Chapter VIII

WILSON AS PRESIDENT
Wilson entered the White House intending to apply to the Presidency the same view of executive leadership he had practiced as Governor. (1) First of all, in his campaign and administration he sought to establish the President as the leader of his party and initiator of legislation. His attempt to do this was based on his conviction that government must be an organic structure with clearly defined leadership and responsibility rather than a system of checks and balances. The social and economic legislation supported by Wilson demonstrated his view that the government must adapt its functions to the changing needs of society. Those measures were an attempt to find a course midway between laissez-faire and socialism, which would protect the rights of individuals against the great corporate forces which had developed in the society.

David Houston described Wilson's idea of introducing cabinet government, and commented, "After he went to Washington, I never heard him refer to the proposal... Wilson had never

---

(1) "My views about executive responsibility will be applied in the Presidency just as much as they were in the Governorship." David Lawrence, The True Story of Woodrow Wilson (New York, 1924) 82.
thought through this problem which interested him for so many years." (2) Mr. Houston's statement, however, is based on a misunderstanding. Though it is true that Wilson no longer advocated structural changes in the government, it is important to recognize that he still retained his fundamental idea that the President, like the Prime Minister, should take the leadership of his party and the initiative in legislation. His experience in New Jersey had demonstrated to him that the chief executive can take this leadership within the present framework of government. Thus, Wilson entered the Presidency determined as far as possible to make his role that of a Prime Minister. He explicitly stated his intention in a letter to A. Mitchell Palmer, 5 February 1913, shortly after taking office:

... the Chief Executive ... must be prime minister, as much concerned with the guidance of legislation as with the just and orderly execution of law. ... (3)

He reiterated his conviction that the President must be made more directly responsible to Congress and the people:

Sooner or later, it would seem, he must be made answerable to opinion in a somewhat more informal and intimate fashion--answerable, it may be, to the Houses whom he seeks to lead, either personally or through a Cabinet, as well as to the people for whom they speak. (4)

(2) David F. Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet* (Garden City, 1926) II, 193.


(4) Ibid., 24.
The extent to which he conceived of his role as that of a Prime Minister is indicated by his intention to resign immediately if defeated in the 1916 Presidential election. On 5 November before the election returns were complete Wilson wrote to Secretary of State Lansing saying that if defeated, he would ask Lansing to resign. The President explained that he wished to appoint his opponent, Charles Evans Hughes as Secretary; the he and the Vice-President could resign and Hughes could take office immediately. Explaining the reasons for his decision, Wilson said:

All my life long I have advocated some such responsible government for the United States as other constitutional systems afford as of course, and as such action on my part would inaugurate, at least by example. Responsible government means government by those whom the people trust, and trust at the time of decision and action. The whole country has long perceived, without knowing how to remedy, the extreme disadvantage of having to live for four months after a national election under a party whose guidance had been rejected at the polls. (5)

Convinced that the President must take the leadership of the party, Wilson became the Democratic spokesman at the very outset of the 1912 campaign. Four years earlier, in Constitutional Government, he had argued for this kind of leadership:

(5) Ray S. Baker, Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters (Garden City, 1937) VI, 292-3, Hereafter cited as Life and Letters. The Twentieth Amendment has cut the period to less than three months.
the convention picks out a party leader from the body of the nation... it does of necessity expect him to present it before public opinion and to stand before the country as its representative man, as a true type of that the country may expect of the party itself in purpose and principle. It cannot but be led by him in the campaign; if he be elected, it cannot but acquiesce in his leadership of the government itself. (6)

In Wilson's opinion, the Democratic platform had formulated current public sentiment against special interests. His campaign speeches presented critical analyses of the changed economic conditions in America. The trusts, he asserted, had gained control over the larger enterprises of the country, stamping out small competitors and fixing high prices. Moreover, he declared, the monopolies were artificially protected by retention of high tariffs. He observed that though wages had increased, the majority had become poorer and the wealth of the country was unevenly distributed. The nation needed a new set of laws that looked to the interest of "the men who are on the make rather than the men who are already made." (7) Asserting that the government had become the foster child of special interests, Wilson pledged himself and his party to bring the "government back to the people."


