CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
1. Introduction 1
2. Second in Line in Political Time 8
3. James Madison: The Jeffersonian Torch Bearer 33
4. Martin Van Buren: The Unfortunate Mop-Up Man 57
5. Ulysses S. Grant: Let Us Have Peace and Hard Money 79
6. Harry Truman: Fair Deal Democrat 103
8. Conclusion 152
   Notes 163
   Bibliography 185
   Index 193
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My first passing interest in heir apparent presidents came during my last year in graduate school at the University of Texas. Upon my arrival at Grand Valley State University in 2006, I began to more systematically study the trials and travails of presidents who came into office on the shoulders of larger-than-life predecessors.

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THE HEIR APPARENT PRESIDENCY
SUCCEEDING A GIANT

It is never easy to assume the mantle of leadership in the shadow of a larger-than-life predecessor. When the time comes for a person to lead, he or she will inevitably be judged according to the gold standard of the greats who came beforehand. That leader will face inevitable comparisons to his or her most immediate predecessor, especially if the predecessor was regarded as exemplary. Indeed, if there is an expectation that the successor lead along a similar trajectory as the predecessor, comparisons will be impossible to avoid. After winning three National Football League championships in the 1980s, San Francisco 49ers head coach Bill Walsh was succeeded by his defensive coordinator George Seifert. The new coach had very big shoes to fill and very high standards to meet. Robert Eaton, the successor to Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca, was compared to a prominent executive with a reputation for rebuilding a stagnant automaker.2

Seifert and Eaton followed different paths to their leadership positions, but they both followed larger-than-life predecessors with significant track records of success and records of innovation. The successors to Walsh and Iacocca had a mandate to maintain the winning models of their predecessors, although few observers expected these new leaders to compile similar records of success. Walsh and
Iacocca established bold and original approaches and their most immediate successors were expected to be faithful custodians rather than revolutionaries. In contrast, a coach who follows a predecessor who is fired after several losing seasons will have a mandate to repudiate previous strategies and tactics and develop new models for victory. Similarly, a CEO who replaces a failed predecessor will be expected to depart from discredited formulas of management and leadership.

Within any organization or institution, leadership demands some degree of apprenticeship, preparation, and knowledge of the successes and failures experienced by the leaders who came earlier. Men and women work their way through a complicated and sometimes unpredictable pathway of career advancement. Sometimes circumstances intervene, such as a death or an abrupt resignation. A new person is unexpectedly thrust into a leadership role, even if he or she may not be ready to assume the task. Varying pathways to leadership can be found in sports teams, corporations, nonprofit organizations, interest groups, political parties, and governments. American presidential history certainly reveals that there is no consistent preparation track for this office.

No matter how they get there, all leaders inherit problems, expectations, and adversaries. No matter what hand a new leader is dealt, he or she will be expected to leave the organization in a stronger position upon his or her departure. A new coach may have to contend with rivalries and personality conflicts that have been brewing for some time. A new corporate CEO may have to deal with emerging changes in his or her industry. Leaders of nations inherit social, political, economic, and foreign policy problems. Fairly or not, regardless of the organization or institution, all leaders will invite comparisons to the records of their predecessors.

After completing his or her tenure, even a transformative and trailblazing leader will not have solved all the problems facing the organization, institution, or team (and he or she may well have created new problems too). If the departing leader leaves behind a proud record of accomplishment and commands great respect, a successor may be positioned as an heir apparent. In this capacity,
the successor is cast in the same philosophical and policy orientation as the predecessor. An heir apparent will pledge to continue building upon the achievements of the predecessor by following the same leadership trajectory. A commitment to continuity can earn the support of the predecessor’s followers, but it also imposes constraints and deep expectations that may be very hard to meet. As the successor is committed to continuing along the predecessor’s path, the new leader also inherits the problems and consequences resulting from the previous leader’s choices. The predecessor’s rivals may continue to jockey for position and the successor will surely generate new critics who draw unfavorable assessments against the previous leader’s gold standard.

