

Presidential Statesmanship as Civic Education

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Acting as statesmen, American presidents sometimes offer, in both word and deed, a powerful source of civic education for the American public. In this article, I examine the notion that the greatest presidential statesmen have periodically sought to educate the American people about the most important of political questions. While an exhaustive account of such a topic is certainly beyond the scope of this article, we can at least paint in broad strokes and begin to examine the issue by discussing alternative civic “lessons” offered by several U.S. presidents. I focus primarily upon Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt.

I choose these presidents in particular because, first, it is generally understood that each of them ably used the rhetorical possibilities of the executive as a vehicle for civic education. Second, in the circumstances confronting them, each offered a political rhetoric that dealt thoughtfully and forthrightly with foundational questions about the nature and scope of popular government rightly understood. I argue that each president’s view of civic education, and the president’s potential role in fostering that education, is shaped by his understanding of human nature, the nature and basis of rights, and the proper ends and means of American democracy. Differences in first principles lead to very different civic “lessons.”

This article is divided into several sections. In the first section, I examine some of the relevant literature on the notion that the best presidents are necessarily civic educators. In the second section, I very briefly discuss the American Founders’ take on the relationship between the executive and public opinion, particularly as it relates to the political science of *The Federalist Papers*. In the remaining sections, relying particularly on their public rhetoric, I explain and compare civic “lessons” provided by Presidents Lincoln, Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt.¹ By comparing the fundamental ideas presented in their respective writings and speeches, we can discern an important development in the character and content of presidential civic education. We find an education rooted in remembering the natural rights principles of the American Founding (best articulated by Lincoln) transformed into an education aimed at the progressive overcoming of those same principles (best articulated by Wilson and later modified by FDR). I argue that such comparisons are important because they prompt us to consider alternative

answers to fundamental questions not only about executive leadership, but about American democracy more generally.

“Taking the People to School”: Great Presidents as Civic Educators

We frequently hear that the best American presidents are, among other things, civic educators. By virtue of their inherent visibility, and their claim to be the sole national officer elected by the great body of the people, presidents are in a position to teach citizens about policy, institutions, and ideas through both word and deed. For some, like presidential scholars Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis, at least one mark of good statesmanship resides in a president’s willingness and ability to offer the American people such an education.² Identifying the great U.S. presidents as Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and FDR, Landy and Milkis suggest that each provided answers to the question of what the regime *should be*; each offered the people a civic teaching on the proper ends and means of American democracy.

Landy and Milkis thus claim that great presidents have historically taken “the people to school.”³ This language of the president-as-teacher is, of course, not uncommon. It became a staple of studies on presidential behavior after the publication of Richard Neustadt’s seminal 1960 book, *Presidential Power*. When Neustadt referred to “presidential teaching,” he referred mainly to a rhetorical strategy in which presidents seek to garner support for policy proposals while maintaining prestige among Congress, party, and the people.⁴ Landy and Milkis seem to suggest that “taking the people to school” includes at least this much, but they also go farther. Great presidents are civic educators, they argue, when they find a way to move the people, mobilize party, succeed in their legislative agenda, *and* when they articulate policies of reform (in service of regime maintenance) with reference to the established principles and institutions of American republicanism.⁵

Elvin Lim also posits that great presidential leadership and presidential teaching go hand in hand, and he rightly observes that this idea of a “pedagogical” presidency “pervades scholarly conceptions of leadership.” He points us toward Arthur Schlesinger, Erwin Hargrove, William Muir, Fred Greenstein, and Mary Stuckey, all of whom have suggested that a large of part of presidential leadership resides in the ability to teach or educate.⁶ Like Landy and Milkis, Lim appears to single out FDR as the prime example of the president-as-civic educator here. Lim reminds us of Roosevelt’s claim that, by pursuing popular support for his policy agenda, the president is “persuading, leading, sacrificing, teaching always, because the greatest duty of a statesman is to educate.”⁷ One need only consider the fireside chats to see the point here. Likewise, in her account of twentieth century presidential speechwriting, Carol Gelderman argues that FDR understood that “the essence of political leadership in a democracy was

teaching.” As the country’s “foremost civic educator,” Roosevelt called the room where he held press conferences “his ‘schoolroom,’ the budget, his ‘textbook,’ his speeches, ‘seminars.’”⁸

For Lim, Landy and Milkis, Gelderman, and others, FDR may have emerged as a great civic educator, as a statesman-rhetorician of the highest order, but he did not do so in a historical vacuum. That is to say, Roosevelt built upon a foundation laid by previous presidents. Perhaps great presidents, those we can confidently call statesmen, have always engaged in civic education through political rhetoric. Perhaps all have “taken the people to school.” But, as Jean Yarbrough observes in her review of Landy and Milkis’ book, “it would seem to matter just what ‘school’ [the people] attend.” While Landy and Milkis suggest that all great presidents offer a civic teaching that builds upon or reaffirms our founding principles, Yarbrough asks, “how can Roosevelt’s interpretation of the founders’ principles be right and also Jefferson’s and Jackson’s?” What about LBJ’s, or Reagan’s?⁹ Yarbrough’s point is well taken. Insofar as we grant that great presidents indeed attempt to be civic educators, what kind of education do they offer? Do presidents provide different, perhaps even competing schools of civic education, or are the lessons fundamentally the same? It is some of these disagreements on first principles—and the consequences of these disagreements for presidential civic education—that we will examine below. To understand how, and in what sense, presidents have come to be characterized as civic educators, we must begin at the beginning, with the American Founders.

