Conclusions

1 Introduction

Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
—From William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar

How the public thinks about the presidency has long tilted toward the personal, tending to see our politics through a prism of the president and the presidency. Even scholars who are versed in the importance of the structural factors surrounding the individual presidents are prone to this myopia. Donald Trump’s presidency has taken this tendency and through his skill at keeping himself at the locus of our attention, made our gaze fixed upon him. This is not a bug in the system, this is a feature of his presidency. If one wants, he is available in some form nearly around the clock. His thoughts on everything from pop culture to deadly serious matters of international relations are the stuff of his Twitter feed; his tweets are reported on with the same interest by the news media as if he had spoken them during a press conference or a formal address to the nation. His years in the media spotlight and as a reality television star have helped him to hone his ability to use media platforms to reinforce his message. Arguably, his is the most “present” presidency ever.

Given all his prowess with catching and keeping the nation’s attention, it is tempting to award Donald Trump some sort of superhuman status
as a new kind of celebrity president. These accolades are often given in a backhand way, however. None other than George Will, once an icon of popular conservative thought, but now estranged from his former Republican Party, labeled President Trump’s leadership abilities as no more than “feral cunning” (2018). Will is not alone in efforts to portray President Trump as a person without a strong intellect but with an instinctual sense of how to get and expand power. No matter how one sees his source of power, it is difficult to argue that he is not at least as powerful a president as has been depicted among those comprising the case studies in this volume from Watergate onward. He has remade his party into a modern populist one, in the process causing moderates and old-line conservatives like George Will to leave the party, or if they are in office, to leave their positions, or both. Trump presents himself as an iconoclast who, with the tutoring of former advisor Steve Bannon, likens himself to a modern-day Andrew Jackson, a populist party builder and destroyer of the status quo. Trump’s actions indicate that he has been trying to live up to that image. His testing or flouting of laws and precedents cover a wide range of actions, from the use of money appropriated by Congress for the US military being repurposed to help fund the building of a wall between the United States and Mexico to ending the daily White House news briefing. According to President Trump, “I have an Article II, where I have to the right to do whatever I want as president,” a sentiment he has expressed in different ways on numerous occasions, but always as a means of expressing his vision of an expanded if not unlimited presidency (Brice-Saddler 2019). Such sweeping expressions of monarchic power must have been part of the rationale behind creation of “Can He Do That?”, a podcast produced by the Washington Post that chronicles the actions of the President from an incredulous perspective. The creators of the podcast are not alone in wondering where the limits are for this president’s claims on power. The President’s supporters celebrate the reinvigoration of the presidency, seeing much to admire in the axiom that what’s good for the president is good for the nation and vice versa. His critics wonder if the genie of expanded presidential power can ever be returned to the bottle.

2 The Use of Backfires: A Systemic Eventuality or Individual Happenstance?

There is much to wonder about with this presidency in terms of how it will change the institution and the basic understanding of how presidents may function in our political system. Adding to this uncertain
future is President Trump’s use of backfires as a fully realized response to scandal. His unique status as president naturally leads to questions about how lasting his alterations to the presidency may be. He did not hold office prior to becoming president, although he toyed with the idea of going back to the late 1980s. He did not serve in the military, the other path taken by the likes of Andrew Jackson and Dwight Eisenhower on the way to the presidency. He did not win the popular vote, joining the small but growing cadre of so-called wrong winner presidents. There are other peculiarities that can be listed here, but the point is that—taken together—Trump’s politics, personal and professional background, demeanor, and behavior form an individual who is unlike any previous occupant of the presidency. Does this singularity mean that the use of fully formed and effective backfires for scandal management is as unique a phenomenon as their creator and will follow him out the door when he leaves office? Or, is President Trump simply the president who, finding himself embroiled in scandal, “went there” and used the resources at his command to do what other presidents in similar situations were unwilling to fully undertake, but that future scandal-touched presidents will doubtlessly emulate? These questions are at the heart of the debate over just what presidential power currently is and, in far more normative terms, what it should be in our political system. This concluding chapter will return to these questions, but in order to answer them as fully as possible, another underlying question needs attention.

