

7-13-2012

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Recommended Citation

Mancher, Zachary (2012) "The Presidents Skowronek Forgot: How Preemptive Presidents Follow Similar Paths in Campaigns, Domestic Policy, and Foreign Policy As Shown Through Eisenhower and Clinton," *Colgate Academic Review*: Vol. 5, Article 11. Available at: <http://commons.colgate.edu/car/vol5/iss1/11>

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The Presidents Skowronek Forgot: How Preemptive Presidents Follow Similar Paths in Campaigns, Domestic Policy, and Foreign Policy As Shown Through Eisenhower and Clinton

Zachary Mancher, 2009

I wrote this paper while on the political science department study group in Washington, D.C. The inspiration for this paper came from two sources. The first was Stephen Skowronek's book, *The Politics Presidents Make*, in which he divides all of the Presidents into four categories: Reconstructionists (Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR), Orthodox Innovators/Articulators (Monroe, Polk, LBJ, etc), Disjunctive Presidents (Hoover, Carter, etc), and Preemptive Presidents (Nixon, Wilson, etc). He goes through history explaining the similarities of the first three types, but completely ignores the Preemptive Presidents. I wanted to fill this gap. The other source of my inspiration came from the fact that my fascination with politics began after Bill Clinton, the President I grew up with, had left office. I wanted to know why he evokes such different emotions from people on opposite sides of the political spectrum. I wanted to know where he would fit into history. This paper taught me fascinating things about the workings of the individual administrations of Bill Clinton and Dwight Eisenhower and about the institution of the Presidency, itself. It has allowed me to not only speak more knowledgeably about these Presidents, but also to incorporate new information about other Presidents into a more refined schema and recognize as future Presidents repeat the same patterns.

Theory

Stephen Skowronek tells us that presidents use "the politics of preemption" when they are opposition leaders coming to power in resilient regimes.¹ These presidents, while free of commitments to the regime, do not have the warrants of authority to reconstruct, because the people still support the establishment. They often

stand out by attacking the powerful regime and end up being either impeached de facto or de jure. Dwight Eisenhower and Bill Clinton were both early regime preemptive presidents. Each immediately followed one term of the reconstructive president's "faithful son," Eisenhower following Truman and Clinton following George H.W. Bush.

Skowronek goes in depth in his explanations of the politics of reconstruction, articulation, and disjunction. He tells us how

¹ Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1997), 43.

reconstructive presidents assault their situations, filling the empty shells of their parties and of the national political establishment. He tells us how orthodox innovators face challenges from both the opposition party and from within the ranks of their own parties. Finally, he tells us about the impossible struggle of the disjunctive presidents to hold the regime together when everything is falling apart. But he does not examine the recurrent themes of the preemptive presidents, of which there are many.

Looking at Eisenhower and Clinton, many similarities do arise in the way they run their presidencies. Preemptive presidents seem to be the anti-orthodox innovators. First, in their election campaigns, articulators claim to be more of the established party line. They try to be the reconstructive president, and then some. Preemptive presidents, on the other hand, claim to be almost nothing. They hold limited to the past, especially within their own party, and often try to say they will govern in a new way. Domestically, where orthodox innovators look to expand the policies of the regime to increase their effectiveness, preemptive presidents look to smooth off the edges of the policy where they think it has gone too far. Neither Eisenhower nor Clinton tried to dismantle the resilient regime of the day. Instead, each just tried to cut at the margins of the central policy of the opposition. Affiliated presidents have a habit of fighting “splendid little wars,” in continuing some long standing foreign policy agenda. Preemptive presidents, on the other hand, avoid wars, and create a new foreign policy, which involves a

different view on the rest of the world. Dwight Eisenhower and Bill Clinton both fought the same battles and attacked in the same manners as they used the politics of preemption. The final goal of the preemptive president is to bring their party back to electoral viability after another regime has come into power.

The Eisenhower Presidency

Going into the 1952 election, Dwight Eisenhower’s political affiliation was unknown to virtually everyone. Eisenhower had been in military politics as Army Chief of Staff and Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, but he had never been involved in electoral politics. As a result, he was courted as a presidential candidate by both parties. In fact, Sherman Adams, as New Hampshire’s Governor and chairman of Eisenhower-for-President committee, needed to do a bit of research just to determine in which party’s primary the General would be competing.² He finally found his answer from NATO headquarters.³ Eisenhower won the 1952 primary over “Mr. Republican” Robert Taft.

Eisenhower, as a preemptive president, wanted to break himself away from the Republican past. The previous Republican president, Herbert Hoover, had been a disaster. Eisenhower told Sherman Adams that he was looking to form a “New or Modern Republicanism.” The basis of this party would be internationalism, as

² Cornelius P. Cotter, “Eisenhower as Party Leader,” *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (1983): 255.

