

~ CHAPTER 1 ~

*The Presidential Difference  
in the Civil War Era*

It was not events alone that caused Northerners and Southerners to view each other as enemies. . . . Politicians . . . were largely responsible for the ultimate breakdown of the political process.

—Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*<sup>1</sup>

THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY witnessed an unprecedented failure of the American political system. After two decades of increasingly bitter sectional disagreement, a disastrous war erupted between the North and the South that took the lives of roughly 2 percent of the nation's population, left much of the South devastated, and radically remade Southern society. So much has been written on this period, it might be assumed that no more remains to be said. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Civil War era is

so intellectually fertile that new ways to explore it constantly arise.

## PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

In the pages that follow, I use the period from 1846 to 1865 as a stage on which a group of American presidents exhibit their strengths and weaknesses. The events of the period from the Mexican-American War to the Civil War form the background of that stage. Six chief executives—James K. Polk, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, and Abraham Lincoln—occupy its foreground. These men merit attention because of the demands placed on the chief executive in this momentous era and because they varied so greatly in the caliber of that leadership, ranging from Abraham Lincoln, who ranked first in presidential greatness in a recent poll of historians of the presidency, to James Buchanan, who ranked last.\*<sup>2</sup>

This is the third in a series of books that ask what enables some American presidents to meet the challenges of their times and causes others to fail. In *The*

\* C-SPAN conducted the poll of sixty-four historians in 2009. Polk was twelfth, Taylor ranked twenty-ninth; Fillmore was thirty-seventh, Pierce was fortieth, and Buchanan finished forty-second and last. (See <http://legacy.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Overall-Ranking.aspx>.) Of course, the very notion of “presidential greatness” is problematic because it conflates a president’s effectiveness with the merits of his or her policies.

*Presidential Difference*, I examined the White House occupants from FDR to Barack Obama. In *Inventing the Job of President*, I focused on the seven presidents from George Washington to Andrew Jackson.<sup>3</sup> In all these works, my approach is straightforward. I proceed chronologically, summarizing the formative years, rise to the presidency, and administrations of the protagonists. I then conclude each chapter by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the president in question by focusing on six realms: public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence.

Why these qualities? Public communication, using what Theodore Roosevelt called the “bully pulpit,” may be thought of as the outer face of the presidency. The ability to articulate goals and rally public support for them is fundamental to presidential leadership. Organization can be viewed as the inner face of the office. The ability to organize and run an administration is vital to a successful presidency. In the smaller administrations of this period, cabinets had much greater significance than they do today. How these presidents filled their cabinets and used those officials and other advisers offers instructive comparisons.

It might be assumed that anyone able to rise to the presidency would be politically skilled, but a surprising number of chief executives has lacked either one

or both of two kinds of political skill. Tactical skill is the ability to get results; strategic skill is the ability to get results that stand the test of time. But these skills alone cannot ensure success. Even a consummately skilled president may be an underachiever if he or she lacks a policy vision. At the same time, a president who advances policies that have undesirable consequences is likely to be worse off than one who lacks vision altogether.

A president also needs the appropriate cognitive style to process the torrent of advice and information that comes his or her way. But even the most cerebral of presidents may go astray in the absence of emotional intelligence, the ability to control one's emotions and turn them to advantage rather than succumbing to disabling emotional flaws. That last, as we shall see, is a quality conspicuously lacking in some of the presidents considered in this volume.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE TIMES

It remains to fill in the background against which these six presidents performed their duties. In 1845 James K. Polk entered the White House inspired by the example of his mentor Andrew Jackson to be a strong president and with the intention of accomplishing a small number of explicitly defined goals. One of those goals—the acquisition of the Mexican province of

California—led to the Mexican-American War, which produced a far greater territorial growth than he had envisioned. The vast new territory gained by this war, called the Mexican Cession, gave the United States the present-day states of California, Nevada, and Utah; most of Arizona and New Mexico; and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. While a great territorial gain, the Mexican Cession gave rise to an intractable political problem: whether to allow slavery in this area.<sup>4</sup>

Some in the North wanted slavery to be barred from these lands.\* Early in the war, Pennsylvania congressman David Wilmot sponsored a measure that would forbid slavery in any territory gained from Mexico. This proposal, the Wilmot Proviso, passed the House of Representatives but not the Senate, but its repeated reintroduction and possible passage was a constant worry to the South until the question was settled in 1850.

The Southern position on the Mexican Cession was staked out in 1847 by John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, who argued that any law prohibiting citizens of any state from entering a territory with their slaves would be “a violation of the Constitution.”<sup>5</sup> This stand was the polar opposite of the Wilmot Proviso and, by

\* Slavery did not exist in the Mexican Cession, as Mexico had abolished slavery, and many politicians North and South insisted that slavery could not exist in most of the area because the soil and climate would not support plantation agriculture. Nevertheless, those politicians became increasingly willing to argue over the principle.

promoting the spread of slavery, marked the extreme in the debate that worried many Northerners.

The political importance of whether states carved from the Mexican Cession would be open to slavery cannot be overstated. At the time, the free states enjoyed a majority of seats in the House, but the North and South had equal representation in the Senate. As a result, the South could block any bills threatening slavery in the Senate. The admission of more free states would overthrow that balance, costing the South this crucial veto power.