As was proffered in the early going of this book, the power of the presidency can be framed as being largely determined by the individual who is president or by the political forces and other systemic factors principally outside of the control of the individual. Richard Neustadt’s (1960) vision of a president unable to command compliance with his wishes, but able to gain assent through persuasion has dominated a personalized view of the presidency. The skills of the individual president are the most meaningful factor in understanding presidential power. The contrasting vision, perhaps best articulated by Stephen Skowroneck (1993), sees individual presidents as less consequential than the makeup of the political coalitions or regimes of a period in political time. As previously stated, the methodology taken in this book is to largely split the difference between these approaches. The result is akin to the one promoted by George Edwards (2003) in which presidents are seen as facilitators who are occasionally able to turn existing systemic factors into opportunities for change. Seen
in this third way, President Trump’s use of backfires is less about skillfully employing the tools of persuasion, i.e., public prestige, reputation among the political class, and the strategic use of the unique vantage points of the presidency, than it is of observing that opportunities exist to help bring about change. Persuasion, as Neustadt used the concept, is the force necessary for bargaining. In a bargain situation, there are shared goals, however loosely held, that are desired by the players in the bargain. A president may want action on a bill and Congress may want to extract concessions on other legislation in order to give the president more of what he or she wants. Quid pro quos are the coin of the realm in bargaining. Presidents trying to manage scandals are not in a typical bargaining situation. There is little to no incentive for those on the trail of a president’s scandal to engage in mutually beneficial quid pro quos. Moreover, while failed negotiations over a treaty or a budget can be painfully injurious to a president, they are unlikely to cause the crippling or even fatal damage that can result from a scandal. All sides know these are the stakes in a scandal and play their hands accordingly. The role that a president performs in managing scandals is measurably important, but it does not fit well with the Neustadtian view of the president as bargainer in chief.

Presidents facing scandals are not totally at the mercy of their political eras and environments. Their agency matters. As was discussed in the previous chapter, while not all the presidents presented in the case studies had circumstances advantageous for the setting of a successful backfire, all had at least contemplated doing so and all had some of the elements at hand to start one. It is doubtless that the environment that greeted President Trump was the most conducive yet for any president contemplating the use of a backfire. The developments in polarization, distrust of institutions by the public, the buildup of presidential power, and the changes in media delivery and consumption may have been influenced to some degree by citizen and then-candidate Trump, but the larger trends were beyond his or any one person’s control. Other presidents may have seen the emerging opportunities in the changing political environment and the potential to harness these factors to help build a backfire to fight their particular scandal, but they did not see them in the mature forms that greeted President Trump.

The structural factors create opportunities that can be utilized, but their existence does not cause presidents to act. It is unknowable if, say,
Richard Nixon somehow had Twitter, *Fox News*, and a post-Tea Party, highly polarized and well-sorted GOP base on his side in 1973 that he would have set backfires to try to snuff out Watergate. Nixon was convinced that his chief scandal was manageable with the basic tools of stonewalling and the suppression of evidence. He was nearly right except for the existence of the tapes which he could have destroyed or taken the step of withholding even after the Supreme Court ordered their release. As Andrew Jackson was quoted saying (probably apocryphally) in response to the Court’s demands on him, “[Chief Justice] John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it” (Rosen 2017). Nixon could have defied the Court, but did not. Perhaps if Nixon had the additional structural factors at his back, he may have felt emboldened to try to disobey the Court. While he lacked the opportunities afforded by a more supportive political environment, it was ultimately his choice to manage the scandal as he saw fit.