³ *Ibid.*

well as a domestic policy that would be liberal, just not as liberal as the Democrats.⁴ Eisenhower went as far as saying, “he was disgusted with Republican leadership,” and was reported as saying that he does not know why anyone should be a member of the Republican Party.⁵ This is the plan of attack of the preemptive president. Where the politics of articulation lead affiliates to run on the party line; the politics of preemption lead the oppositional leader to veer towards the center. As Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush ran as extra terms of Roosevelt and Reagan, respectively, Eisenhower ran free of previous commitments. This is different, though, from the campaign of the reconstructive president, who also does not follow party line. The reconstructive president, like Reagan, runs in the opposite direction, as far from the established regime as possible.

Eisenhower’s domestic policy sought to clip at the margins, not overturn, the Democrat’s new big government strategy. He made no sweeping reforms in his domestic policy during his two terms.⁶ In fact, he supported mild incremental increases to welfare programs, the staple of the Roosevelt’s Democratic regime.⁷ This included an increase in the social

security tax in 1954.⁸ Eisenhower was not trying to turn back the clock to pre-Roosevelt policies. He knew that the public supported New Deal programs, so his goal was merely to slow them down and cut back if there was an opportunity. One instance of this is farm policy, which had been politicized by the Agricultural Adjustment Act. In 1954, Eisenhower sent a farm bill to Congress that did not immediately end the farm subsidies, but promoted a gradual return to free market principles.⁹ In the face of a resilient regime, a more frontal assault on New Deal economics would not have been possible.

Some consider Eisenhower’s greatest accomplishment to be keeping the United States out of war for his full two terms.¹⁰ It was in foreign policy, not domestic policy, where he brought the most change. Following World War II, the United States was looking at a new enemy in communism spreading across the globe, replacing the pre-war enemy of fascism spreading across Europe. Eisenhower built his foreign policy around the concept of internationalism. Internationalism the mindset that supports,

“international cooperation, consultation, and conciliation; international law, institutions, and

⁴ Ibid., 259.

⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁶ Mary S. McAuliffe, “Eisenhower the President,” *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 3 (1981): 629.

⁷ Fred I. Greenstein, “Eisenhower as an Activist President: A Look at New Evidence,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979-1980): 575.

⁸ Ann Mari May, “President Eisenhower, Economic Policy, and the 1960 Election,” *The Journal of Economic History* 50, no. 2 (1990), 422.

⁹ Edward L. Schapsmeier, and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, “Eisenhower and Agriculture Reform: Ike’s Farm Policy Legacy Appraised,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 51, no. 2 (1992): 151.

¹⁰ McAuliffe, “Eisenhower the President,” 5.

treaties; international negotiations, norms, and dispute settlement; economic interdependence, growth, and freer trade; international development, aid, and technical assistance; diligence in seeking arms control; and the restraint in the use of force, except when responding to clear provocation, and then, if possible, employed under multilateral auspices".¹¹

Eisenhower wanted to move "from generalship to the brink of peace."¹² Among his foreign policies were humanitarian efforts such as Open Skies and Atoms for Peace.¹³ This fits the thesis that preemptive presidents, unlike affiliated presidents, avoid wars. With the people, and usually Congress backing their party, articulators are free to fight "muscle flexing" wars. Preemptors, though, face politically hostile situations, with the opposing party ready to pounce on any mistake or unnecessary action. Because of this, Eisenhower, as a preemptive president, had to do all he could to avoid war, including adopting the internationalist approach.

Skowronek does not group Eisenhower in with the preemptive presidents. Instead, he lists him as one of "Three Hard Cases".¹⁴ Part of the reason he does this is that Eisenhower seemed to be extremely sensitive to the Democratic regime, and because of that

he did not get impeached entirely, like Andrew Johnson, or effectively, like Woodrow Wilson. But the reason the powerful Democratic regime did not look to impeach Eisenhower is that Eisenhower seemed almost not involved as president. He was thought to be a passive president who delegated most of his decisions to his advisors. A few things lent to this overall impression. The first is that the White House did not release the president's full schedule of meetings.¹⁵ Another is that he usually reserved his own comments for the end of meetings, such as those of the National Security Council, while his advisors argued their points throughout the meetings.¹⁶ While he did not do much speaking, Eisenhower did make the final decision in these meetings.¹⁷ Finally, Eisenhower kept himself out of trouble with the opposition by making it seem like his advisors were in control by having them make announcements, especially controversial ones. The common lore was that foreign policy was made by John Foster Dulles while domestic policy was made by Sherman Adams.¹⁸ In fact, Eisenhower often ordered that specific action be taken by his advisors. Eisenhower's Press Secretary James Hagerty explains,

President Eisenhower would say, "Do it this way." I would say, "If I go to that press conference

and say what you want me to say, I would get hell." With that he would smile, get up and walk

¹¹ Thomas L. Hughes, "The Twilight of Internationalism," *Foreign Policy* no. 61 (1985-1986): 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ Fred I. Greenstein, "Eisenhower as an Activist President," 582.