The Founders: Civic Education, Institutions, and Leadership

In their letters, speeches, and writings, the American Founders often spoke to the need for civic and moral education to help preserve and transmit the American regime to future generations. A general diffusion of knowledge, particularly in the rights and duties of citizenship and the proper ends of government, combined with an understanding of virtues such as moderation, self-restraint, humility, liberality, and courage, would help to form good republican citizens and foster attachment to decent republican institutions. Yet, as is often noted, the cultivation and administration of such things were left largely to the prudential authority of state and local governments, private families and institutions.¹⁰ We might ask, from the Founders’ point of view, what role presidents might have in educating citizens through statesmanship and political rhetoric.

The Founders did see a role for the president in civic education of a fundamental sort, and we know that presidents of the early republic performed such a function. This is seen most clearly in the use of presidential proclamations, declarations, open letters, and inaugural addresses. Landy and Milkis remind us that long before Teddy Roosevelt coined the term, Washington took advantage of the “bully pulpit” to teach the nation about the requisites for healthy republican government in his Farewell Address, the “most overtly didactic of all presidential utterances.”¹¹

President Jefferson, despite his ambiguity on executive authority, would help to continue the same course, particularly in his explanations of the “Revolution of 1800,” in his First Inaugural Address, and through the Louisiana Purchase. When Washington and Jefferson did speak to the people, they largely articulated and reflected upon the principles and structures of republican government and American constitutionalism.¹²

Yet, when one turns to the *Federalist Papers* dealing with the executive, there is little said about presidential education of the public, at least not explicitly. The separation of powers, the president’s mode of election, his enumerated powers, his tenure of office, and absence of votes of no confidence against the president all combine to help provide what Hamilton refers to as “personal firmness” in the executive. In situations where short-term, hasty, and perhaps overly passionate public opinion might call for policies harmful to the common good, presidential independence and firmness allow the cool and deliberate sense of the community to reassert itself.

Hamilton thus focuses on the executive’s independence from public opinion in light of the danger of demagoguery and faction.¹³ This is not the common twentieth-century depiction of “visionary” presidents educating, or leading the people toward expanded ideas of liberty, equality, and justice. Rather, *The Federalist* characterizes the president as a kind of conservator or agent of moderation. And, here at least, that function seems to rely mainly upon the constitutional structure of the presidency and its place within the separation of powers.

The Founders’ views here are predicated on fundamental assumptions about human nature, rights, and the legitimate purpose of government. Their political science rested on the notion that, by nature, human beings are equally endowed with inalienable rights, and that the purpose of government is to secure those rights. Given that we possess these rights equally as a fundamental fact of human nature, no man has a claim to rule over another man without his consent. Governments thus derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. These ideas, held to be true everywhere and always according to the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God, are most succinctly expressed in the Declaration of Independence, but they are found throughout the state constitutions, public documents, and sermons of the day.

Moreover, as Madison noted in *Federalist Paper 51*, since human nature is everywhere and always complicated and imperfect, we are in perpetual need of government. For the same reason, it is simply too risky to trust any one man or group of men in that government with absolute, arbitrary power over our lives, liberties, and possessions. Good governments are thus constitutionally balanced, limited, and structured.¹⁴ This view of a timeless, imperfect human nature informed the Founders’ design of various institutions and structures to help secure our natural and inalienable rights. The biggest threat to our safety and happiness, the Founders reasoned, is the problem of faction. The Founders’ view on the persistence of faction is best expressed in *Federalist 10*. The seeds of faction, Madison argued, are sown in the nature of man.

To remove the causes of faction would thus require the impossible: that we change human nature by finding a way to extinguish our self-love, our diverse and unequal talents, abilities, and interests.¹⁵ Human nature offered permanent political problems that could not be eliminated by institutions, education, or progress; the best we can hope for is control the effects of faction in the best manner possible.

The Founders' understanding of executive leadership and civic education ought thus to be understood in light of their broader understanding of human nature and the ends and means of healthy republican government. For the Founders, however useful excellent individuals might be, as Madison famously suggested, enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.¹⁶ And worse than the absence of greatness is the presence of demagogues, the flatterers who exacerbate and feed upon the problem of faction in popular government. Leadership, for the Founders, was intimately related to the problem of demagoguery and faction. We know from reason and experience that, just as human beings are endowed with reason and capable of virtue, we are also prone to recklessness and vice. Our shared and imperfect human nature suggests that, just as leaders are prone to flatter, the people are prone to flattery.¹⁷

One thus gets the sense that, for the Founders, if presidents are to provide civic lessons to the people, among those lessons might be the following: presidential leadership might sometimes be useful, desirable, or necessary; it might even be crucial in helping to educate citizens in republican virtue and first principles. But prudence dictates that that we not rely too heavily upon such leadership. A healthy republican government would do well to rely primarily upon institutions, and the character of its citizens, rather than upon the character and rhetorical leadership of presidents as the chief means of securing our natural and inalienable rights.