### 3 Opportunity for Presidential Choice

The term “opportunity” is used here very deliberately. Opportunities are governed by the choice among what is possible. If one has the means, he or she can choose a particular vacation destination over another, but no one can choose to vacation on another planet—yet. Among the possible choices, other factors shape the mechanisms for decisions. Will the opportunity last or is it fleeting? Will the costs of undertaking the opportunity be overly burdensome? Is the opportunity really an opportunity or will it cause unforeseen difficulties if taken? If the opportunity is not undertaken will inaction lead to future problems? This sampling of decision-making factors highlights the challenges in assessing the level of freedom presidents have in making decisions about all opportunities. Some decisions are rather prosaic ones based on balancing the everyday facts of life in governing. For example, a president may wish to see the budget cut for a disliked program, but the constituency for that program will try to punish anyone who advocates for the removal of funding. The president must weigh fairly basic costs versus benefits in his or her decision. The president can seek the cut, do nothing, or find some middle ground, but it is unlikely that any of these choices will have a seismic change on his or her presidency. Other circumstances provide less freedom of choice, meaning
that there will be outsized impacts on the president’s ability to govern, be reelected, or even continue in office. In such a case, the president still has the liberty to make a choice, but the range of choices is narrowed, maybe to the vanishing point.

Take, for instance, the argument made by Samuel Kernell in his justly influential Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership (2007). For Kernell, Washington had changed from a place where governing took place inside the framework of institutional pluralism, where proto-coalitions of key members of Congress joined with interest group representatives and others in ways that fostered an atmosphere of bargaining. Presidents could count on these coalitions to deliver support in return for the goods they sought. Kernell notes that three developments transformed national politics and largely ended institutional pluralism by the late 1970s. First, as the New Deal brought about an expanded role for government and created many new policies, organized interests emerged as the beneficiaries of government activity and thus held a desire to influence policy. Second, technological advances, especially in communications, made seeing the workings of national politics a commonplace practice. Lastly, the ties to political parties weakened for both voters and for those in government (30–31). The result was a new system based on individualized pluralism in which presidents could no longer count on the leaders of the proto-coalitions as bargaining partners. Under the changed system, presidents would have to make multiple bargains with the new multitude of stakeholders in more transparent ways. Presidents, unable to function effectively in this augmented environment with low prospects for bargaining, turned to the extensive use of “going public,” the practice of communicating directly with the public to encourage them to put pressure on their members of Congress and others with influence over a president’s goals.

No president had to respond to the change to individualized pluralism in Washington by going public, but most have, even though it may not be a very effective or productive practice (Edwards 2003). A similar case is present in Bruce Miroff’s work on presidential spectacle. Owing to factors that are related to those cited by Kernell (2007) and Lowi (1985), Miroff argues that at least since the Reagan administration, presidents have been caught in a no-win situation of high expectations for leadership and policy success and the reality of not being able to meet such expectations. In order to demonstrate they do have power, they
engage in spectacles of leadership that are “gestures” signifying power but are really stage-crafted events, much the same as the prearranged outcomes of professional wrestling matches. As with one of these made-for-TV events, presidential spectacles feature a “good guy,” the president, matched up against a “bad guy” who will, in the end, be defeated (2018, 231–232). Miroff argues that while Reagan was the past master of spectacle, all of his successors in office have at least attempted its use, with some failing miserably and others finding at least some success with the practice. Even a president with a reputed dislike of drama, President Obama, utilized spectacle for some aspects of his presidency (245–248).

Miroff’s position is that this use of spectacle, however universal, is not born of the will of individual presidents. “Spectacle, then, is more a structural feature of the contemporary presidency than a strategy of deception adopted by particular presidents” (251). In much the way that Kernell sees presidents going public because they have few, if any, better options in the era of individualized pluralism, Miroff views the use of spectacle as stemming from factors beyond their control; the excessive focus on the president as an individual, the overblown expectations the public has for presidential leadership, and the media’s insistent coverage of the nation’s politics as a “report on their [the president’s] adventures” (251).

Reflecting on Kernell and Miroff’s conclusions leads to a sense that contemporary presidents are more captives of a constitutionally and statutorily limited office that has become even more circumscribed in its occupant’s ability to try to show that he or she really has any power. If the opportunity for leadership is the choice between being shown as ineffective but honest about the limits of the office or trying to use whatever means are available to wring power from the system or to give the appearance of doing so, that is more of a choice in name only. Does the same logic apply to the use of backfires as it does for going public and using spectacle?