In each of these proposals Wilson conceived of the government as an impartial force using its authority to create a just balance among the various interests in society. He stressed that government must be kept free from the influence of special interests. It was necessary, he said, to set up an unentangled government, a government that cannot be used for private purposes, either in the field of business or in the field of politics; a government that will not tolerate the use of the organization of a great party to serve the personal aims and ambitions of any individual, and that will not permit legislation to be employed to further any private interest. (8) He declared that the government was going to assist in distributing the wealth of the country in such a way that no particular class or interest would occupy the centre; every class would be regarded as a member in the partnership of economic development.

Though Wilson emphasized the necessity of having an impartial government, he saw no contradiction in advocating strict party loyalty. In his opinion, a strong, unified party led by the chief executive was one of the chief means of achieving the organic functioning of the government. Only when Congress was dominated by members of the same party as the chief executive, and both party and President were agreed on

the legislative program, could the government function smoothly and effectively. In his inaugural address, Wilson described the party as an instrument which the nation could use to effect a definite purpose. Otherwise, he said, "The success of a party means little." (9) Because election of a majority of one party represented the people's support for the party program, Wilson argued that it was justifiable to fill government posts with those who would support that program. (10) He did not, however, believe in limiting appointments to members of the victorious party, but thought that others sympathetic to the party platform should be named as well.

A number of Wilson's statements indicate his concern that party interests should not be put above public good. At a banquet in 1916, he declared that party politics sometimes played too large a part in the United States. "This country demands service which is essentially and fundamentally non-partisan. ... in saying non-partisan I do not mean merely as between parties and political organizations, but also and more fundamentally as between classes and interests." (11) In a similar vein he said in a talk in 1915, "Politics in this

(9) PP. 57: The New Democracy, I, 1.
(10) Ibid., 27.
(11) Ibid., II, 144.
country does not depend any longer upon the regular members of either party." (12)

In the context of his other statements and actions, however, it is clear that Wilson did not minimize the importance of the role of party politics in government. His decision to resign (13) if defeated in 1916 indicates his conviction that the chief executive must have the support of the party in power. Such support was possible, he believed, only when the chief executive and a majority of the members of Congress were of the same party.

Though Wilson placed great emphasis on the role of the President as the leader of his party, he retained his concept of the President as representative of the people as a whole. As he had said in Constitutional Government, "Sometimes the country believes in a party, but more often it believes in a man. . . ." (14). In 1916, despite the efforts of many prominent citizens to avoid partisan issues in the wartime election, Wilson asked the people to return a Democratic majority to Congress. Election of the Democratic Congress, he stated, would be a vote of confidence from the people, indicating their support of his leadership in terminating the war and

(12) Ibid., I, 238.


preparing for peace. In an address on 24 October 1918 he said:

I am your servant and will accept your judgment without cavil, but my power to administer the great trust assigned me by the Constitution would be seriously impaired should your judgment be adverse, and I must frankly tell you so because so many critical issues depend upon your verdict. (15)

Although Wilson was concerned with establishing his leadership of the party and of the nation, even more important to him was his part in shaping the legislative programme of Congress. Through the measures proposed in the Democratic platform, he saw the possibility of curbing the unjust dominance of special interests in the society, and of creating a greater degree of social justice and harmony.

One of the measures that Wilson supported vigorously was the Underwood-Simmons Tariff bill, which was intended to reduce high protective tariffs. Addressing Congress in support of the measure, Wilson declared:

No must abolish everything that bears even the semblance of privilege or of any kind of artificial advantage, and put our businessmen and producers under the stimulation of a constant necessity to be efficient, economical, and enterprising, masters of competitive supremacy, better workers and merchants than any in the world. (16)

The bill was strongly opposed by many lobbyists in Washington. When the activities of the lobby were preventing quick action on the measure, Wilson appealed directly to the people, saying:


I think that the public ought to know the extraordinary exertions being made by the lobby in Washington to gain recognition for certain alterations of the Tariff bill. (17)

He assailed those who were attempting "to overcome the interests of the public for their private profit," and asserted that "Only public opinion can check" the lobby's constant interruption of "the calm progress of debate." (18)

Wilson's statements to Congress and to the public helped to defeat the lobby and after a great struggle the Tariff bill became law. With the passage of this act the first general reduction of tariff rates was achieved.