Lincoln: Civic Education as Remembering First Principles

Aside from FDR, when academics, journalists, and politicians characterize the president as the nation's civic educator-in-chief, they will perhaps most often point to Abraham Lincoln. This is a consequence not only of the profound crisis Lincoln faced in leading the nation through the Civil War and emancipation. It is also a consequence of the political rhetoric he left behind. It's been said that the actions of statesmanship consist largely in "saying something," and Lincoln, perhaps more than any other American president, had a gift for saying things that stick with us.¹⁸ Clearly an adequate account of Lincoln's, or of any great president's, efforts at civic education would require much more space than we can indulge in here. We are again forced to settle down on what we take to be the most illuminating and representative examples and themes.

Lincoln's sweeping response to secession and his eventual pursuit of emancipation illustrate the profound sources of presidential authority embedded within the Founders' energetic executive. Presenting his case to Congress in his Message to Congress in Special Session, and to

the people in his First Inaugural, Lincoln defended his actions primarily, though not exclusively, through an appeal to the provisions of the U.S. Constitution and the principles of the American Founding, particularly as expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

More importantly for our purposes here, the war itself might call into question the adequacy of the Founders' solution to the problem of faction as expressed in the *Federalist*. If that solution resides primarily in mechanical, institutional arrangements (particularly the extended territory and multiplicity of interests) and not in leadership, those mechanisms only served to stave off the war. And once the war came, some might argue, it was primarily the leadership of a great presidential statesman that guided us through the crisis. Yet, if Lincoln held to such a view, he certainly never said so explicitly.¹⁹ Rather, even in his tenure as president, Lincoln never appeared to abandon the civic teaching on leadership he offered as a young man in his 1838 Lyceum Address.

At the Lyceum, Lincoln argued that history suggests popular governments are always prey to demagogues and that, insofar as leadership is necessary, America had always been fortunate that chance circumstances offered the most gifted and ambitious of political men opportunities to put their talents to good use. And the people themselves once had an outlet for the worst of their passions in a common foe during and after the Revolution. But new circumstances re-expose timeless dangers. The people themselves, without an outlet to siphon off the most destructive of passions, turn those passions on one another. The ostensible topic of Lincoln's speech was the growing problem of mob violence and disregard for the rule of law in 1830's America. But the fundamental problem, Lincoln argued, was not destruction of life and property, but the detachment from the principles of the Declaration, the Constitution, and the laws that mob violence engenders. A people detached from the Founding principles and institutions are ripe for demagoguery. Without such a grand project, to borrow the language of the *Federalist*, the most ambitious of men might commence demagogues and end tyrants, seeking to tear down the regime the Founders built. Only through a political religion of law-abidingness and a rededication to the Constitution and the principles of the Declaration could a free people resist the temptations of demagogues and defend itself from the most dangerous of leaders.²⁰

Lincoln's views on leadership here are not unlike those of the Founders. His account of the dangers of demagoguery, and its contribution to the problem of faction, is premised on the notion that leaders and the people alike share an enduring and imperfect human nature. Lincoln once suggested that "Human-nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this [the Civil War], we shall have as weak, and as strong; as silly and as wise; as bad and good."²¹ A sober acknowledgment of our own nature suggests that we guard against demagoguery by guarding against our own destructive passions. Lincoln's solution resides in a thorough-going civic education in the principles and institutions of the American Founding. According to Lincoln, reverence for the laws must be taught in the schools and seminaries,

preached from the pulpit, passed on from parents to children, proclaimed in legislative halls and enforced in the courts of justice.²² Of course, we might add that presidents may be called upon to help foster this civic education. In great national crises, such statesmanship might be especially necessary. But for Lincoln, like the Founders, the ultimate object of our civic veneration is not the leadership of a president, but the principles of the Declaration, the Constitution, and the rule of law.

We see something of Lincoln's own efforts at civic education prior to assuming the presidency, particularly in his speeches on the slavery crisis of the 1850's. With the spread of slavery into the western territories, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Douglas' Popular Sovereignty doctrine, and the *Dred Scott* decision, Lincoln became increasingly concerned that a new and dangerous idea was creeping into our political discourse. Coming out of political retirement, Lincoln would argue that a new and invigorated slave interest had abandoned the intention of the Founders by seeking not to keep slavery on the path of ultimate extinction, but rather by declaring moral indifference to the institution (Douglas) or by even declaring slavery a positive good for both slave and master (Calhoun). This attempt to change public attitudes toward slavery could only be accomplished, Lincoln claimed, by rejecting the first principles of American democracy.

In his 1856 Speech at a Republican Banquet, Lincoln suggested:

Our government rests in public opinion. Whoever can change public opinion, can change the government, practically just so much. Public opinion, on any subject, always has a "*central idea*," from which all its minor thoughts radiate. That "*central idea*" in our political public opinion, at the beginning was, and until recently has continued to be, the equality of men.²³

In response to the slave interest, proper statesmanship would require a war of ideas. Above all, it would require an attempt at civic education in first principles, particularly in the idea of natural equality.

Lincoln repeatedly reminded his audiences that government by consent of the governed presupposes that all men, everywhere and always, are equally endowed by nature with the same inalienable rights; that no one is, by nature, wise or virtuous enough to rule over another without that other's consent. The principle of natural equality, Lincoln argued, is the very sheet anchor of American republicanism.²⁴ This the slave interest emphatically denied. But, for Lincoln, rejecting the principle of natural equality had profound consequences for American public philosophy, for it ripped the theoretical grounding from any principled, objective defense of limited government by consent of the governed.

