under the best of circumstances “going public” provided only an “indirect form of control” over the actions of Congress. Indeed, going “over the heads” of Congress was sometimes not “a viable method” at all, as in the case of a president “trying to overcome opposition in the Senate.”⁷⁵ The Senate, Wilson wrote, was “not so immediately sensitive to opinion” as the House and was “apt to grow, if anything, more stiff” if the president tried to pressure it with appeals to public opinion.⁷⁶

Wilson’s vision was thus more limited and constrained than today’s rhetorical presidency. Wilson’s rhetorical president did not routinely appeal to public opinion. Nor did he engage in partisan campaigns to force Congress into deferring to his agenda. As the spokesman for the “whole people,” Wilson’s ideal president transcended partisan divides, and he did not seek to manipulate public opinion but rather to engage the citizenry in “common counsel.” He prevailed not by manipulating public opinion but by the force of his ideas and arguments in the “play of debate.” Wilson’s rhetorical president pursued bold policy initiatives, but he never led too far in advance of public opinion. Above all, Wilson’s rhetorical president operated within the strict confines of an oratorical tradition that was, “at base,” an “ethical tradition.” Reflecting a “connection between eloquence and character” that has “atrophied” in our own day, he imagined a rhetorical presidency occupied by orator-statesmen who lived up to “an exalted code of conduct.”⁷⁷

As president of Princeton University from 1902 to 1910, Wilson both promoted and embodied his own theories of oratorical statesmanship. In his inaugural address at Princeton, he pledged to pursue the mission he had articulated six years earlier in his sesquicentennial address: the training of “efficient and enlightened men” for leadership and public service.⁷⁸ During the first few years of his presidency, he also used a “careful program of speeches and written statements” to win alumni and faculty support for curriculum reforms, fundraising efforts, and a “preceptorial,” or British-style, tutorial system. The preceptorial system

in particular put Princeton “on the map educationally” and made Wilson “something of an academic hero.”⁷⁹ Yet toward the end of his presidency, Wilson lost two major reform battles with the Old Guard at Princeton: a dispute over Princeton’s traditional “eating clubs,” and another involving the location of a new graduate school. Championing democratic principles in both disputes, Wilson attracted national attention, but he also displayed his tendency to lead too far in advance of public opinion.

In the first of the two controversies, Wilson sought to replace the school’s traditional eating clubs with a system of “quadrangles” with dormitories, eating halls, classrooms, and housing for some faculty. In Wilson’s view, such an arrangement would eliminate “rivalries and cliques” among Princeton’s students and create a sense of community, bringing “all four of the classes” together in “a sort of family life.”⁸⁰ The idea provoked a storm of protest from faculty and alumni however, and after a prolonged debate the trustees voted to reject the proposal. Wilson appealed “over the heads” of the trustees to their common constituency—the alumni groups—but his public campaign proved too little too late. Historian John Morton Blum summarized Wilson’s mistakes and how he ignored his own principles of rhetorical leadership:

According to the principles of leadership he himself had formulated, he never should have raised it or pursued it as he did. Underestimating the force of tradition, which he ordinarily valued, he had neglected accurately to measure the opinion of his constituency or adequately to educate it. He had “pushed on” too soon, relied too much upon himself and his own insights and definitions, misinterpreted resistance as a selfish force which confirmed the merit of his own ideal. In varying degrees overconfidence and impatience spoiled his talents for perception and persuasion.⁸¹

Much the same might be said about Wilson’s second major setback as president of Princeton: a bitter dispute with the graduate dean, Andrew West, over the location of a new graduate college. With Wilson demand-