Banking and currency reform was also of major concern to the President. The systems of private banks, he told Congress, had to be subjected to government regulation. He argued that the banking laws must mobilize the monetary resources of the country, not permitting their concentration in the hands of a few but making them available for more general use. Moreover, he asserted, the laws must prevent the use of these reserve for "speculative purposes in such volume as to hinder or impede or stand in the way of other more legitimate, more fruitful uses." Wilson argued that the control of the systems of banking set up by the new laws must be public rather than private, "must be vested in the Government itself, so that the banks may be the instruments not the masters, of business and of individual enterprise and

(17) Ibid., 36.

(18) Ibid.
Another important step that Wilson took toward fulfilling the Democratic campaign pledges was his support of anti-trust legislation. The President appealed for amendment of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law which was no longer effective in curbing the power of monopolies. His initiative resulted in the passage of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act. Also passed with his support was the Federal Trade Commission Act, which took the first move toward government regulation of inter-state commerce.

In supporting each of these measures—tariff reduction, currency reform, and anti-trust legislation—Wilson was demonstrating his conviction that the government must create conditions allowing individual initiative the greatest possible scope consonant with the general welfare. In agriculture as well as business, Wilson sought to expand the functions of the government to meet the needs of the times. Agricultural activities, he observed in his inaugural address, needed to become as efficient as business undertakings. Moreover, farmers required direct information about scientific developments that would enable them to improve methods of raising crops and livestock. Expansion of farm credit, development of water-

(19) Ibid., 39-40.
courses, reclamation of waste places, and conservation of natural resources were other problems Wilson saw facing American agriculture. (20)

Some of the most pressing of these problems were dealt with in the Federal Farm Loan Act. The act provided for setting up co-operative farm loan groups and supplying capital to develop them. The measure was important because it effected closer co-operation between the federal government and the states in the direct education of farmers. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 granted funds for vocational and agricultural education. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 or Agricultural Educational Extension Act provided for two demonstrators and specialists in each of the rural countries of the nation. By the creation of an Office of Markets and Rural Organization, problems of marketing, finance and rural organization were systematically attacked. The Cotton Futures Act of 1914 established standards for grading cotton, and the Grain Standards Act of 1916 secured uniformity in the grading of grain, enabling the farmer to get fair prices and giving him an incentive for better production. The United States Warehouse Act of 1916 provided better storage facilities for crops by requiring crop warehouses to be licensed by the Department of Agriculture. To facilitate transportation in rural areas, the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 was passed. (21)

(20) Ibid., 4.
Plowed with the result of agricultural legislation, Wilson wrote to a member of Congress:

"I am glad to have had an opportunity to take part in the execution of this large program, which, I believe, will result in making agriculture more profitable and country life more comfortable and attractive, and therefore insure the retention in rural districts of an efficient and contented population."

Although Wilson attacked the problems of economic reform first, he always bore in mind the need for social legislation. In his campaign he had outlined the broad principles on which social legislation must be based:

"The firm basis of government is justice... There can be no equality of opportunity, the first essential of justice in the body politic, if men and women and children be not shielded in their lives, their very vitality, from the consequences of great industrial and social processes which they can not alter, control, or singly cope with. Society must see to it that it does not itself crush or weaken or damage its own constituent parts..."

Social justice, he argued, requires enactment of "Sanitary laws, pure food laws, and laws determining conditions of labor which individuals are powerless to determine for themselves..." (24)

One of the most important pieces of labour legislation enacted during Wilson's administration was the Child Labor Act of 1916. Though a number of states had already enacted

(22) PPWJ: The New Democracy, II, 263.
(23) Ibid., I, 4.
(24) Ibid.
child labour laws, this act was the first national law preventing the employment of children in dangerous or injurious occupations. In 1916 Congress also passed the Workmen's Compensation law. The Adamson Act established an eight-hour day on all inter-state railroads. The Lafayette Seamen's Act of 1915 did a great deal to improve the life of sailors in the merchant marine.

The emergence of war in Europe forced Wilson to focus his attention primarily on foreign affairs. It is only a guess to say that had it not been for the war Wilson's administration would have made further strides in bringing about social reform.