This was the essence of Lincoln's oft-repeated argument that the institutions of the U.S. Constitution could not be disentangled from the principles of the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution, Lincoln argued, was framed to secure the principles set forth in the Declaration. Indeed, these principles justified the American people's very right to form and maintain a government the first place. Lincoln's speeches of the 1850s, especially the Peoria Address, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and his response to the *Dred Scott* decision, are filled with statements to this effect. Lincoln argued that, at bottom, the slave interest was attempting to reeducate the American public to *forget* that the central defining idea of American republicanism is that all human beings are, by nature, created equal. And when the war came, as president, Lincoln would often remind the American people (in speeches like his First and Second Inaugurals and the Gettysburg Address) about the founding principle of natural equality, that the war really was about the moral status of slavery, and that the war had a ultimately had a philosophical cause.²⁵

For Lincoln, combating the slave interest required that the American people be *reminded* of the centrality of the principle of natural equality to the very notion of government by consent of the governed. Like the Founders, Lincoln saw civic education as consisting primarily in remembering the first principles of America republicanism. And like some of the Founders, while Lincoln did not explicitly or directly comment on the president's role as civic educator, he repeatedly performed that function through his political rhetoric. Yet if Lincoln and the Founders saw presidential civic education as promoting this remembering of first principles, later presidents would offer an alternative view. Beginning in the progressive era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we witness the beginning of a very different take on the president-as-civic educator, one that focuses not so much upon civic education as remembering first principles, but rather upon redefining and transcending those principles.

Wilson: Leadership, Progress, and Civic Education

In discussing the idea of a "pedagogical" presidency, Lim argues that the notion of president-as-civic-educator was present at the Founding, but that the case for the pedagogical president is best made by considering the "theories and practices of the founding rhetorical presidents," TR, Wilson, and FDR. The rise of the modern, rhetorical presidency marks a change in the way presidents speak to the American people, a change in how often they speak, and a change in what they speak about. By the early twentieth century, in support of their policy agendas, presidents would increasingly appeal directly to the people (as opposed to Congress or party) through speech making. By going around Congress and directly to their constituents, presidents can pressure legislators to acquiesce in the presidential agenda, often by discussing not only the principles of republican government, but the finer points of policy and presidential leadership

itself. If the Founders' fear of presidential demagoguery is not dismissed, it is at the very least muted.²⁶

Yet, when it comes to presidents and civic education, the rise of the rhetorical presidency coincides with, and is intimately related to, something still more fundamental than the frequency of presidential speechmaking, going public, the bully pulpit, etc. The founding of the twentieth century rhetorical presidency was inextricably bound up with a reevaluation of the principles and institutions of the American Founding. To the extent that the Founders and Lincoln saw the presidency as a resource for civic education, that education was meant to be provided in service of transmitting the principles and institutions of the Founding to future generations. This need for civic education, indeed much of the content of that education, was understood in light of certain first principles: a timeless and imperfect human nature, that all men are equally endowed by nature with inalienable rights, that the purpose of government is to secure those rights, that faction is the greatest danger to securing those rights, that good government is necessarily limited and balanced government, etc. The rhetorical presidency as we understand it today is a product of American progressivism, the first intellectual and political movement in the United States to feature as its central characteristic a critique of the Founding principles mentioned above. We can thus expect that it is not merely the *method* by which a president educates that changes with the progressives (i.e., increased public addresses, press conferences, going public etc.). The *content and character* of that education also changes.

Although many look to TR's use of the bully pulpit as a prime example of the rhetorical presidency, the broader and more fundamental relationship between the progressive critique of the Founding, statesmanship, and civic education is perhaps best expressed in the speeches and writings of Woodrow Wilson. Inspired by Hegel's philosophy of history, Wilson believed the idea that there might be trans-historical truths that apply to all men at all times was mistaken. Such ideas were merely expressions of the American mind in a particular historical epoch. Wilson sought to help bring forth the modern, rational, bureaucratic state in America, and to keep abreast of Progress with a capital "P," proper statesmanship would require a direct engagement with the principles and limited government institutions of the American Founding.²⁷

Key to Wilson's analysis of the Founders' Constitution was a critique of separation of powers, what he referred to as the spirit of "checks and balances." According to Wilson, while such a view might have been appropriate for the eighteenth century, this understanding of the Constitution had become dangerously behind the times. A constitution read in the spirit of checks and balances unnecessarily inhibits and restricts energetic, active government. Old political formulas, such as the spirit of checks and balances, "do not fit the present problems; they read now like documents out of a forgotten age."²⁸ New economic problems exist in twentieth-century industrial America and we must overcome the spirit of checks and balances if we are to keep pace with the times. According to Wilson, the old theory of checks and balances

does not work because it mistakenly conceived of government as a machine. The problem, Wilson argued, is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls under “the theory of organic life.” Wilson urged that government “is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live.”²⁹

Above all, Wilson claimed, our understanding of the Constitution tended to inhibit the emergence of competent and energetic political leadership to solve social and economic problems. Wilson thus sought a means by which to craft a new notion of statesmanship for the twentieth century, a vision of leadership for a new age. According to Wilson:

