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Richard Nixon was in the White House when I began writing about the presidency. My first book, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy*, was published in 1976. For four decades I have studied presidential politics; *Presidents on Political Ground* aims to distill much of what I have learned. My objective from the start has been to approach presidential leadership as the interplay of individual abilities and choices with the larger structures within which they have to operate. I have been associated in this respect with a subset of presidency scholars who emphasize leadership in context.

Although *Presidents on Political Ground* reflects a long career as a presidency scholar, it had a more immediate stimulus as well: the presidency of Barack Obama. Often during Obama's two terms I have been struck by analyses that ascribe his administration's course almost entirely to the president’s personal strengths and weaknesses, with little regard for history and context. Obama has proven to be a prime illustration of the problem that motivated this book.

To be sure, some of the responsibility for the overly personalized explanations belongs to Obama himself. Elected at a moment of profound economic dislocation, Obama was drawn to the stories of past presidents who had turned grave crises into transformative moments in the history of the American republic. In the period between his election and his inauguration, he let it be known that he was reading books about Abraham Lincoln and especially Franklin D. Roosevelt. Obama tempted fate by suggesting analogies between their presidencies and his upcoming one. But once in office it did not take long for him to be disabused of this conceit. The wall of opposition he faced from congressional Republicans for his first major undertaking, a massive economic stimulus bill, swiftly demonstrated that he would be granted no Rooseveltian hundred days, indeed no opening for a historic transformation comparable to the New Deal.

Yet for many observers in the media, and especially for conservative and liberal political activists, the comparisons to FDR (and to other modern presidents at times) remained all too handy regardless of changed circumstances. To indignant conservatives, Obama has been seen as too much like FDR, whom they blame for the rise of big government, prone just like his progressive predecessor to executive power grabs and egregious violations of the Constitution. To disappointed liberals, Obama has been seen as a faint imitation of a progressive Roosevelt, too conciliatory and timorous to seize a rare opportunity for fundamental change. Another FDR in the White House would have radically transformed American health
care into a “single payer” system and struck forcefully at Wall Street by breaking up the “too big to fail” banks and investment houses.

Amid the arguments over whether Obama has been dangerously strong or distressingly weak, the contextual frameworks that have shaped and circumscribed his administration have too often been obscured. The political ground over which he has traveled has been little charted. When Obama has resorted to executive orders as an alternative to legislative initiatives blocked in Congress, his unilateral actions have been seen as an unusually aggressive assertion of authority rather than a regular feature of every modern presidency. When Obama has suffered defeats in Congress, his modest legislative skills, falling well short of Roosevelt’s masterful ways, have been regarded as the primary cause, leaving aside the fact that Roosevelt had overwhelming Democratic majorities in Congress for his first six years in office and did not have to face a Republican opposition that routinely sought to obstruct his every legislative move. Obama has operated in a different media environment, political economy, party system, and policy landscape than FDR encountered. Across the board his presidency has proceeded on a different, and for the most part more difficult, political ground.

President Obama is only one of the major figures in *Presidents on Political Ground*. While making references to presidents prior to the New Deal, the book is mainly concerned with the succession of presidents from FDR to Obama. The contextual understanding that I believe is needed to make sense of any of their presidencies provides me with my theme.

Large parts of *Presidents on Political Ground* were first formulated in response to two invitations for which I am very grateful. I was asked by Nigel Bowles and Alan Renwick to join a group of scholars developing a framework for the comparative study of political leadership. Two meetings of this group—at an American Political Science Association panel in Toronto and a workshop at the University of Oxford—drew me more deeply than before into an examination of presidents in the areas of coalition politics and domestic policy making. Subsequently, another project on comparative political leadership, organized by John Kane, Haig Patapan, and Ian Shapiro, led me to draft papers for meetings at Yale on the topics of “global leadership” and “good democratic leadership.”

An ongoing politics and history group at the University at Albany, SUNY, provided me with a forum for extensive discussion of my paper on “Presidents and Economic Royalists.” I thank my colleagues for the stimulating exchange.

Early versions of several chapters received helpful critical comments from a number of scholars. My thanks to Peter Breiner, Neil Chaturvedi, Brendan Doherty, Nan Keohane, the late Thomas Langston, Sid Milkis, and Mike Nelson.
Two anonymous readers for the University Press of Kansas were unusually supportive as well as thoughtful in their commentary. For his insightful reading of the entire manuscript, I am especially grateful to Steve Skowronek. The late James MacGregor Burns was an inspiration for my work on leadership and a good friend.