Backfires, as they are conceptualized in this book, are a tactic unique to scandal management. There are other actions presidents take to shift blame or attention away from themselves and their actions, but as discussed in detail in chapters one and two, these are not backfires. Given their uniqueness, how much choice do presidents have in employing them, especially after President Trump’s effective use of them as part of his scandal management strategy? As with going public and the use of spectacle, presidents finding themselves in the midst of a scandal feel
the structural features around their presidencies. Some of these aspects of their environments are helpful to their situations, while some are severely limiting. However, unlike the ideas about leadership contained in the works by Kernell, Miroff, and others, scandal management is only about leadership in the sense that a president must survive the scandal in order to continue to lead. Successfully managing a scandal includes a president taking actions that limit or reverse the damage being done to his or her presidency while they continue to try to lead in multiple ways, including on policy, with the public, with their political party, and beyond. To say that structural factors are more determinative than individual factors in the choice to utilize a backfire gets things a bit backward; presidents have more discretion—more of a true choice—over the decision to use a backfire because it is ancillary to leadership but is not leadership itself. The structural factors have put more of the raw material for a backfire at hand and, importantly, increase the likelihood of its success for some presidents.

Perhaps the use of backfires is now at its true dawning with President Trump’s effective use of them in both the “wire tapp” and “Biden scandal” deployments. What is now becoming visible may be what Lowi was witnessing in the 1980s as he chronicled the arrival of the “personal president” and plebiscitary politics and what Kernell saw around the same time with going public, and Miroff with the rise of spectacle. Evidence existed for what these scholars saw coming to fruition with the Reagan presidency first as past instances in minor forms, not yet fully developed at the outset by previous presidents. If this line of reasoning is valid, Donald Trump may well be what Reagan was to going public or the use of spectacle—the first president that is in possession of the full set of structural factors for the use of a new aspect of presidential power and the person who is willing or needs to use it.

4 A Projection of Future Trends

The techniques of presidential leadership are evolutionary. The expectations of the public about the role that should be played by presidents change. Trust in government ebbs and flows. Parties gain and lose seats in Congress and adherents among the electorate. Technological advances open new conduits for communications. Success in using the means to lead or to at least pantomime the image of leadership begets imitation. What President Trump has done with his use of backfires is not fully original. Others have either wished to use one and pulled back or partial
deployed one. As has been discussed earlier, whether bounded by some sense of morality against breaking the norms of our democracy, the limitations on necessary circumstances or resources, hubris that drove them to think they could somehow make the scandal go away, or the fear of falling into a chasm of ignominy, almost all of the presidents featured in the case studies did not fully play out the use of a backfire as part of their scandal management response. If President Trump has broken the seal on the fully deployed use of backfires and, as is likely the case, scandal has become a fixture of modern presidential politics, the expectation should be that his use of the tactic may be emulated. There are four factors that make it more probable that a future president will employ a backfire.

First, presidents caught in power scandals have more options to try to manage the scandal than do those entangled in either a financial or sex scandal. By their nature, power scandals are fought over where the limits of presidential power are drawn. Without clear, unambiguous evidence along the lines of the “smoking gun” tape of Nixon’s Watergate malfeasance, presidents can do battle over this kind of scandal so effectively because of the vastness and the vagueness of what actually constitutes the power of the presidency. A president wishing to add a backfire to the mix of stonewalling and some form of limited cooperation is well positioned to do so; they are certainly not precluded from using one. The Trump presidency has expanded the scope of presidential power with little effective checking by the other branches. Future presidents may well see this expansion of power as theirs to inherit and use, especially when confronted with a power scandal.

Second, the current and immediately foreseeable partisan makeup of the American political system favors the future use of a backfire by a Republican president rather than by a Democratic one, although it does not prevent their use. The existing state of polarization has purified and sorted the parties; its asymmetric quality gives Republican presidents a resource of support and thus more freedom to utilize a backfire that is not currently matched on the Democratic side. The utilization of constitutional hardball in pursuit of “traditional” political values and goals is an additional layer of protection for a president deploying a backfire, since if the misdirection is uncovered for what it truly is, it can be played off as a use of power for noble purposes.