A great nation is not led by a man who simply repeats the talk of the street-corners or the opinions of the newspapers. A nation is led by a man who hears more than those things; or who, rather, hearing those things, understands them better, unites them, puts them into a common meaning; speaks, not the rumors of the street, but a new principle for a new age; a man in whose ears the voices of the nation do not sound like the accidental and discordant notes that come from the voice of a mob, but concurrent and concordant like the united voices of a chorus, whose many meanings, spoken by melodious tongues, unite in his understanding in a single meaning and reveal to him a single vision, so that he can speak what no man else knows, the common meaning of the common voice.³⁰

According to Wilson, such leaders have a kind of oracle into history, for they see the direction in which the progress of history is moving and they can understand the common opinion more completely and more accurately than the people themselves.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of Wilson’s leader of men is his unique ability not only to read and interpret public opinion but to articulate that opinion back to the people in a readily understandable and palatable form. The leader of men must prepare democratic citizens for the next stage of national progress. Although the leader can see over the next horizon, the people cannot. Thus, the leader must not get too far out in front of the people in his policy proposals or his arguments and justifications for them. The leader of men is thus, above all a political rhetorician, of the first order. He must “read the common thought: he must test and calculate very circumspectly the preparation of the nation for the next move in the progress of politics.”³¹

Wilson eventually turned to the presidency as the most fertile ground for this visionary progressive leadership. He came to argue that the American president is not only a party leader and chief executive officer under the Constitution, but is also the only national office elected by the entire nation, and thus, the only office capable of legitimately claiming a national mandate.

Compared to Congress, the president enjoyed a greater visibility and a closer relationship with the entire American people, better able to lead public opinion through political rhetoric.³² Wilson's president is the chief legislator for the nation, tightly connected with Congress, energetically pursuing a national policy agenda. Yet Wilson's presidency moves beyond the energetic executive envisioned by Hamilton and the American Founders.³³

The constitutional presidency of the American Founders was designed in accordance with the notion that while executive authority was ultimately and fundamentally derived from the sovereignty of the people, in civil society that authority is defined, structured, and limited by the people's Constitution as fundamental law. As mentioned above, to help guard against the dangers of faction and demagoguery, the Founders created an energetic executive independent from Congress and temporary whims of short-term public opinion. These dangers could not be transcended or overcome by historical progress because they were the consequence of an imperfect and unchanging human nature; they were enduring political problems. And the Founders constructed their political institutions—including the presidency—accordingly.³⁴

But, with Wilson, the energy and independence of the American executive is seen in a different light. For Wilson, institutional limitations on government were on the wrong side of history. Insofar as human nature can evolve and develop over time—as Wilson's progressive historicism posits—institutions designed in light of the notion of a necessarily imperfect and unchanging human nature are obsolete and counterproductive. Wilson posited that the seeds of faction are not forever sown in the nature of man. Contrary to the political theory of the *Federalist*, the very causes of faction could be overcome by history. As history progresses and human nature improves, the most controversial of political questions will have been agreed upon and the emphasis in government turns from politics to administration.³⁵

Clearly, Wilson's vision of the president as a leader of men speaks explicitly to the idea of the president-as-civic educator. With the details of governing handed over to a federal bureaucracy of administrative experts, one of the key responsibilities of Wilson's president is to articulate and defend far-reaching, transformative policy to the people. In short, Wilson's president would serve as a civic educator of progress. Wilson was explicit in suggesting that such leadership would require a confrontation not only with the Founders' Constitution, but also with the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Wilson understood that the notion of natural and inalienable rights serves as the foundation of limited government. And, for Wilson, part of what the best presidents must undertake is to reeducate the people about the nature and basis of liberty, to offer a new civic education that redefines our fundamental political principles in light of a progressive notion of history. Wilson asserted that, although we tend to think of the Declaration of Independence as a highly theoretical document, "except for its assertion that all men are equal, it is not." Although the document "names as among the 'inalienable rights' of man the right to life, liberty and the

pursuit of happiness,” Wilson claimed, “it expressly leaves to each generation of men the determination of what they will do with their lives, what they will prefer as the form and object to their liberty, in what they will seek their happiness.” In brief, Wilson argued, “political liberty is the right of those who are governed to adjust government to their own needs and interests.”³⁶

On Wilson’s reading, liberty is thus no longer understood with any reference to pre-political, natural and inalienable rights, but is rather the continually changing, conventional result of a deal between the government and the governed.³⁷ As the result of conventional agreement, and devoid of any basis in nature, the meaning of liberty is not subject to any limitations or guidelines save the will of the parties at the time of that agreement.³⁸ Whereas Lincoln had once declared “All honor to Jefferson, to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times,” Wilson reads the idea of timeless natural and inalienable rights out of the American political tradition.³⁹ For Wilson, this effort was to be guided by American presidents, as the chief moral-political educators of the people, leading the nation toward the next stage in the development of American democracy. To meet this challenge, as leaders of men, the best presidents must help to reeducate the American people about the proper ends and means of American democracy. Presidential civic education, on this view, resides not so much in helping the people to remember or the maintain the principles of the Founding, as it does in prompting the people to reevaluate, or perhaps even reject, those principles in the name of historical progress.