As this brief review has shown, most of the proposals in the Democratic platform of 1912 were enacted during Wilson's administration. Though part of this success was undoubtedly due to the economic, social, and political conditions of the nation, it can hardly be doubted that a major factor was Wilson's dynamic personal leadership. His constant contact with Congress as a whole and with individual legislators was unprecedented in the history of his office. Within the framework of his constitutional powers, he utilized extra-constitutional means of influencing legislation. His methods of dealing with Congress offer an excellent illustration of his pragmatic approach to the administration of government. Though he was convinced that the most workable government structure is based on a parliamentary system, he was forced
to work within the Presidential system. Within that system, however, he succeeded in effecting many of the principles of parliamentary government, and in making his position nearly that of a Prime Minister.

When Wilson first appeared before Congress on 4 March 1913 to deliver his inaugural address, he was breaking a 150-year-old tradition. Not since Washington and John Adams had the President addressed Congress in person. Wilson explained that he broke the custom in order:

... to verify for myself the impression that the President of the United States is a person, not a mere department of the Government having Congress from some isolated island of jealous power, sending messages, not speaking naturally and with his own voice. ... (25)

From then on Wilson appeared before Congress throughout his administration. By such personal contact he hoped to break down the traditional barriers between the Senate and the chief executive. His statement in Constitutional Government clarifies his view:

As it is now, the President and Senate are apt to deal with each other with the formality and punctilio of powers united by no common tie except the ... tie of public interest, but it is within their choice to change the whole temper of affairs in such matters and to exhibit the true spirit of the Constitution by coming into intimate relations of mutual confidence, by a change of attitude which can perhaps be effected more easily upon the initiative of the President than upon the initiative of the Senate. (26)

(25) Ibid., 32.

(26) Constitutional Government, 140.
Wilson's speeches to Congress were not only a direct message to the legislators; they were also an indirect appeal to public opinion. In this way he sought to utilize the pressure of public sentiment in order to move recalcitrant members of Congress into action. His efforts to secure passage of the Underwood-Simons Tariff Bill offer a good illustration of the way Wilson dealt with both Congress and the public to win support for the legislative programme. As mentioned earlier, Wilson appeared before Congress to give a special address asking for a reduction in tariff rates. When passage of the bill was being delayed by the tariff lobby, he appealed to the people over the heads of Congress in a statement to the press. Calling attention to the activity of the lobby, he warned, "The newspapers are being filled with paid advertisements calculated to mislead the judgment of public men not only, but also the public opinion of the country itself." (27)

To gain the united support of the Democratic members of Congress, Wilson also made use of the legislative caucus. While the Underwood Tariff Bill was being discussed, a caucus of the Democratic representatives was called at Wilson's insistence. After the President and the Congressmen discussed

the measure, the group voted to support it as party policy. (28) On 7 July, the first caucus of the Democratic senators that session, Wilson met with the group, and they also voted to support the tariff bill. (29) Wilson's influence in the caucus was clearly felt. Even Senator F. L. Simons, Chairman of the Finance Committee, requested Wilson to write his opinions on the income tax provisions of the tariff bill, so that Simons could use the statement in the caucus to bring dissident senators into line. (30) Senators refusing to follow the decision of the caucus sometimes received a personal communication from the President. To Senator John R. Thorton, Wilson wrote:

Undoubtedly, you should have felt yourself perfectly free in the caucus to make every effort to carry out the promises you had made to your own people, but when it comes to the final action, my own judgment is perfectly clear. No party can ever for any length of time control the Government or serve the people which cannot command the allegiance of its own minority. I feel that there are times, after every argument has been given full consideration and men of equal public conscience

---

(28) Life and Letters (Garden City, 1931) IV, 112-13. Wilson had written in Congressional Government that, "... within Congress / there is / no visible, and therefore no controllable party organisation. The only bond of cohesion is the caucus, which occasionally whips a party together for co-operative action against the time for casting its vote upon some critical question." Woodrow Wilson, Congressional Government (New York, 1956) 30.


have conferred together, when those who are overruled should accept the principle of party government and act with the colleagues through whom they expect to see the country best and most permanently well served. (31)

Thus, it was under the regular influence of Wilson's leadership that Democrats used the caucus to secure enactment of a number of bills. As W. F. Willoughby observed; in no other administration has the party caucus been used so effectively to obtain united party support for legislation. (32)