Third, the information environment is more favorable to future Republican presidents who wish to use a backfire in large part because of the strength of the conservative media constellation, whose biggest and
brightest star, *Fox News*, is the most watched news programming in the country. Evidence indicates that the channel also has a greater impact on our politics than either *CNN* or *MSNBC*. For example, Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) found that significantly more so than other news channels, watching *Fox News* increases the likelihood that a viewer will vote for Republican candidates than other channels have on viewers voting for Democratic candidates. President Trump’s relationship with *Fox News* has been, with few exceptions, one of great benefit for both the President, who routinely injects his ideas directly into the channel’s viewership with little or no critical commentary by the on-air talent, and the channel, that gains credibility and viewer loyalty from the President’s largesse. *Fox News* has adapted to the changes in conservatism and Republican Party politics that President Trump has brought about, making it all the more likely that a future Republican president will inherit at least part of the institutional synergy that the current president has with the channel.

Fourth, America’s social and political institutions have been weakened from without and from within and this fraying makes it more likely that presidents will employ backfires and that they will be effective. The roots of the diminishing of our institutions are deep and varied. The New Left’s critiques of the Johnson and Nixon administrations focused on the illegitimacy of their use of power, especially in regard to the war in Vietnam. The conservative backlash to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s culminated in the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s with its disparagement of government writ large. Fomenting distrust in the most basic of political and social institutions has been used to gain advantage, as well. While even the leadership of his own party decried his statement, a recent poll showed that about one-third of the public agreed with President Trump’s assertion that “the media is the enemy of the people” (Lardieri 2019). Measures of the public’s trust in government are nearly as low as they have ever been with only 17% of respondents affirming their support in a national poll (Pew Research Center 2019). Other polling indicates that nearly three-quarters of the sample believed that an unelected “deep state” was “manipulating policy” (Shelbourn 2018). Scandals in the political world as well as in financial sectors, among the clergy, in the entertainment industry, and elsewhere have helped to perpetuate and reinforce a disposition that those who hold positions of power and acclaim may well be guilty of some form of transgression. Unfortunately, in too many cases, this sense has proven to be prescient. A distrustful nation is one that is increasingly poised to accept what a backfire offers; that a
president is placing a spotlight on yet another transgression, but that this scandal is really the one that deserves our attention.

President Trump is a facilitator of change in the sense that his complete and successful use of a backfire has altered an aspect of presidential power. His particular use of this tactic marks a transformation in what presidents may get away with when they are in the midst of a scandal; as such, it is the expansion of presidential power. It is important to note that he did not bring about all the necessary elements required for a successful backfire just as no president is the architect for all that surrounds him or her during an administration. Citizen, candidate, and now President Trump may have had a hand in fostering the trends that brought about these factors, as he was and is someone who has used his position to try to influence our politics, government, and society. For example, his attempts to disprove President Obama’s US citizenship along with his championing of other false conspiracy theories surely helped to amplify negative emotions on the part of some while it raised his notoriety. In sum, Donald Trump did not create the conditions for successful backfires from whole cloth, nor was he completely unassociated with some of the peripheral efforts that resulted in their creation. What is more directly attributable to him is that he was able to see the circumstances associated with his particular type scandal, the partisan polarization in the nation, the power of a conservative media apparatus, and the high levels of distrust Americans have for many of our institutions and the government, and use these factors to build successful backfires.

5 Backfires in a Constitutional Democracy

As of this writing, the 2020 presidential election is well underway, an election like no other since it takes place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. How the election unfolds and how President Trump, in particular, reacts to this fraught environment may offer some preliminary insights for future research into the potential use of backfires beyond their deployment for the range of scandal responses analyzed in the case studies for this book.

The early caucuses and primaries of 2020 featured a muddled field for the Democrats, but former Vice President Joe Biden ultimately became the Party’s presumptive nominee in April. Unlike Obama in 2008 or Clinton in 1992—the last two times that the Democrats were able to switch the presidency from Republican control—the Party has not chosen
a generational candidate likely to provide a major boost of excitement about a “changing of the guard.” To the contrary, it is likely that much of Biden’s appeal comes from his serving in the last administration under a fairly popular president. As a man advancing into his later 70s, Biden is a few years older than Donald Trump and, therefore, cannot lay claim to be the voice of a new generation. In many ways, the choice of Biden may reflect the Democrats’ desire to unseat President Trump and to try to return to a less fractious form of governing and politics. While Biden holds a modest lead in national polls and is mostly ahead in key battleground states, his ability to beat the incumbent president is hardly assured.