FDR: Civic Education and Statesmanship as the Redefinition of Rights

Woodrow Wilson was the chief intellectual architect of the modern rhetorical presidency, and his vision for executive leadership—indeed his vision for American democracy—rested fundamentally upon the president’s role as a civic educator. Yet, as we have seen above, when scholarly commentators discuss presidents as civic educators, Franklin Roosevelt often emerges as the example *par excellence*. In facing the profound challenges of the Great Depression and World War II, it would fall to FDR to institutionalize Wilson’s model of presidential leadership, the administrative state, and civic education. Through his political rhetoric, Roosevelt found a way to make sense of the challenges facing the American people in a palatable and reassuring form. With regard to the Great Depression, perhaps the most significant and far-reaching aspect of FDR’s political rhetoric was his characterization of statesmanship as the perpetual redefinition of rights in light of changing political and economic circumstances. We will focus on this aspect of FDR’s statesmanship here, for it speaks directly to the notion that the best presidents are first and foremost civic educators charged with teaching the people about the legitimate ends and means of American democracy.

In response to the Great Depression, FDR routinely argued that the federal government and its president are duty-bound to regulate increased segments of the national economy, to intervene into the relationship between capital and labor, and to establish economic safety nets for the young, the sick, and the elderly. In his public speeches and writings, FDR routinely explained his New Deal policies as solutions to a potentially regime-threatening economic crisis. But beneath the New Deal, indeed fundamental to it, was a civic teaching about the purposes of American democracy and the nature of statesmanship itself.

Campaigning for the presidency in 1932, Roosevelt delivered an address to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club that laid out the political theory of the New Deal. Here Roosevelt would claim that the profound economic crises of the Great Depression required that the national government must take on a more active, more "positive" role in securing the social and economic well-being of the people.⁴⁰ Roosevelt framed his proposals in light of a progressive economic history, and his chief concern here was the regulation of banking and business, along with increased social welfare policy. We had once given free rein to "financial titans" to help build up the American economy, but current economic conditions call for a "reappraisal of values." Roosevelt claimed that today's task is not seeking out new resources and producing new goods. Our industrial plant is built, he urged. Today's task is rather "administering resources," dealing with the problem of under-consumption, "adjusting wealth and products more equitably," and "adapting existing organizations to the service of the people." Roosevelt summed up the matter by famously declaring, the "day of enlightened administration has come."⁴¹

Roosevelt sought to work with business to help create an "economic declaration of rights, an economic constitutional order."⁴² The declaration of such rights, Roosevelt argued, was nothing more than a redefinition of the terms of the Declaration of Independence, a rewriting of America's social contract. He explained:

The Declaration of Independence discusses the problem of Government in terms of a contract. Government is a relation of give and take, a contract, perforce, if we would follow the thinking out of which it grew. Under such a contract rulers were accorded power, and the people consented to that power on consideration that they be accorded certain rights. The task of statesmanship has always been the re-definition of these rights in terms of a growing and changing social order.⁴³

Roosevelt here followed Woodrow Wilson's reading of the Declaration, with the terms of the social contract (which would seem to include not only the means but, importantly, the *ends* of government) capable of being continually renegotiated. Our most fundamental rights, rights once claimed to be natural and inalienable, become rights "accorded" to us as the result of a deal struck between the people and their rulers.⁴⁴ The formulation of the social contract as we find it

in the Declaration suggests that governments are instituted among men to secure their natural (i.e., pre-existing, pre-political) and inalienable (i.e., non-negotiable) rights. Roosevelt's reading of the Declaration obscured this fundamental premise, and thus departed significantly from the Founders' and Lincoln's understanding of the first principles of American government. As such, the ends of government are open to perpetual redefinition and any principled limits to the means we might consent to in pursuit of those ends no longer have any objective basis. The means of government would be increasingly fashioned by administrative agencies, while politics would turn increasingly toward civic education and opinion leadership by the executive. Insofar as our most fundamental rights must be perpetually re-defined, it helps if we have a proper leader, Wilson's rhetorically gifted "man of the people," to see into the future, discern the movement of history, and point us in the direction we must tend.

Although Roosevelt began to sketch out his economic declaration of rights in the Commonwealth Club Address, these rights are enumerated in more detail in his famed 1944 State of the Union Address. Here Roosevelt argued that our republic began "under the protection of certain inalienable political rights," but as our "our industrial economy expanded—these political rights proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness." Today "true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. 'Necessitous men,'" Roosevelt claimed, "'are not free men.'"⁴⁵ Over time, certain "economic truths have become accepted as self-evident." He called for a "second," or economic Bill of Rights. Among these new rights are:

The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the Nation; The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation; The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living; The right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home or abroad; The right of every family to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; The right to a good education.⁴⁶

"All of these rights," Roosevelt suggested, "spell security. And after this war is won we must be prepared to move forward, in the implementation of these rights, to new goals of human happiness and well-being."⁴⁷

In principle, Roosevelt's view of statesmanship consisted in redefining the right to pursue happiness into a right to happiness itself, at least happiness understood as material well-being or security.⁴⁸ Roosevelt's economic bill of rights clearly does not demand an equality of results in

any *unqualified* sense. What it does do, however, is call for equality in particular or specific results in that pursuit (gainful employment, decent wages, etc.), elevating them to the status of “rights,” or more accurately stated, entitlements.⁴⁹ As Landy and Milkis suggest, these rights were best understood as “programmatically rights,” secured through the pragmatic administration of the economy and a government freed from the “demands of formal constitutionalism.”⁵⁰

Roosevelt’s elevation of these rights certainly resonated with the American people. Landy and Milkis rightly suggest that, after the Roosevelt era, nearly every major public policy is characterized as a “right,” asserted to automatically confer constitutional status to programs like Social Security, Medicare, and food stamps. According to Landy and Milkis, the attempt to secure these rights required a “relentless government identification of problems and the search for methods by which these problems might be solved.”⁵¹ This never-ending seeking after problems to solve in the name of securing perpetually redefined rights is the very essence of the New Deal’s pragmatic liberalism.