ing that the school be integrated into the university and West insisting that it remain “in lordly isolation away from the undergraduates,”⁸² Wilson again took his case to the alumni in a series of well-publicized public speeches in 1910. With West in control of a sizeable bequest for the new college, Wilson again lost the debate, and historians have faulted him for missing opportunities to end the controversy, elevating minor issues to “the status of ideals,” and displaying the “intolerance of a true believer.”⁸³ Cooper has disputed comparisons between the graduate college controversy and the League debate, arguing that the differences were “more striking” than the similarities. Yet in both cases Wilson did try to “break a deadlock by appealing over the heads of his opponents to their common constituency.” And in both cases the strategy failed.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, Wilson’s reform efforts at Princeton earned him a national reputation as a “crusader for democracy.” In the “national political atmosphere created by the progressive movement,” his struggle against the exclusive eating clubs was “readily interpreted as democracy against privilege,” even though he consistently had argued that he had “no objection to the exclusivity of the clubs.”⁸⁵ The controversy over the graduate school likewise contributed to Wilson’s reputation as a champion of democracy, as Wilson himself cast the dispute as a contest between privilege and “the people.” Speaking before an alumni group in Pittsburgh, Wilson sounded the high-minded refrain that Judge John W. Westcott would later quote as he nominated him for president: “. . . the great voice of America does not come from the seats of learning, but in a murmur from the hills and the woods and the farms and the factories and the mills, rolling on and gaining volume until it comes to us from the homes of the common men. Do these murmurs come into the corridors of the university? I have not heard them.”⁸⁶

During the presidential campaign of 1912, Wilson would build upon his reputation as democracy’s champion. Defending government “of the people” against the alleged “paternalism” of Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson transformed his principles of oratorical leadership into campaign appeals, promising a revival of public deliberation and political renewal “from below.” After the election, Wilson championed those

same principles as he campaigned for his New Freedom legislation and, later, for military preparedness. Wilson's preparedness tour in particular reflected his principles of oratorical leadership. First he took his case to the people. Then he returned to negotiate with Congress as a "spokesman for the whole people." Wilson's success during his first term in office renders even more puzzling his self-defeating behavior during the League of Nations debate.

Enacting the Rhetorical Presidency

The campaign of 1912 proved a turning point for Woodrow Wilson, as his preference for old, traditional modes of oratorical leadership and public deliberation were challenged by new modes of political campaigning. As Ellis has noted, Wilson frowned upon the "emotionalism" of the "extended stumping tours" associated with Bryan and Roosevelt. Respectful of the "old-fashioned" proprieties, he insisted that people looked for "dignity in high office" and initially refused to mount a "demeaning 'rear-platform' campaign of the sort that William Howard Taft and Bryan had conducted in 1908."⁸⁷ Finally, however, Wilson gave in and "stumped" across the nation. Promoting the platform of progressive reforms that he would later dub "the New Freedom," he "lacked Theodore Roosevelt's animal heat" and his "capacity for arousing mass affection."⁸⁸ But with the Republican vote split he prevailed in "one of the great campaigns in American history"—a campaign that "crackled with excitement" yet also aired "questions that verged on political philosophy."⁸⁹

Wilson's philosophical differences with Roosevelt not only reflected a central tension of the Progressive Era but also grew directly out of Wilson's academic writings. While Wilson agreed with Roosevelt on most issues, he claimed to differ with Roosevelt in his attitude toward leadership and popular governance, contrasting his own vision of political and spiritual renewal "from below" with Roosevelt's alleged "paternalism." Like Roosevelt, Wilson promised governmental action, but only after the great issues of the day had been thoroughly discussed and debated by the whole country. There was something "astir in the air

of America,” Wilson declared on the campaign trail, “an almost startling change in the temper of the people.” In the past, political campaigns had been occasions for “whooping it up.” But now there was a new spirit in America, a spirit of “frank discussion” and “common counsel.” Citing the movement to open schoolhouse doors to town hall debates, Wilson concluded that Americans were longing to “get together” and “hear things of the deepest consequence discussed.”⁹⁰

As in his academic writings, Wilson lamented that Congress was no longer a site of great debates. He also worried about the lack of forums for ordinary citizens to discuss and debate the issues of the day. “For a long time,” he observed, “this country of ours has lacked one of the institutions which freemen have always and everywhere held fundamental. For a long time there has been no sufficient opportunity of counsel among the people; no place and method of talk, of exchange of opinion, of parley.” For Wilson, one of the great “needs of the hour” was “to restore the processes of common counsel” so that public opinion rather than “private arrangement” would determine governmental policy. Like many progressives, Wilson championed a revitalized public sphere as an end in itself—a reform to precede all other reforms. “We must learn . . . to meet, as our fathers did, somehow, somewhere, for consultation,” Wilson declared on the stump. “There must be discussion and debate, in which all freely participate.”⁹¹