Wilson also used other tactics to pressure Congress into passing the legislation he supported. When the legislators failed to take final action on the tariff and currency reform bills during the regular session, Wilson held Congress throughout the summer, opposing adjournment until the laws were enacted. (33) He threatened to reconvene Congress if it voted to adjourn without passing the bills. Wilson was reported to have told his Secretary of the Treasury, William G. McAdoo:

Please say to the gentlemen on the Hill who will urge postponement of this matter that Washington weather, specially in these days, fully agrees with me and unless final action is taken on this measure at this session I will immediately call Congress in extraordinary session to act upon this matter. (34)


(32) W. F. Willoughby, Principles of Legislative Organization and Administration (Washington, 1934) 559-64.

(33) Life and Letters, IV, 182.

(34) J. P. Tumulty, Woodrow Wilson As I know Him (Garden City, 1921) 174.
On two occasions Wilson even threatened to resign if the Democratic-controlled Congress failed to support his policies; namely the debate on the Panama Canal tolls and the Kellogg resolution. (35) When the question of repealing the Panama Canal tolls was before Congress, Wilson reportedly said, 'In case of failure in this matter, I shall go to the country, after my resignation is tendered, and ask it to say whether America is to stand ... as a nation that violates its contracts as more matters of convenience, upon a basis of expediency.' (36)

Through his public statements Wilson exerted a great deal of influence on Congress. Equally important, however, were the President's private contacts with members of his cabinet and with individual senators and congressmen. Before every session of Congress Wilson drew up a list of measures which he wanted Congress to adopt. He then discussed the list with certain members of the cabinet and with leaders in the House and Senate. (37) In this way he not only gained support for the programme he had outlined but he used his influence to block


(36) Life and Letters, IV, 415.

(37) Wilson explained to Congressman Scott Ferris on 13 May 1914 that certain proposals were not on the legislative programme because ' ... I did not see when the House leaders conferred with me just how it was possible to put these bills on a program which represented the effort of the party to carry out its platform obligations.' Wilson Papers.
passage of laws which in his opinion conflicted with the party's basic principles. The impact of those conferences was attested by Albert S. Burleson, Postmaster General, who wrote, "For six years we invariably put through these programs as outlined by Woodrow Wilson." (38)

While the Underwood-Simmons Tariff bill was being framed and debated, Wilson kept in constant touch with Representative Oscar Underwood and Senator F. L. Simmons. He also consulted other members of both House and Senate. In the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, Congressman E. Y. Webb related that Wilson personally drafted the clause, "The labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce." (39) In reference to the Federal Reserve Act, Representative Carter Glass later wrote that Wilson dominated the entire discussion of the measure. (40) He wrote, "It has been a pleasure to follow your intelligent, patriotic and courageous leadership, without which nothing worth while could have been accomplished." (41) With regard to the controversial question of who would be entitled to the credit of the Federal Reserve Act, Baker wrote, "the credit belongs to no one man and to no one group. . . . Upon one thing


(40) Life and Letters, IV, 103-200.

(41) Ibid., 200.
alone all of the controversialists are agreed, that if it had not been for the far-seeing statesmanship, the wise, steady, unrelenting leadership of the President, a satisfactory Federal Reserve Act could not have become a reality." (42)

In numerous instances Wilson arranged to have bills drafted so that they would be ready for presentation to Congress. He once wrote to William G. McAdoo, Secretary of the Treasury, regarding the railroad legislation he advocated:

... It would be of great service to me if the lawyers who are serving you would have ready for me by the time Congress opens, if possible, a bill embodying the guarantees which I could place in the hands of the chairman of the committees concerned. (43)

After approving the draft of the bill he had requested, he would send it over to a member of Congress or to the chairman of the standing committee having the power to deal with it. When unsure about which legislator he should contact, he consulted members of his cabinet. On 16 January 1918 he wrote to Albert S. Burleson, the Postmaster General:

Enclosed are drafts of two bills the great importance of which you will see at once. I am sending them to you to ask your judgment as to how they should be brought to the attention of the leaders on the Hill. By

---

(42) Ibid., 168.