Until the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shutdowns across the world, the measures of the health of the American economy were strong. President Trump’s approval ratings have largely remained stable and in the range of other incumbents who have been elected to second terms. In short, until the economic and social devastation brought about by the coronavirus in the first part of 2020, many of the fundamentals that political scientists and others use to model presidential elections pointed in the direction of a Trump victory. The crystal ball is much hazier now as the politics of the crisis and the election combine in unpredictable ways. This mixture has the potential to create a challenge to the Trump presidency as great as those posed by the Russia investigation and his impeachment over the “perfect phone call.”

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, President Trump has labeled himself a “wartime president” and has sought to present himself as in command of the crisis response using many of the techniques he has long employed in business, entertainment, and politics. His nightly televised briefings from the White House have substituted for the large rallies that the President enjoys. Yet, even in the smaller space and lower volume of these briefings, Trump is able to command a sizeable audience and media attention, something the President has proudly noted himself (Grynbaum 2020). The President’s management of the crisis is fluid and appears to veer between a desire to exert control over the situation to a hands-off approach toward the creation and implementation of plans. For example, while he has claimed to have “total authority over the states,” in his sparring with state governors over the handling of the COVID-19-crisis—a statement that brought derision from even some of the most conservative Republican members in Congress—he has also said that it is up to governors to “call the shots” about when they reopen their states (Cummings
This bifurcated approach to managing the crisis has had mixed reviews from the public to date, with polls showing a slight majority disapproving of his actions, a result that largely mirrors his overall approval ratings (Galston 2020).

While the President’s desired degree of ownership for the management of this crisis has yet to gel, there is a growing clarity about how he will focus any blame for the economic and social fallout caused by the pandemic. The President and his campaign have made it clear that others—mainly China and the World Health Organization—are the actors who were not candid enough about the extent and potential danger of the virus. Additionally, in echoes of the “Biden scandal” backfire deployed in response to the Ukrainian phone call, President Trump’s campaign is pursuing a strategy against Biden that depicts him as “weak” on China because of his son’s business deals with the Chinese (Swan 2020). In essence, President Trump’s position is shaping up to be that the severity of the personal, social, and economic loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States was not a function of poor or absent planning and slow or ineffective responses on his part. If Trump is seen as the architect for an ineffective response (something that current public opinion polling is starting to indicate), this—coupled with a highly uncertain economy—could greatly diminish his chances for reelection. It bears watching to see if President Trump pursues this China/WHO line of defense and how much resemblance it may have to the distractions intended by the “wire tapp” and “Biden scandal” backfires.

Incumbent presidents are difficult to beat and there is a political lifetime (in reality, about six months) between the moment of this writing and the election in November 2020. There is a chance that President Trump will be returned to office. A second term, frequently the more scandal-pocked of a president’s tenure, may offer a natural experiment to test the assertions made here about preconditions for the use of backfires. While another round of second term backfires set by President Trump would be an interesting natural experiment for social scientists, it would be rotten for citizens. Backfires, even those that have been incomplete or only pondered by presidents are a fascinating aspect of presidential power, but they are a negative development for our democracy. The use of a backfire is, at its core, an act of deception and an abuse of the office of the presidency. It is the telling of a lie on a grand scale to avoid sanction. Even if the counter-scandal at the heart of a backfire is based on bringing to light the height of malfeasance by another, this cannot excuse
the instrumentality of the deception as a means of saving one’s own skin. There is no “good” backfire, just as there can be no “good” wagging of the dog; even if the outcome has some benefit, the motive for the act is the offense. Apologists can argue otherwise about the actions of the presidents showcased in this book’s case studies, but the basic conceptualization of constitutional government is that it rests on limited power and accountability. Backfires offer a vast new reservoir of power with the prospects of limited liability. It may go without stating, but if President Trump faced a less polarized Congress and public, with a different party makeup in the Senate for his impeachment trial, the conclusions drawn here would be somewhat different, but largely only in terms of the success of his use of backfires. That he used them as fully as he did would not be altered by another outcome in the Senate.