For Wilson, the election of 1912 thus became a mandate for progressive reform and for a renewal of democratic deliberation. He agreed with Roosevelt on the need for a strong presidency. But for Wilson, the president’s role was to facilitate debate and give voice to the “will of the people,” not to impose elite opinion upon a docile and disinterested public. Invoking the public of classical democratic theory, Wilson insisted that a citizen was not “participating in public opinion at all” until he “laid his mind alongside the minds of his neighbors” in public discussion and debate. Contrary to Tulis’s critique, Wilson did worry that some demagogue—“some man with eloquent tongue”—might come along and “put this whole country into a flame.”⁹² Yet he had faith in the ability of ordinary citizens to recognize and resist demagoguery. In the compilation of his campaign speeches published shortly after the

election, *The New Freedom*, Wilson claimed to “feel nothing so much as the intensity of the common man.” He also proclaimed his absolute faith in the ability of ordinary citizens to govern themselves:

The men who have been ruling America must consent to let the majority into the game. We will no longer permit any system to go uncorrected which is based upon private understandings and expert testimony; we will not allow the few to continue to determine what the policy of the country is to be. It is a question of access to our own government. . . . It ought to be a matter of common counsel; a matter of united counsel; a matter of mutual comprehension.

So, keep the air clear with constant discussion. Make every public servant feel that he is acting in the open and under scrutiny; and, above all things else, take these great fundamental questions of your lives with which political platforms concern themselves and search them through and through by every process of debate. . . .

I am not afraid of the American people getting up and doing something. I am only afraid they will not; and when I hear a popular vote spoken of as mob government, I feel like telling the man who dares to so speak that he has no right to call himself an American. You cannot make a reckless, passionate force out of a body of sober people earning their living in a free country. . . . Do you see anything resembling a mob in that voting population of the countryside, men tramping over the mountains, men going to the general store up in the village, men moving in little talking groups to the corner grocery to cast their ballots, . . . Or is that your picture of a free, self-governing people? I am not afraid of the judgments so expressed, . . . because the deepest conviction and passion of my heart is that the common people . . . are to be absolutely trusted.⁹³

Wilson generally remained true to his professed commitment to “common counsel” during his first term in office. Promoting his New Freedom legislation, he led public opinion “in a careful and construc-

tive manner," occasionally appealing "over the heads" of Congress, but rarely resorting to the sort of dramatic personal appeals that Roosevelt made from the "bully pulpit." Moreover, Wilson "consistently combined his public, rhetorical efforts to sway Congress with a more informal and interactive mode of presidential-congressional relations."⁹⁴ Most importantly, Wilson appealed to public opinion with "discretion," blaming congressional resistance to his reform program on the "insidious" lobbyists rather than Congress itself and portraying himself as "merely the interlocutor and coordinator of Congress, not its dominating master."⁹⁵ Wilson neither criticized his congressional opponents publicly nor threatened to go "over their heads." Even when he dramatically broke one hundred years of precedent by appearing before Congress in person, he portrayed it merely as one "human being trying to cooperate with other human beings in common service."⁹⁶

Wilson thus created at least the appearance of working with Congress on his New Freedom reforms. Even though he eventually would address the House or Senate twenty-seven times, making the address to Congress "a major weapon in his oratorical arsenal," he did so in a spirit of "common counsel," limiting those addresses to "basic principles" and leaving "leeway for the adjustments and compromises" that became "the hallmark" of his presidency.⁹⁷ The result, as Cooper has written, was a "spectacular, possibly unmatched, record of legislative and party leadership." As Cooper concluded, only FDR's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society "rival Wilson's accomplishments with the New Freedom between 1913 and 1916."⁹⁸