Indeed, circumstances always change between the predecessor’s departure and the successor’s tenure, thereby demanding alterations to the established pattern of leadership. If any aspect of the successor’s leadership marks a clear departure from the record of the predecessor, old loyalists can quickly turn into critics. Leaders of institutions and organizations are chosen because of a commitment to a particular pattern of action. When that trajectory is disrupted, a leader may compromise the trust and support he or she depends upon from established allies.

If the predecessor is regarded as dominant and exemplary, adversaries and critics of the heir apparent may find a more vulnerable target, given the new power arrangements. Opponents may build real momentum to challenge the new leader, as well as the predecessor’s achievements that the successor has pledged to protect. The predecessor’s fierce loyalists will then expect the heir apparent to respond to opponents in accordance with principles and tactics of the predecessor. If this does not happen, the heir apparent leader will find him- or herself with a new crowd of critics.

These former supporters turned critics may loudly lament that the new leader fails to compare with the great predecessor. The incumbent will be accused of some combination of poor management, feckless negotiating, ineffective communication skills, and having a weak commitment to preserving the predecessor’s record. Assertions will be made that the predecessor’s hard-won achievements
are being frittered away by a successor who has “betrayed” his or her supporters.

Regardless of their personal or professional relationship with each other, no two people can be expected to have identical styles of leadership and managerial skills. Obviously, the differences are greater when the successor has pledged publicly to reverse the approach of the predecessor. Even when the predecessor and the successor have pledged to follow a similar trajectory, however, differences in style and even substance will be revealing. Every change of leadership will bring differences of temperament, negotiating tactics, social skills, and how agendas are prioritized. One leader may be very charismatic, an excellent speaker, and very effective in dealing with the media. Then that leader’s successor, who has pledged to the same means and ends, could be an uninspiring and dull public speaker who is prone to making public gaffes. Two leaders can have similar goals and ideologies, but one may be excellent at bargaining with other power brokers, while the other leader may lack this talent.

As a leader begins his or her stewardship, he or she will have an agenda, short-term goals, and long-term goals. Unexpected crises and developments will also surely intervene to disrupt those plans. Regardless of a leader’s context and standing vis-à-vis the leaders who came before, the incumbent will want to compile achievements that are exclusive to his or her tenure. Indeed, the new leader may want to be bold by attempting to eclipse the achievements of previous leaders or to complete the unfinished work of his or her predecessor. Unfortunately, moving out of the shadow of a larger-than-life predecessor makes these tasks even more difficult, especially when an heir apparent takes over immediately or very soon after the titan’s departure.

The challenges facing these heir apparent leaders are numerous, as I will discuss in greater detail. Still, they are challenges that can be met in the absence of catastrophic external events. In addition, strong organizational and communication skills can pay great dividends for a leader. Finally, there must be an appropriate balance between deference to established approaches of the predecessor and
taking some risks by altering and refining the methods, the priorities, and even the goals of the previous leader.

Heir apparent leadership presents challenges across institutions and organizations, inside and outside of government, but my emphasis going forward will be on the American presidency. In the presidency, the problems, strengths, and flaws of the individual holding the office will manifest themselves early and transparently to all observers. Especially in the twenty-first century, and for many years in the previous century as well, presidents have been the most visible actors to casual and keen observers of American politics. The political and constitutional power that they yield on a domestic and international stage usually dwarfs the power of leaders outside of government. I will submit here that heir apparent leaders of any institution can observe a pattern of common problems, challenges, and opportunities by scrutinizing some of our past presidents who had to govern in this role. Some of these experiences may serve as valuable lessons to leaders who find themselves in the heir apparent position, even outside of government.