¹⁴ Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 45.

¹⁵ Greenstein, "Eisenhower as an Activist President," 579.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 580.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 582.

around the desk, pat me on the back and say, "My boy, better you than me."¹⁹

He also did this to Agriculture Secretary Ezra Taft Benson. Eisenhower allowed Benson to take all of the heat from the Democrats on his agriculture policy, while occasionally tempering the Secretary, to keep the Democrats from attacking him directly.²⁰ Eisenhower seems to have avoided the plague of impeachment that haunts preemptive presidents not by accepting his opponents' views, but by cleverly disguising his own involvement and allowing his advisors to take the blame for him.

The Clinton Presidency

As Dwight Eisenhower ran in 1952 as a "New Republican," Bill Clinton ran in 1992 as a "New Democrat," divorced from the ideals of the party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter. Like Eisenhower, Clinton was running as a center of the aisle preemptive candidate, looking to serve as an alternate to the resilient regime without completely dismantling it. His campaign promises were far from the party line, and they included: the end of welfare as we know it, a middle class tax cut, and a shrunken federal government.²¹ These were admittances that the public supported the central programs of the Reagan regime. Clinton's policies were not recognizable as those of a

Democrat, but were necessary to bring the party back to electoral relevance.

While many of his Domestic policies seemed to abandon the Democrats' overall position, Clinton did what he could to save the liberal policies from the onslaught of the Republican leaning public and (except for during his first two years) Congress, and cut back against the edges of the conservative laissez-faire economic policy. Clinton did indeed have many accomplishments for the liberal domestic agenda. One of these was raising the minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.15.²² Others included a health care bill that kept people insured even if they lost their jobs, the Family Leave Act to allow workers time off to care for sick dependants, and the Earned Income Tax Credit, which cut taxes for those on below average wages.²³ Finally, Clinton managed to steal the issue of crime away from the Republicans. By supporting the death penalty, but also supporting crime prevention techniques such as the Brady bill on gun control and putting thousands more police on the streets, Clinton both made himself tough on crime while also giving an alternative to the current tactics.²⁴ In 1988, 63% felt George Bush was stronger on the crime issue while only 29% favored Michael Dukakis.²⁵ By 1996, Clinton held a 52% to 40% advantage over Robert Dole on the

¹⁹ Ibid, 584.

²⁰ Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier "Eisenhower and Agriculture Reform, 150.

²¹ Martin Walker, "The US Presidential Election, 1996," *International Affairs* 72, no. 4 The Americas, European Security (1996): 658.

²² Ibid., 659.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ David B. Holian, "He's Stealing My Issues! Clinton's Crime Rhetoric and the Dynamics of Issue Ownership," *Political Behavior* 26, no. 2 (2004): 105.

²⁵ Ibid., 106.

same issue.²⁶ So even though Clinton passed Welfare reform and declared the “End of big government,” he still accomplished the goals of a preemptive president. Without upsetting the publicly supported shift to small government by attempting to return to New Deal or Great Society standards, Clinton was able to smooth the edges where he felt that Republicans had gone too far and make progress for the Democratic economic agenda. Moreover, Clinton successfully reintegrated the Democrats as being viable political options on domestic policy in the post-Reagan political landscape.

Clinton’s foreign policy also followed the pattern of the preemptive president as set by Eisenhower. As Eisenhower adopted a new policy to the post-World War II world, Clinton adopted a new policy to confront the world after the fall of communism. Again, as a preemptive president, Clinton chose a path avoiding war. He pushed for a post-containment strategy of “enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies”.²⁷ His strategy, more commonly known as globalization, held that in an increasingly connected world, more of what happens abroad has an impact at home, and that the economy, and not military force, is the most important part of foreign policy. To this end, Clinton’s foreign policy achievements consisted mostly of free trade agreements. He signed the North American Free Trade Agreement

(NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to enlarge the community of free markets.²⁸ He also supported the newly created World Trade Organization as another institution with goals similar to his own.²⁹ In addition, Clinton cooperated, rather than fought, with the Chinese government because of their economic entanglement.³⁰

But Clinton’s two terms were not conflict free. While he used the military in multiple situations, Clinton avoided getting stuck in long term wars. His strategy in August 1996 of countering Saddam Hussein’s aggressive tactics by ordering two volleys of cruise missiles was considered a decisive, but appropriately limited action.³¹ In August 1994, Clinton threatened to invade Haiti with 20,000 troops in order to restore democracy. Clinton’s lone foray into extended battle was in Bosnia in 1995, when he sent in 20,000 troops to keep peace. While some remained into 1997, there were no casualties as of October 1996.³² Clinton successfully kept American troops out of long wars, while still performing the Commander-in-Chief duties to the approval of the American people.