At first glance, Wilson proved less successful promoting preparedness. Taking his case to the people in January and February 1916, Wilson "failed to reach any significant number outside of those who shared already his new point of view," according to Blum.⁹⁹ Arthur S. Link agreed, arguing that Wilson was "deluded" by the "friendly editors and cheering throngs" into "thinking he had changed the Midwestern mind," a mind tradition-bound by America's isolationist history.¹⁰⁰ Yet the case can be made that Wilson accomplished precisely what he set out to accomplish with his "swing around the circle." Staking out a rhetorical middle ground between "the pacifists on one side and the

militarists on the other,” he portrayed the tour as part of his “duty . . . to hold frank counsel with the people themselves.”¹⁰¹ Then casting himself as a spokesman for the “whole people,” he returned to Washington to broker a compromise that effectively “eliminated preparedness as a party issue in 1916.”¹⁰²

Wilson had embraced preparedness only reluctantly after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and even then he did so partly for political reasons: to keep Theodore Roosevelt and the preparedness movement under “prudent control.”¹⁰³ Still committed to neutrality in the European war, Wilson proposed only a moderate military build-up during his first term in office. Yet that buildup did not go far enough for the interventionists, while it went too far for many of his fellow Democrats in Congress. William Jennings Bryan, who had resigned from Wilson’s cabinet in protest of the administration’s stern warnings to Germany, even took to the hustings to argue against the president’s plan. Wilson, however, positioned himself above the political fray. Describing his preparedness tour as an exercise in “common counsel,” he professed an interest only in clarifying an issue that had been “deeply clouded by passion and prejudice.”¹⁰⁴ More importantly, he claimed to embrace the principles animating both sides in the debate. In his speech before eight thousand people in Milwaukee on January 31, for example, the president pledged to protect both the peace and the honor of the nation. However, he concluded, the choice was out of his hands: “In the first place, I know that you are depending upon me to keep this nation out of the war. So far I have done so. And I pledge you my word that, God helping me, I will if it is possible. But you have laid another duty upon me. You have bidden me see to it that nothing stains or impairs the honor of the United States. And that is a matter not within my control. That depends upon what others do, not upon what the Government of the United States does.”¹⁰⁵

In so defining the issue, Wilson cast himself as the “spokesman for the whole people.” He had heard the “unmistakable voice” of “the great body of this nation,” he said, and the message was clear: “We depend upon you to keep us out of war. . . . But we depend upon you to maintain unsullied and unquestioned the honor and integrity of

the United States.”¹⁰⁶ Claiming to speak as “the trustee of the nation,” he explained in Chicago that he had been “called upon” to express the “sober judgments” of the whole nation, not any “individual opinions,” and the next day in Des Moines he claimed to express “the spirit of America” more truly than his critics.¹⁰⁷ In Topeka he insisted that he had come “not to plead a cause” but only to “sweep away” untruths that might “cloud the issue.” As president, he concluded, it was his duty to “subordinate everything to the conscientious attempt to interpret and express . . . the genuine spirit of my fellow citizens.” And according to Wilson, that “spirit” was clear. The American people cherished peace and wanted to avoid war, but they also “stood ready to do their duty in the hour of need.”¹⁰⁸

Wilson reinforced his persona as a spokesman for the “whole people” by disavowing any particular plan for building up the military. “I am not a partisan of any one plan,” he declared in the first speech of the tour. “I have had too much experience to think that it is right to say that the plan that I propose is the only plan that will work, because I have a shrewd suspicion that there may be other plans which will work.” Two days later in Pittsburgh, Wilson confessed that he did, in fact, have a plan, but he again insisted that “the details do not make an difference” and concluded: “I believe in one plan; others may think that an equally good plan can be substituted, and I hope my mind is open to be convinced that it can.” In St. Louis on February 3, he expressed more directly his willingness, even eagerness, to negotiate and compromise with Congress. “I am not jealous . . . of the details,” Wilson told the crowd of twelve thousand in the St. Louis Coliseum. “No man ought to be confident that his judgment is correct about the details. No man out to say to any legislative body, ‘You must take my plan or none at all’—that is arrogance and stupidity.”¹⁰⁹