(43) Life and Letters (Garden City, 1939) VII, 438. Wilson even had independent establishments propose bills for him. For example, on 7 May 1917 Wilson wrote to Colonel House that The Shipping Board had bills prepared and ready for introduction. Ibid., 56.
trouble is that I do not know what committee chairman or chairman should be consulted. Won't you give me the right tip? (44)

Wilson not only worked until the bills he wanted were introduced; he also saw them through the different stages of progress. While bills were pending in standing committees, the President made personal contacts with chairman and other Committee members. During his first term he met the senate finance committee in the President's room in the Capitol—the first time since Lincoln's administration a President had conferred with legislators on Capitol Hill. (45) At various other times he called committee members to the White House to discuss pending bills. (46)

Aware of the danger of bills expiring in House and Senate calendars, Wilson maintained regular correspondence with leading members of Congress, writing often to Champ Clark, the Speaker of the House of Representatives. (47) His letter to Representative Edward W. Pou in regard to the McLean resolution is an example of the deferential, yet assertive approach Wilson used in these letters:

... I take the liberty of calling your attention, as ranking member of the Committee, to a matter of grave concern to the country which can, I believe,

(44) Ibid., 472.
(46) Carter Glass, An Adventure in Constructive Finance (Garden City, 1927) 130.
be handled under the rules of the House, only by
that Committee. . . . The matter . . . lies so
clearly within the field of Executive initiative
that I venture to hope that your Committee will
not think that I am taking unwarranted liberty
in making this suggestion as to the business of
the House. . . . (48)

Wilson not only maintained close contact with leaders
of both houses but with the rank and file members of Congress
as well. Through personal conferences, telephone calls, and
letters he called their attention to the legislation which
most concerned him. Sometimes he expressed his appreciation to
members of Congress who had given active support to measures
Wilson favoured. To Senator Leo S. Overman he wrote:

You are a splendid fighter. I am following your
present generous and able course in pushing the
bill with appreciation and admiration, and wanted
to give myself the pleasure of sending you at
least this line. (49)

Although Wilson generally tried to be tactful in his
dealings with members of Congress, at times he was strict and
uncompromising. He often called legislators who disagreed with
him to the White House, and told them that they were not right.
Sometimes he sought to discipline recalcitrant members of
Congress by cutting off their patronage. For example, he wrote
on 26 January 1918 to Attorney General Thomas W. Gregory:

. . . we not only ought to pay no attention to
Senator Vardaman's recommendations for office,
but that we ought studiously to avoid nominating
men whom he picks out. . . . (50)

(48) PPT: The New Democracy, II, 129.
(49) Life and Letters (Garden City, 1939) VIII, 93 . .
(50) Ibid., VII, 501.
His personal letters, calls and conferences undoubtedly made an impact on legislation. At every phase of legislative process Wilson exerted his influence. He and his assistants took an active part in drafting bills, and once the bills were introduced Wilson used all possible means to secure their adoption. He delivered messages to Congress, exerted pressure on those who disagreed, encouraged the supporters, and worked to prevent bills from dying in committees. He and his assistants carefully scrutinized amendments to bills in order to detect changes that might distort the measure's original purpose.

Only after the 1918 elections when the Democratic party lost control of Congress did Wilson find himself unable to take a leading part in legislation. He had no way of forcing a Republican-controlled Congress to follow his lead. Wilson's position illustrated that he considered the major weakness of the American system of government. He had long asserted that a government could not function effectively when there was opposition between the legislature and the chief executive. Since the United States President did not require the support of the party in power to retain his office, he could find himself in the position Wilson occupied in 1918—that of a chief executive ineffectually trying to lead a Congress controlled by the opposition.

Despite the experience of the last two years of his term, however, Wilson demonstrated that it was possible within—
the framework of the United States Constitution to bring about a closer harmony between the working of the legislature and the chief executive. Because he was flexible enough to try to adapt the principles of his political thought to the American system, he was able, during the period reviewed, to exercise a remarkable degree of influence on the legislation, and, as Professor Clinton Rossiter puts it, achieve "genuine triumph as a catalyst of Congressional action." (51) Using all the constitutional and extra-constitutional powers at his command, he led Congress in the enactment of the legislative programme that to him was one step in the creation of the social justice he had long envisioned.