My association with the University Press of Kansas has long been a pleasure. Fred Woodward, by now an old friend, worked with me once again on developing the book project, and Chuck Myers has skillfully brought it to completion. Carol Kennedy and Larisa Martin have brought their skills to copyediting and production, respectively.

I have been blessed by my children’s love but also have benefited by their career choices that connect me to political environs relatively distant from my academic position. Nick, a journalist who reports on Latin American politics and culture, and Anna, who has worked in political fundraising and strategic communications, have plenty to teach their father.

My wife, Melinda Lawson, a historian, has been the best of partners in every regard. We talked about Abraham Lincoln on the night we met in 1984, and our shared passion for history and politics has never flagged. Neither has the love and understanding that she has always given me.
PRESIDENTS ON POLITICAL GROUND
Introduction

A MACHIAVELLIAN METAPHOR

The prince, Machiavelli writes, must always keep his mind on war. While hunting in the countryside, hardening his body for the physical rigors of war, he must also study the landscape for prospective fields of battle. The prince needs to “learn the nature of the terrain, and know how mountains slope, how valleys open, how plains lie, and understand the nature of rivers and swamps.” Machiavelli cites a historical model for training the military mind in this manner. When Philopoemen, an Achaean general, traveled through the countryside with his companions, he quizzed them: “If the enemy were on that hilltop and we were here with our army, which of the two of us would have the advantage? How could we attack them without breaking formation? If we wanted to retreat, how could we do this? And if they were to retreat, how could we pursue them?” Even in peacetime, Philopoemen sought to comprehend “all the contingencies that can occur in an army.”

My subject in this book is presidents and not princes, politics and not warfare. But I employ Machiavelli’s discussion in chapter 14 of The Prince as the source of the master metaphor for this study of presidents on the ground of political struggle. Presidents are not likely to win major battles or to avoid damaging defeats if they are not attuned to the shifting terrains upon which their political contests will be decided. They require something akin to what Joseph Nye calls “contextual intelligence”—the capacity to examine in advance the distinctive characteristics of each ground upon which they hope to advance or might have to retreat.

Unlike Machiavelli, I do not presume that any insights I glean from this study will be taken up by leaders themselves. The audience for whom I write contains anyone who tries to understand presidential action: political scientists, historians, journalists, and ordinary citizens. My target is the all-too-common tendency to evaluate presidents without sufficient attention to context, to focus on the dramatic figure in the foreground and leave indistinct the terrain upon which the action unfolds. Without understanding the ground of presidential politics, evaluations are bound to be distorted, whether in the form of too much praise or, more often, too much blame.

In studying presidents on political ground, Machiavelli is a valuable guide for more than his landscape metaphor. The Machiavellian perspective I adopt in this book draws less from the notorious proponent of deception or violence than from the pathbreaking analyst of politics as a dynamic field of struggle. By alerting
readers to the flux and contingency of politics, the author of *The Prince* cautions against idealized formulas or pat generalizations about leadership. In Machiavelli’s world, so much is always in play for the person at the top that success remains tenuous and failure is never far away. Yet his cold-eyed vision is not meant to discourage action; on the contrary, it is when political leaders know the ground over which they must proceed that sometimes mastery becomes possible and great ends can be achieved.

The shape of conflict, Machiavelli suggests in chapter 14 of *The Prince*, changes with each terrain. The contours of battlefields will look quite different depending on whether they are located in the mountains, in the valleys, or on the plains. Some terrains will be advantageous, favoring an offensive strategy; other terrains will be daunting, with prudence warning of the likelihood of retreat. In many instances the terrain appears neutral, and victory goes to the side that makes the smarter maneuvers on the field of battle. The variability of political ground and of the conflicts that are fought on it is a core proposition of this study of presidents. Presidential action is hardly all of a piece; each ground upon which it proceeds must be understood through its own distinctive features.

Even solid knowledge of each distinct ground for political conflict is not a surefire aid to the actor or guide to the analyst. As Machiavelli famously teaches, it is the unpredictable that ultimately haunts political action: “Fortune is the arbiter of one half of our actions.”3 In his most biting example of Fortune in *The Prince*, Cesare Borgia made every right move to gain power, only to fall when he became gravely ill at the worst possible moment. One does not have to look far to see the role of Fortune in the careers of recent presidents, whose original agendas were dramatically altered by events they could not have anticipated. In his first year in office, George H. W. Bush’s administration was blindsided by the remarkably swift collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. In his son’s first year in office, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed a domestic presidency for a time of peace into a presidency that assumed a global wartime footing. Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency with a long list of domestic reforms in mind, only to have them overshadowed by a financial collapse less than two months prior to his electoral victory. Political ground, then, is not only variable depending on the topography of the terrain; it can also be unstable, subject to earthquakes of greater or lesser magnitudes.