During his preparedness tour, Wilson occasionally lapsed into questioning the motives or tactics of his political opponents. In New York, Wilson feigned surprise that some had allowed “partisan feeling or personal ambition” to “creep into the discussion” of preparedness, and in Cleveland he lamented that the issue had arisen in an election year. He then instructed: “The man who brings partisan feelings into

these matters and seeks partisan advantage by means of them is unworthy of your confidence.”¹¹⁰ In Des Moines, he accused *some* of his “fellow citizens” of “seeking to darken counsel on this great matter,” and—without naming names—he criticized advocates on both sides for stirring up a “heat of passion” and making “our air tense.” Our “first loyalty,” Wilson reminded his listeners, must be to America. Before an audience of some four thousand at Soldiers’ Memorial Hall in Pittsburgh, Wilson admonished those whose “counsel is passion” and called for calm deliberation and “cool judgment”: “It is not wise, it is not possible, to guide national policy under the impulse of passion. I would be ashamed of the passion of fear, and I would try to put the passion of aggression entirely aside in advising my fellow citizens what they should do at any great crisis of their national life. . . . I know it is not easy. When the world is running red with blood, it is hard to keep the judgment cool. . . . But, while I can understand the excitements of the mind which circumstances have generated, I would tremble to see them guide the decisions of the country.”¹¹¹

Wilson’s call for “cool judgment” reflected the neoclassical ideals of his writings on oratory. The role he enacted during the debate, however, reflected his new conception of a rhetorical president—one who both led and interpreted public opinion. Claiming to understand the “temper of the people” better than others, Wilson deciphered public opinion from the “crowds at the stations” and the “multitudes” who packed great halls to hear his speeches. He even sensed the true “spirit of the nation” in the “ardent display” of the Stars and Stripes during his tour. Embarking upon his “errand from Washington,” he had expected only to meet “quiet audiences and explain to them the issues of the day.” Instead, he had been met by large and enthusiastic crowds that declared, “in one fashion or another,” that they loved their country and “stood ready to do their duty in the hour of need.”¹¹² Like today’s rhetorical presidents, Wilson urged his supporters to make their voices heard.¹¹³ Yet he presented such pleas not as attempts to rally public opinion but as reminders of the responsibilities of citizenship. According to Wilson, citizens had a duty to speak out and become part of public opinion. Donning his professor’s hat in Kansas City, he reflected on

why the participation of ordinary citizens was necessary if democratic deliberations were to produce sound collective judgments: "We are all of us fit to be judges about what is none of our business, and that is the way that great bodies of men come to the most cool-headed judgments. Their passions are not involved, their special interests are not involved; they are looking at the thing with a certain remove, with a certain aloofness of judgment."¹¹⁴

During this tour, Wilson thus reaffirmed his faith that public opinion served as an effective check on the distortions and excesses of the demagogue. "We can control irresponsible talkers amidst ourselves," he observed in Milwaukee. "All we have got to do is to encourage them to hire a hall, and their folly will be abundantly advertised by themselves."¹¹⁵ In the last major address of the tour, in St. Louis, he again encouraged a vigorous and open debate, expressing his confidence that the public would see through the deceptions of his critics. Echoing *Constitutional Government*, he concluded: "They have a right to talk, but they have no right to affect our conduct. Indeed, if I were in your place, I would encourage them to talk. Nothing chills folly like exposure to the air, and these gentlemen ought to be encouraged to hire large halls. And the more people they can get to hear them, the safer the country would be."¹¹⁶ During his preparedness tour, Wilson may not have changed many minds. But from "the standpoint of politics," as Thomas J. Knock has observed, he "met the challenge masterfully."¹¹⁷ Creating at least the appearance of public support for preparedness, he built a bipartisan congressional majority behind the administration's program and robbed the Republicans of their most powerful issue in the 1916 campaign.

In his second term, of course, war would test the limits of Wilson's patience with "common counsel" and "cool" deliberation. In declaring war, as Hofstadter observed, Wilson was forced to "turn his back upon his deepest values,"¹¹⁸ including his commitment to "government by debate." Hinting at things to come, Wilson declared in his "War Address" of April 2, 1917, that "disloyalty" would be met with the "firm hand of stern repression," and in a Flag Day address that same year he sounded an even more ominous warning: "Woe be to the man or group of men

that seeks to stand in our way in this day of high resolution when every principle we hold dearest is to be vindicated and made secure for the salvation of the nations.”¹¹⁹ War had changed everything. The most obvious manifestation of that, of course, was the Committee on Public Information (CPI).