To be sure, there are different rules and practices in business, sports, and nonprofit organizations. Leadership within any organization or institution demands skills and talents that are very likely to be required in some degree in the American presidency. Inside and outside of government, skills in communication, bargaining, strategizing, and diplomacy are vital for a successful leader. Presidents and leaders outside of government must know how to set agendas, prioritize objectives, and choose when to fight and when to retreat in a conflict with adversaries.

**SUCCESSION AND THE PRESIDENCY**

The presidency was designed by the Constitution’s Framers, in Article II, to be a robust and independent office while still not occupying the center of American political and governmental life. In Federalist Papers Nos. 67–77, Alexander Hamilton carefully explicates the necessity for specific presidential powers under the Constitution,
while assuring citizens that the chief executive’s powers will be limited by other actors.\(^3\) Yet from the eighteenth century to the present, through a long succession of strong and weak executives, the overarching trajectory of presidential power and influence was one of steady growth. Explanations and consequences for the growth of the presidency have been extensively covered by other scholars.\(^4\)

“To reverse and undo what has been done by a predecessor,” Hamilton said, “is very often considered by a successor as the best proof he can give of his own capacity and desert.”\(^5\) The very act of presidential succession contributes to the growth of presidential power over the long run. Presidential failure can breed the very conditions that enable stronger presidents to remake the American political and governmental landscape: James Buchanan was succeeded by Abraham Lincoln and Herbert Hoover was succeeded by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Strong and successful presidents can then bequeath significant accomplishments to their successors. A like-minded successor wants to preserve, protect, and extend the achievements of the predecessor, which was the role of Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman. However, even a successor from a different political persuasion will seek to at least maintain the power and influence of the office to take the nation in a different direction. Dwight Eisenhower, the first Republican president in twenty years, inherited an office in 1953 that grew exponentially as a consequence of the New Deal, World War II, and the Cold War. As president, Eisenhower charted a somewhat different course than his New Deal Democratic predecessors, but he did not seek (nor would circumstances permit) a diminution of presidential power.

Many presidential biographies and scholarly studies reveal the impulse in every president to surpass the accomplishments of the men who came before him. Lyndon Johnson came of age politically as a young congressman who firmly attached himself to Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. As president himself, Johnson sought to surpass Roosevelt’s achievements.\(^6\) James Polk was a Democrat in the Jacksonian tradition, and was mentored by the General himself. As president, Polk used the office to aggressively achieve Jacksonian goals in the domestic and international arenas.\(^7\) Theodore Roosevelt
sought to use the presidential office on a much more personal level than any of his predecessors, while also reinvigorating the reformist spirit of Abraham Lincoln’s Republican Party. Barack Obama’s documented fascination with the presidency of his ideological opposite, Ronald Reagan, suggests that Obama sought to emulate Reagan’s communicative talents. Obama envisioned using the office as a vehicle for twenty-first-century progressivism, just as Reagan once used the office to advance conservatism.

Still, the aforementioned cases are not examples of an heir apparent assuming the office from a like-minded predecessor who is regarded as a powerful and significant president. Years elapsed as developments established some distance between one president and another. In the intervening years, the other party won the presidency and attempted to take the nation in a different direction, new foreign and domestic crises occurred, the demographics of the nation changed, and public policies evolved in unanticipated directions. The new president began with more of a clean slate and smaller shadows of great predecessors lurking in the background.

The heir apparent president’s dilemma is different. Presidents who are successful with policy accomplishments are very likely to enlarge the influence of their office, either as a consequence of their achievements or as a means of executing their goals. For a like-minded heir apparent, preserving those achievements, as well as the power and influence of the office, serves as a test of the depth and durability of the predecessor’s footprint. Presidents that are recognized as “great” or well above average will be inextricably tied to their most immediate like-minded successors. The heir apparent’s struggles to establish an identity of his or her own may clash with the imperatives of preserving, protecting, and defending the predecessor’s achievements. How a successor in this role navigates the challenges of being in such a large shadow will tell us more about how presidents set agendas, respond to crises, manage coalitions, and establish identities of their own.