Taking into account all of the factors that contribute to the uncertainties facing a prince, Machiavelli might have been expected to present a pessimistic account of political leadership. On the contrary, for him it is the hardships of political action that test the mettle of leaders and the barriers to success that evoke the creativity of the best among them. “Without a doubt,” he writes,
princes become great when they overcome difficulties and obstacles that are imposed on them; and therefore Fortune, especially when she wishes to increase the reputation of a new prince, who has a greater need to acquire prestige than a hereditary prince does, creates enemies for him and has them take action against him so that he will have the chance to overcome them and to climb higher up the ladder his enemies have brought him.4

Machiavelli’s view that dangerous times are fertile ground for great leadership has become familiar to Americans in accounts of the most storied presidents, like Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led the nation through its most perilous crises.

To understand the leadership of princes amid variability, flux, and contingency, Machiavelli turned to history. His approach recommends itself to a study of presidential leadership on political ground. To the extent that we can discover patterns in presidential actions—patterns that might be different on each distinct political ground—we are most likely to find them through historical investigations. Single-factor explanations for presidential performance, as widely disparate as personality, rational action, or political economy, invariably leave too much in the shadows. Rather than narrowing the angle of vision, a historical approach offers a wide array of cases to review. The trick is to make sense of them by discerning the essential configurations into which most fall. That is the task set for this book.

FIVE POLITICAL GROUNDS

One of the unique features of the contemporary American presidency is that chief executives are, unlike any other political officials, expected to be active across the board. They are judged by how well they navigate their way across a plethora of political terrains. This book does not attempt to provide a comprehensive study of these terrains. Rather, it focuses on five political grounds, chosen not only for their intrinsic importance but for the relative paucity of our knowledge about them.

The chapters that follow explore political terrains that differ considerably from one another. Chapter 1 examines the ground of media. Chapter 2 switches the focus to the ground of political economy. Chapter 3 sets out to map the ground of coalition politics. Chapter 4 studies the politics of domestic policy making. Chapter 5 covers recent developments that have shifted the political ground for presidential leadership in foreign policy.

It will be readily apparent that I have omitted some of the most important grounds for presidential leadership, especially Congress and public opinion. These
two terrains have been extensively charted by leading presidency scholars, such as George Edwards III, Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher, Charles Jones, and Mark Peterson in the case of Congress, and Jeffrey Cohen, George Edwards III, Samuel Kernell, Larry Jacobs, and B. Dan Wood in the case of public opinion. They are domains of presidential activity that have lent themselves to impressive quantitative analyses, with historical cases playing only a secondary role. Interestingly, these studies of Congress and of public opinion mostly conclude that the ground for presidential advances is rockier than conventional wisdom would have it. The titles of two books by Edwards—At the Margins with respect to presidential influence in Congress and On Deaf Ears with respect to presidential efforts to change public opinion—sum up how legislative and public opinion contexts often impede and frustrate leadership.5

PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT

To highlight the grounds and delineate the contexts for presidential action is to raise the issue of determinism. I want to address this issue up front. To do so will require a brief excursus into competing frameworks for understanding the presidency.

Broadly speaking, presidential studies fall into two categories, with their placement depending on the relative explanatory balance that authors establish between individual agency and structural context. For some scholars, the individual actor is the center of attention, with context noted but seldom elaborated. For other scholars, structures are placed at the fore, with the actor’s choices and their outcomes heavily influenced by contextual factors. The individual actor perspective is common in many areas of presidential studies, and it is overwhelmingly favored by journalists and citizens. Challenging what is typically conventional wisdom has been the task of the alternative approach, which argues, as George Edwards III puts it, that “we should focus less exclusively on the president and devote more attention to the context in which the president seeks to lead.”6

The most famous study of the presidency, Richard E. Neustadt’s Presidential Power, presents the classic account of individual agency in the White House. Neustadt begins with a structural observation: there is a substantial gap between the high expectations surrounding presidential leadership and the limited constitutional powers of the executive in a system of “separated institutions sharing powers.”7 But Presidential Power has little further to add about the contextual parameters for executive actions. Rather, Neustadt’s concern is how an individual president can close the gap, maximizing limited resources through attentiveness to
power stakes and skill at persuading other elite actors. Talent and temperament are his ultimate answers to the puzzle of powerful presidential leadership.