The story of the CPI’s unprecedented campaign to silence dissent and forge a consensus behind the administration’s war policies has been told many times, and the details need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that the CPI represented the antithesis of Wilson’s vision of an informed and freely deliberating democratic polity. Headed by progressive journalist George Creel, the CPI distributed an estimated 75 million pamphlets, plastered stirring prowar posters on walls across the nation, and mobilized 75,000 so-called Four Minute Men to give speeches to tens of millions of Americans—all singing the praises of “Americanism” and discrediting “all things German.”¹²⁰ Manipulating news coverage and strongly discouraging dissent, the CPI encouraged not “common counsel” but “hysteria, hatred, [and] an atmosphere of intolerance.”¹²¹ In the climate of patriotic conformity promoted by the CPI, there was little room for the “play of debate.”

The CPI not only betrayed Wilson’s vision of “government by debate,” but it also signaled the beginning of a new era of scientific propaganda and public relations. In this new era, public opinion would no longer be viewed as an oracle to be obeyed, but rather as a political resource to be manipulated or even manufactured. As he began his postwar crusade for the League of Nations, Wilson stood in the middle of this historic transformation of America’s political culture. The second oratorical renaissance was giving way to the Age of Propaganda.

Conclusion

Woodrow Wilson did not alone invent the rhetorical presidency. Nor did he envision today’s rhetorical presidency—the presidency of slogans, sound bites, and the “permanent campaign.” The rhetorical presidency evolved over time, and Wilson’s contributions reflected both progressive ideals and the era’s nostalgia for the “golden age” of

oratory. As perhaps nobody else, as Kraig has argued, Wilson embodied the “conflicting oratorical standards” of the Progressive Era. Combining the “élan of the old oratory” with an understanding of the “necessities of modern mass communication,” he was a “near perfect synthesis” of the “old and new,” somehow managing, “not unlike Lincoln before him,” to seem “both modern and classical” at the same time.¹²²

In dismissing Wilson’s views on demagoguery as “strained” and “inadequate,”¹²³ Tulis has failed to grasp the significance of the larger, quintessentially progressive conception of rhetoric that undergirded both Wilson’s political theory and his public speaking. Wilson did not deny the threat posed by demagoguery. To the contrary, he frequently criticized the spellbinders of his own day, and he devoted much of his scholarly work to describing the character and requirements of responsible rhetorical leadership. Like most progressives, Wilson had faith in the ability of ordinary people to govern themselves. Yet he also shared the progressive view that ordinary citizens needed to be educated in the ways of democratic deliberation and provided more forums for expressing their views. Like most progressive reformers, Wilson was both optimistic and concerned about the prospects for an enlightened democratic public. The people were capable of recognizing and resisting the deceptions of demagogues, he believed, but only if educated to distinguish between the true “orator-statesman” and the charlatan.

Unfortunately, as Clements has argued, Wilson sometimes “mistook” his own ability to “move and inspire an audience” for evidence that he had an “instinctive understanding of their wishes.” His “power over an audience and seeming rapport with its members” sometimes gave him the “illusion” that he was speaking for the people.¹²⁴ Peter Levine has gone even further, arguing that Wilson advocated “calm, national discussion aimed at consensus” but really sought political conformity. “Wilson’s fault was to declare himself the sole arbiter of the public interest and to demand acquiescence rather than real consensus,” Levine concluded. He assumed “that his own beliefs and values epitomized the national interest.”¹²⁵

In this respect, Wilson might be counted among the “scientific” progressives described by Danbom.¹²⁶ He professed faith in democracy, but

CHAPTER 1

he also saw the need to “educate” the public, lest they come to the wrong conclusions. As he left on his “swing around the circle” in September of 1919, Wilson complained that the opposition had misrepresented the treaty, and he described his tour as an exercise in setting the record straight. Before long, however, it would be Wilson who was distracting and misleading the public in the League of Nations debate. Pledging to educate and empower public opinion, he ultimately defied public opinion himself.