In effect, through such highly visible rhetorical pieces like the Commonwealth Club Address and the 1944 State of the Union, Roosevelt attempted to educate the people toward a new understanding of equality, in which the national government can no longer rest content to merely secure the conditions whereby individuals might pursue happiness. Rather, government must actively seek to secure at least a minimal or baseline equality of condition. And the engine of this change resided in a growing administrative bureaucracy and an increasingly powerful rhetorical presidency, in which the executive would redefine our most fundamental rights, and perpetually reeducate the American people, in light of changing historical and economic conditions.

Roosevelt’s view of the presidential statesman as civic educator thus owes more to Wilson’s political theory than to that of Lincoln or the American Founders. It is often noted that part of Roosevelt’s and his speechwriters’ (particularly Adolf Berle’s) rhetorical prowess was the ability to offer a radically new teaching about rights, and the very nature and scope of government, that looked like the old liberalism that the New Deal sought to supplant.⁵² Roosevelt’s rhetoric works more comfortably with the language of rights than that of his progressive predecessors. But the focus on the redefinition of founding ideas, and the primary emphasis on the administrative state and executive leadership of public opinion, reveal just how indebted to Wilson FDR’s depiction of statesmanship and civic education really is.

FDR once suggested that Lincoln transfused the concepts of the Framers with new meaning. Landy and Milkis rightly suggest that, in doing so, FDR offers insight into his own understanding of statesmanship.⁵³ That FDR saw statesmanship in these terms, that he saw statesmanship as residing fundamentally in giving new meaning to old ideas seems correct. However, whether Lincoln, or for that matter the Founders, saw statesmanship in that light is another question, a question that, in my opinion, Landy and Milkis do not adequately consider. Presumably, FDR meant by this statement that, by applying the idea of natural equality to blacks,

Lincoln gave new meaning to the Founders' principles. Indeed, Landy and Milkis suggest as much.⁵⁴ However, Lincoln repeatedly suggested that his duty was not to give new meaning to old ideas, but to resist the slave interest's attempt to transfuse the principles of the Founding with new meaning. And like the Founders, Lincoln did not claim that the statesman's duty is to educate and guide the people toward the redefinition or overcoming of first principles, but to assist the people in the maintenance of those principles.⁵⁵ The argument that FDR was forced to reinterpret the American constitutional in order to save it is indeed a powerful one, but, arguably, it does not attach enough weight to the fact that Roosevelt's recasting of the Declaration denatures the rights professed therein and robs the Declaration and Constitution of any theoretical, objective defense of limited government. Insofar as this teaching is a key part of FDR's civic teaching, that teaching is more fundamentally indebted to Wilson and the progressives than to the Founders or to Lincoln.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion briefly examines some of the civic teachings offered by just three U.S. presidents. Again, any exhaustive account of such matters would require far more than one can offer here. Nor do I wish to imply that the Founders', Lincoln's, Wilson's, or FDR's political thought can be merely reduced to the ideas presented above. But I do think these ideas are nevertheless fundamental to their views on statesmanship and civic education and I do think we can draw some useful conclusions. Insofar as presidents are civic educators, it does matter what lessons they offer. Examining the civic lessons of Lincoln, Wilson, and FDR are instructive because each offers arguments that force us to consider the nature and basis of rights, the limitations of human nature, the proper ends, and the necessary means of American democracy.

One would be hard pressed to deny FDR's lasting influence on our expectations of presidential speechmaking, and on our expectations about the kind of civic education presidents should offer to the American people. His rhetoric of leadership and economic rights should certainly resonate with us today. Yet, whatever one might think of FDR's institutionalization of the progressive rhetorical presidency, or his economic bill of rights, these things rest fundamentally upon a far-reaching critique of the political theory informing Lincoln and the Founders' understanding of popular government, and the president's educative role in it. By rejecting the natural rights and limited government constitutionalism of Lincoln and the Founding, this transformation came at a great cost. If we understand our most essential rights as no more than the result of a tentative bargain with the national government, and there are no trans-historical limitations placed up the objects of our consent, then we've arguably sacrificed any objective, principled defense of limited government by consent of the governed. The

necessity of this moral-theoretical foundation for American democracy is what Lincoln saw so clearly in his dispute with the slave interest.

Thus, it should be clear by now that when we refer to presidential statesmen as civic educators, we mean by civic education something broader and substantially more significant than a particular president's attempts to persuade citizens of his policy agenda. While such things are surely important, in its most serious sense, civic education is a part of liberal education, that is, an education worthy of a free human being. As such, civic education points us toward the question of how we ought to live together. Through our careful reflection upon them, presidential speeches and actions can serve as *enduring* sources of civic education well beyond a president's tenure in office. The civic lessons offered by the Founders, a Lincoln, a Wilson, or an FDR, for example, are just as available to citizens today as they were during the slavery crisis, the progressive era, or the Great Depression. Their arguments are guided by first principles, and through their rhetoric those principles are articulated to us. By weighing and comparing their arguments, we contribute to our own civic education today. Indeed, today, when it seems we expect as a matter of course that presidents will offer the nation moral and civic guidance on even the smallest of concerns, we are better able to evaluate and judge that guidance if we have considered well the civic lessons of the great American statesmen of the past.