Rational choice scholars, seemingly at an opposite pole from Neustadt in their approach to presidential leadership, share his fundamental emphasis on individual agency. For those in the rational choice camp, the personal qualities of a president can be ignored, at least for the purpose of generating testable hypotheses. As William Howell writes in *Power without Persuasion*, “Rational choice emphasizes the things that all presidents have in common. It treats presidents as generic types, intentional actors who seek policy objectives within well-defined institutional settings.” More than Neustadt, rational choice scholars specify the contexts within which presidential actions take place; with their roots in game theory, they are attentive to the institutional parameters and rules that advantage or disadvantage the players. Yet as the name of this approach suggests, the reigning assumption is that any president will be a rational actor who will aim to maximize power wherever the opportunity arises. Moreover, as a unitary actor, the president will be able to move more single-mindedly and coherently than a collective decision making body like the Congress. For all of their theoretical and methodological differences with Neustadt, rational choice scholars share with him an optimistic assumption that power-seeking presidents can prevail over the forces that constrain them.

As is the case with presidential studies that privilege individual agency, contextual approaches appear in very different forms. Two are highlighted here because they are the ones most relevant to this book: the behavioralist approach and the historical-institutional approach. Behavioralist scholars apply statistical methods to large data sets, which in the case of the presidency include congressional roll call votes on presidential proposals, time-series of presidential approval scores, and polling data on responses to presidential efforts at changing public opinion on policy issues. Perhaps the most prominent scholar in these areas, the aforementioned George Edwards III, has repeatedly demonstrated that contextual factors, such as the partisan distribution of seats in Congress or the low level of public interest in politics, explain a great deal more about the fate of presidential ventures than do variations in presidential talent or temperament. Yet if Edwards’s work is less sanguine about the prospects for presidential success than are the studies from Neustadt or the rational choice camp, he still leaves space for effective presidential agency. Edwards doubts that presidents can transform the critical contexts for their leadership, but a president who recognizes the opportunities as well as the obstacles that contexts present, and who moves prudently to exploit these opportunities, can achieve a great deal in the office.

Even more central to this book than the contextual approach of behavioral-
ists is the historical-institutional approach to the presidency. The most prominent historical-institutional work on the presidency, Stephen Skowronek’s *The Politics Presidents Make*, sweeps over the whole history of the institution to uncover a remarkably persistent set of patterns. Skowronek divides the history of the presidency into a series of partisan regimes, each of which dominates the office for a generation or more. Within these regimes, four types of presidents are characterized, depending on whether they found the regime, maintain it, are caught in its collapse, or oppose it without the ability to overthrow it. For Skowronek, presidential success or failure is not, in a fundamental sense, attributable to individual ability or rationality; they are recurrent features of when and where presidents fall in the life span of a regime. Great success is reserved for founders of regimes; presidents in the middle years of a regime produce ambivalent results; presidents left holding the bag for regimes that are breaking down are saddled with a reputation for personal ineptitude. Structure is foremost for Skowronek, but like Edwards, he is hardly unconcerned about opportunities for agency. The great irony in his work is that all presidents disrupt the larger political system in the drive for accomplishments, but more often than not the disruptions end up exploding in their faces.12

This study of presidents on political ground has clear affinities with the scholarship of Edwards and Skowronek. Indeed, I have long admired their work and draw many insights from it. Skowronek’s scholarship, in particular, plays a prominent role in this book, especially in chapter 3. Yet the political grounds I study here have only a modest amount of shared territory with the political grounds that they have explored. Edwards’s studies have concentrated primarily on legislative politics and public opinion; I concentrate on political grounds beyond these two. Skowronek develops a macro-historical theory of presidential leadership; I operate closer to the ground in my explorations into presidential history and discern patterns that are more diverse than the ones he has highlighted.

Siding with Edwards and Skowronek, as opposed to the theoreticians of individual agency, in emphasizing context, I share with them a concern not to devalue the efforts and accomplishments of individual presidents. In each chapter that follows, context represents the political ground, but the stories of presidents as they venture across that ground occupy the larger part of the text. A contextual approach does not imply that presidential acts or fates are predetermined. On the contrary, elaborating the circumstances in any field of action is a prerequisite to assessing the intentions, strategies, and records of presidents in that field. Sometimes accused of advancing a deterministic theory of presidential politics, Skowronek supplies a rejoinder with which I concur: “I believe that understanding leadership contexts ultimately enhances our appreciation of human agency, that we end up with a truer measure of each individual effort—of its novelty and of the broader significance of that novelty—when we take into account basic differences
in the way the leadership problem gets configured and understand what is entailed in trying to master each configuration.”