Bill Clinton was not able to repeat Eisenhower’s performance in avoiding impeachment at the hands of the resilient regime. This may be because of Clinton’s greatly different tact in governing and his vastly different

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Clinton’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign policy*, no. 121(2000): 18.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 20.

³¹ Thomas Omestad, “Foreign Policy and Campaign ’96,” *Foreign Policy* no. 105 (1996-1997): 36-38.

³² Ibid., 47.

personality. Where Eisenhower seemed to be uninterested and uninvolved in policy, especially on the domestic level, Clinton couldn't get enough of it. Clinton was an avid "aficionado of policy qua policy," more than any other president.³³ According to his advisors, "Clinton never stops thinking" and holds out as long as he can to make a decision, in order that he can use the most possible information in coming to that decision.³⁴ Clinton was clearly fully involved in all policy making as president. Another way Clinton left himself open to criticism from both sides was by promising too much in order to be able to bargain down to achieve some of his goals.³⁵ As preemptive presidents face both the resilient regime and the old guard of their own fallen regime who still wish to hold the policies of the past, this gets preemptive presidents in a lot of trouble. His idealistic promises both angered the Republicans and then the Democrats after he failed to follow through on all of his objectives. Finally, Clinton earned the moniker, "Slick Willie" for often telling people just what they want to hear.³⁶ Both of these traits drew claims that he was inconsistent and unprincipled. Bill Clinton ran the campaign, domestic policy, and foreign policy of a preemptive president, and suffered the usual fate, as well.

³³ Fred I. Greenstein, "There He Goes Again, The Alternating Political Style of Bill Clinton," *Political Science and Politics* (June 1998): 179.

³⁴ Stephen J. Wayne, "Clinton's Legacy: The Clinton Persona," *Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 3 (1999): 559.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 560.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Analysis

Facing a resilient regime and public support of its policies, preemptive presidents walk a fine line between expounding the established commitments of the regime in power and attacking them too forcefully, resulting in irrelevance due to impeachment. In order to achieve these ends, preemptive presidents enter office with similar goals. They look to revive their parties, cut back on the edges of the established regime, and avoid wars. They are the anti-articulators.

First, preemptive presidents want to revive their own party as a politically viable option. They start by putting a "New" spin on the party, specifically, accepting the central program of their opponent as a permanent change to the political landscape. Following Roosevelt and Truman, Eisenhower accepted the New Deal. He went as far as increasing taxes for social security. Following Reagan and Bush, Clinton accepted small government as the new norm. He reformed the welfare system to fit the smaller government frame of the Republican establishment. This action of moving towards the center is the opposite of the movement of the orthodox innovator, who either stays directly in line with the reconstructive leader, or moves even further to the edge of the political spectrum.

Next, preemptive presidents cut back against the regime where they can. Eisenhower brought free market principles back to the agriculture industry. Clinton raised the minimum wage, passed healthcare reform (on his second attempt), and lowered taxes for

lower class workers. Where preemptive presidents cut pieces off of the legislative agenda of the powerful regime, orthodox innovators add on to it. Once again, the goals of the orthodox innovators and those of the preemptors are in direct conflict.

Finally, preemptive presidents do not have the luxury of using war as a means of distracting the public from their domestic failures. Where affiliated leaders fight wars such as the Seminole War and the Vietnam War knowing they have the support of the nation and the establishment, preemptive presidents must avoid long wars at all costs conscious that they will be continually scrutinized. To do this, they use the strategy of changing the focus of foreign policy away from war and towards cooperation. Even Eisenhower, the General, pushed for internationalism which involves interdependence and the restraint of force. Clinton also switched the focus of foreign policy to that of economic foreign policy. He pushed for free trade agreements and strong international institutions and organization. Both Eisenhower and Clinton, as preemptive presidents, had to be careful to avoid war.

Although Skowronek does not take an in depth look at the politics of preemption in the same way he examines the politics of reconstruction, articulation, and disjunction, there seems to be a set standard, based on the cases of Eisenhower and Clinton. Preemptive Presidents run down the center, then perform a balancing act of accepting established commitments while whittling away unwanted policies. They avoid wars and revive their parties, while usually ending up as political

catastrophes themselves, being politically martyred in the form of impeachment for opposing the resilient regime of the day.

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