Endnotes

1. Portions of this article, especially the sections on Wilson and FDR, are adapted from arguments made in my book, Jividen 2011.
2. Landy and Milkis 2000, 6. Also see Landy and Milkis 2009.
3. They borrow this phrase from Felix Frankfurter's characterization of FDR. See Felix Frankfurter to Franklin Roosevelt, August 9, 1937, Corcoran Papers, Box 210, Library of Congress. Cited in Landy and Milkis 2000, 6.
4. See Neustadt 1990, 84, 87–90, 108, 188–91.
5. Landy and Milkis 2000, 233.
6. Lim 2008, 117–120. See Hargrove 2000 195; Muir 1995, 13–17; Greenstein 2000, 195; Stuckey 1990, 97.
7. Rosenman 1938–1950, 1:756. Cited in Lim 2008, 119; Landy and Milkis 2000, 158, 234–35.

8. Gelderman 1997, 11. Lim points us toward similar statements in Schlesinger 1957, 539; Leuchtenburg 1995, 15. Also see Leuchtenburg 1963, 330. Here Leuchtenburg suggests that FDR's many press conferences "served [...] as a classroom to instruct the country in the new economics and the new politics."
9. Yarbrough 2001, 143–44.
10. See, for example, Peek 1954, 83–92; Peterson 1975, 332–46; Allen 1988, 469, 521–22; Padover 1953, 313–14.
11. Landy and Milkis 2000, 33.
12. See *Ibid.*, 40–79. See esp. 41, 71, 78–79 on Jefferson as civic educator; also see Bailey 2007.
13. Cooke 1982, 482.
14. *Ibid.*, 349.
15. *Ibid.*, 58–59.
16. *Ibid.*, 60.
17. The term "leadership" is mentioned twelve times in *The Federalist*. Of those, eleven times the term is used disparagingly. Only once is the term used favorably and it is in reference to the leaders of the American Revolution. See Ceaser 1979, 192–97.
18. See Frisch and Stevens 1983, 4.
19. Compare with the (in)famous and admittedly esoteric reading of the Lyceum and Temperance Addresses in Jaffa 1959.
20. See Basler 1953, 1:108–15.
21. *Ibid.*, 8:101.
22. *Ibid.*, 1:112. Lincoln's words here are especially reminiscent of John Adams' advice to the colonies in response to the Stamp Act in his "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law." See Padover 1954, 3–21.
23. *Ibid.*, 2:385.
24. *Ibid.*, 2:266.

25. See, for example, *Ibid.*, 4:168–69, 258, 438; 7:23; 8:333.
26. See Lim 2008, 6–12; Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, Bessette 1981; Tulis 2009; Tulis 1987. On the argument that elements of the rhetorical presidency have always been part of the American political tradition, see Nichols 1994, Medhurst 2008.
27. On Wilson’s historicism and the principles of the American Founding, see Pestritto 2005, esp. chapters 1–2; Kesler 1984; Kesler, 1989.
28. Wilson 1908/1961, 57; Wilson 1913/1961, 19–20, 41.
29. Wilson 1913/1961, 42; cf. Wilson, 1908/1961, 56– 57.
30. Link 1966–1993, 19:41–42.
31. *Ibid.*, 6:659.
32. Wilson 1908/1961, 68. Milkis and Nelson 2003, 231–35; Ceaser 1979, 170–212.
33. *Ibid.*, 57 (54–81 more generally). See Ceaser 1979, esp. 192–97; Tulis 1984, 117–44.
34. For example, see *Federalist Papers* 10, 51, 63, and 71 in Cooke 1982.
35. See Wilson 1908/1961, 54–81; Link 1966–1993, 5:357–58. Wilson 1889, 631; Pestritto 2005, 209–210, 221–52.
36. *Ibid.*, 4; cf. Wilson 1913/1961, 42–43.
37. *Ibid.*, 5.
38. Kesler 1984, 115–16; Kesler 1989, 157–58.
39. Basler 1953, 3:376.
40. Rosenman 1938–1950, 1:742–56.
41. *Ibid.*, 1:752.
42. *Ibid.*, 1:752.
43. *Ibid.*, 1:753.
44. *Ibid.*, 1:754. Here I closely follow Kesler 1989, 161–63. See Wilson 1908/1961, 4; Wilson 1913/1961, 42–43.
45. *Ibid.*, 13:40–41.

46. *Ibid.*, 13:41.

47. *Ibid.*, 13:41.

48. See Frisch and Stevens 1983, esp. 330–334; Landy and Milkis 2000, 158, 193–95.

49. See Eden 1993, 137n204; Mansfield 1991, 56–59, cf. 31–34, 93–95, 185–86, 196–200; Mansfield 1993, 96–111.

50. Landy and Milkis 2000, 194.

51. *Ibid.*, 194.

52. See, for example, Eden 1993.

53. Rosenman 1938–1950, 5:68. See Landy and Milkis 2000, 157–158.

54. Landy and Milkis 2000, 114–15, 157–158, 242–243.

55. See, for example, Basler 1953, 2:398–410, 3:220.

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