A PREVIEW

Each of the five chapters that follow explores a different political ground for presidential action. All combine conceptual analysis with historical cases. Yet the form of analysis and the kinds of cases considered vary with each new political ground.

“Media and the Presidential Spectacle” covers the ground on which a president’s identity is established and contested. The contemporary ground for presidential appearances is visual as much as verbal, shaped by television and social media as much as by traditional print media. This is unstable ground: presidents were first advantaged by the rise of network television, then diminished with a profusion of visual choices and a proliferation of platforms for criticism of presidential performances. Yet in the modern era there has been an unchanging expectation for presidents to appear as larger-than-life figures, mounting winning dramas that will impress the mass public. Modern media is the ground for the presidential spectacle: the presentation of character and the deployment of gestures that claim, in defiance of critics, to demonstrate presidential virtue. Five case studies in this chapter—of Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton, the second Bush, and Obama—illustrate the possibilities and pitfalls of these presidential spectacles on media ground.

“Presidents and Economic Royalists” switches the focus from identity to power. Charged with the duty of managing the American economy, presidents have to cope with the pressures from and the resources of powerful actors in the corporate and financial sectors. The recent experience of the Obama presidency amid the Great Recession suggests the pitfalls in neglecting to chart this ground. This chapter focuses in particular on Democratic presidents from FDR to Obama. Elected primarily by constituencies other than the rich and powerful, Democratic presidents tend to have tense and tangled relationships with those that Roosevelt dubbed “economic royalists.” Case studies of Roosevelt, Kennedy, Clinton, and Obama display a pattern in these relationships: Democratic presidents need cooperation from business, eventually find themselves in confrontation with the rich and powerful, but ultimately back away from forceful, much less radical, actions and underwrite corporate and financial profits in the service of economic growth.

“Presidents and Coalition Politics” takes presidents onto the ground where followers and foes collide. Presidential rhetoric is typically high-minded, presenting leaders who represent and serve the entire nation. Presidential practice involves grubbier political tasks, necessitating services to some groups and interests while
neglecting (or punishing) others. Regardless of their agendas or parties, presidents have to grapple with the imperatives of building, maintaining, and fending off threats to their political coalitions. Strong coalitions are central to electoral prospects, legislative accomplishments, and long-term legacies. Considering presidents from FDR to the present, this chapter maps the terrain of coalitional politics. It attempts to catch presidents in the acts of coalitional politics, placating groups traditionally allied with their parties, scrambling customary alliances when policy objectives cut across established cleavages, poaching among the rival party’s supporters, and warding off the potential disaster of coalitional collapse.

“Tough Terrain” studies presidents making domestic policy on political ground. Domestic policy making has proven to be dangerous ground for recent presidents, with signature policy initiatives resulting in devastating electoral consequences. Even when the electoral fallout is less extensive, the politics of domestic policy presents numerous difficulties for presidents. The conventional method of scoring victories and defeats—whether presidential proposals are enacted into law—fails to capture the variety of battles that presidents fight on this ground. I distinguish in this chapter between three kinds of domestic policy making that reflect the dynamic features of the context within which presidents have to act. In situations where the political ground is favorable, presidents can act as policy entrepreneurs, initiating programs that they personally prefer. In other instances, presidents’ supporters press hard for bolder measures than presidents have planned to advance. Where rivals threaten to take over an important piece of political ground, presidents may have to outflank their adversaries with policy proposals that run counter to their past stances and actual preferences.

“Foreign Policy Making on Partisan Ground” highlights a recent heightening of political conflict on the ground where presidents are supposed to encounter the fewest political problems. Partisan polarization now infects foreign policy making as much as it does domestic policy making. This chapter traces the growing divergence between Republicans and Democrats in worldviews, showing how opposing perspectives on national security, first articulated by landslide losers Barry Goldwater and George McGovern, eventually came to be partisan orthodoxies. The impact of polar orthodoxies on presidents from Reagan through Obama has been paradoxical. On the one hand, in the field of foreign policy and defense presidents now face greater resistance from the opposing party in Congress and through the media, along with stronger demands for fidelity to party doctrine from their own supporters. On the other hand, presidents today have more maneuverability to zigzag across the lines of partisan cleavage in the name of global realism than they did during the era of a rigid Cold War consensus.

All five of these chapters originated as essays in edited volumes or as conference papers. All have been substantially revised, expanded, and updated; all have
been reframed through the Machiavellian metaphor of political ground. Any of the chapters can be read as an independent essay. But only when taken as a whole can they illustrate this book’s larger theme: the importance of understanding the disparate and shifting terrains upon which presidents have to operate as political actors.