When Zachary Taylor became president in 1849, the question of slavery in the Mexican Cession remained unsettled. Later that year, the issue came to a head when California applied for admission as a free state. By that time, many in the South were speaking angrily of secession as the only way to protect their rights. A convention of Southerners held in Nashville in the summer of 1850 asserted the right of states to secede if they saw their rights being threatened and named passage of the Wilmot Proviso as such a threat. This convention also endorsed the idea of extending the Missouri Compromise line\* to the Pacific, banning slavery to its north but allowing it to the south, but insisted that only if California was divided in ac-

\* The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had banned slavery from those parts of the Louisiana Territory, except Missouri, that lay north of the southern border of Missouri, 36°30' north.

cordance with this line could a free state be admitted into the Union.

In the midst of this crisis, Taylor died in office and was replaced by Vice President Millard Fillmore. The breakup of the Union was temporarily averted by passage of the Compromise of 1850, a package of provisions sponsored initially by Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky that included some measures that advanced the interests of the North and others that appealed to the South. While the compromise did not satisfy the demands of the Nashville Convention, Southern tempers were generally soothed. Across the South—though not in South Carolina—secessionist sentiment waned.

Soon, though, tension reappeared. Many in the North were outraged over the government's enforcement of a key part of the compromise, the Fugitive Slave Act. This act made it far easier than before for Southern agents to seize African Americans from Northern cities under the claim that they were runaway slaves. Many in the North refused to comply with the law, and several Northern states passed personal liberty laws that effectively nullified the Fugitive Slave Act, infuriating Southerners.

Franklin Pierce became president in 1853 in the midst of that bitter controversy. The situation worsened when Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, repealing the Missouri Compromise line and

authorizing slavery in parts of the Louisiana Territory from which it had hitherto been forbidden. The act sparked widespread anger in the North; six Northern members of Congress denounced the act as

a gross violation of a sacred pledge; ... a criminal betrayal of precious rights; ... part and parcel of an atrocious plot to exclude from a vast unoccupied region ... free laborers ... and [to] convert it into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves.<sup>6</sup>

Worse, Kansas quickly erupted in bloodshed as pro-slavery forces based in Leecompton fought for control of the territory with antislavery forces based in Topeka.

James Buchanan entered the White House in the midst of this fighting. Within days of his 1857 inauguration, the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision mooted the entire debate over slavery in the territories by declaring that Congress had no power to ban the institution from any territory. While Southerners hailed the ruling, many in the North saw the decision as the work of what they called a "Slave Power conspiracy" that threatened the Union. (Chief Justice Roger B. Taney and four of the six justices joining him in the majority opinion were from slave states.)

By the 1860 election, the old Democrat and Whig two-party system had disappeared. The Whig Party had collapsed primarily over the issue of slavery. Many

Northern Whigs moved to an emerging antislavery party, the Republican Party. Some Southern Whigs joined the Democratic Party, giving primacy to their sectional interests, which Democratic policy protected. Other Southern Whigs were at sea, looking for a party that would cool sectional tensions while preserving Southern interests. Many Northern Democrats, meanwhile, had grown frustrated with the increasingly hard-line positions of their Southern colleagues.

The Republicans married traditional Whig positions such as support for internal improvements and a protective tariff to a stiff opposition to the spread of slavery to the territories. Support for these policies grew quickly in the North and Midwest but was virtually nonexistent in the South. Southerners regarded the Republicans with suspicion and fear. They believed that the new party intended to abolish slavery, ending their way of life. Soon after Republican Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 presidential election strictly on Northern votes, seven Southern states seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. The Civil War began little more than a month after Lincoln was inaugurated president.

## THE CAUSES OF THE CIVIL WAR

Historians have long debated the causes of the Civil War. Was it an inevitable result of competing social

and economic forces, fundamental sectional differences that clashed with the growing pressure to forge a more united nation? Was slavery really the central issue in this conflict, or was it merely “a smoke-screen for concealing the basic motives”?<sup>7</sup> What of the individuals who lived in the Civil War era? What role did they play in the steps that led to the war or the climate that produced it?

As historian Michael Holt points out in the epigraph to this chapter, American political leaders had ample opportunities to work out solutions to the issues they faced in the decade and a half from the Mexican-American War to the Civil War. They could not, however, find a sustaining one. As historian Allan Nevins concludes,

The angry issue of slavery in the Territories, settled by the great compromise of 1850 but wantonly reopened in 1854, was practically settled again by the end of 1858. But by 1858 passions had been so deeply aroused that large sections of the population could not view the situation calmly or discuss it realistically; fear fed hatred, and hatred fed fear. The unrealities of passion dominated the hour.<sup>8</sup>

Once political leaders reopened that issue, they allowed passion to dominate the hour and did not allow compromise to hold.

What role did the antebellum presidents play in that dynamic? It is important to recognize that the presidency in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s was not as powerful an office as it is today, and modern administrations give ample evidence of the limits even on current presidential power. The chief executive of the pre-Civil War era did not control as extensive a federal bureaucracy as in the modern state, and Congress, to some degree, had the initiative as the leading agent in setting federal policy. There is a degree to which, as William J. Andrews explains, presidents in this period “deferred to Congress in most areas.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the six presidents of this period were national leaders who wielded executive power and who were expected to provide leadership on major policy issues. Even the four presidents from this period who are generally judged as weak rather than strong executives—Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan—worked to advance what they saw as the policies best suited to soothe growing sectional animosity. Yet those efforts, as those of congressional compromisers, failed. Presidential leadership in the pre-Civil War era mattered. This book addresses the question of *how* it mattered.