Donald Trump’s seemingly supersized grip on the presidency and the nation’s political psyche makes it all too easy to see his use of backfires as a Trumpian invention, unique to the man, his skillset, and his character. This “great man” view of presidential power detracts from the structural factors that have made the successful deployment of backfires possible and overstates the power of a president to bend these factors to his or her will. President Trump saw that these elements were in place and used them with full measure. Would a person of a different temperament or character have done otherwise? Perhaps so, but that has not been the intent of this study and cannot be deduced from its design. What is fairly certain is that other presidents in the post-Trump era will attempt to replicate his successful use of this tactic of scandal management.

It is lamentable that the nation’s politics has been riven by scandal. It is even more regrettable that the public is largely either put off by the rise of a scandal-worn politics or, depending on whose proverbial ox is being gored, horrified or enthralled by this blood sport. In either case, much of the public has become even more like the spectators in Edelman’s “parade of politics” (1985), watching and perhaps yelling loudly from the sidelines, but on the outside nonetheless. This is not a paean to some golden age when politics was “better” in America. Rather it is to note that the rise in political scandals overall has encouraged a view of politics as a highly adversarial game with distinct “winners” and “losers,” with the “losers” biding their time until the opposition trips itself up and they can be pilloried for their transgressions. The result is an unhealthy fixation on an “other” that deserves subjugation by means of revelation
of wrongdoing, rather than cooperation born of compromise through deliberation.

More specific to the findings of the case studies at the core of this book, the advent of fully realized presidential counter-scandals has had the effect of empowering some at the expense of others. Those on the “winning” side of the faux version of a scandal brought about by a backfire gain from the illegitimate exercise of presidential power, potentially by damaging something or someone else. For example, as with the “Biden scandal,” while there is no credible evidence to support the most salacious of President Trump’s charges about the former Vice President or his son, they have been damaged to some degree by the charge itself. Given that Joe Biden was an early front runner for the Democratic Party’s nomination and a strong matchup against President Trump for the general election, damaging charges about Biden’s character and lawfulness made by the President inevitably had some negative effect on his candidacy. Such power—drawn from the office of the presidency—was not envisioned by the Framers and could only be in keeping with the most expansive and grotesque imaginings of the office.

The arrival of the fully deployed and successful backfire has also helped to allow those who have abused power and the people’s trust to avoid sanction. While there were clearly other reasons that President Trump was not found guilty of the two articles of impeachment passed by the Congress, his use of backfires for the Ukraine scandal and the Russian scandal influenced the outcomes of both. The misdirection brought about by a backfire creates a space in the flow of the narrative around the initial scandal, the “firebreak” in the analogy of the backfire and the device that has the potential to limit or remove the damage caused by the initial scandal. In that opening, doubt grows over the seriousness or even the existence of the original scandal, especially when these qualms are nurtured by way of a counter-narrative. That germ of uncertainty provides cover for those involved in the original scandal and those who set the backfire. Whether of minor or considerable magnitude, the doubt grown in the space created by the backfire advanced President Trump’s claim to exoneration. Whether he would have avoided conviction and removal from office or some other punishment without the use of backfires to manage his scandals is unknowable. What is more arguably the case is that his use of this tactic provided some advantage against being negatively sanctioned that would not have existed in its absence.
While the standard playbook for presidents responding to scandal has long been to stonewall or cooperate, the findings produced here point to the scandal type, the level of polarization, the media environment, and the public’s views about government and other institutions as the key factors in the use of the third response; setting a backfire. However, there is nothing preordained or mechanistic in this conclusion. It is the occupant of the White House who evaluates the circumstances surrounding the scandal. A president responds in ways that reflect his or her understanding of the presidency as it relates to the position as defined by the often-competing roles of public servant, party leader, and as an individual. Each of these roles is connected to a legacy of a president’s time in office and an individual president’s choice of response to the increasingly common occurrence of scandal can define that legacy. The use or the contemplation of using a backfire as a response to scandal is common for presidents faced with the gloom of a scandal, but it does not mean that this tactic is in keeping with democratic norms or will always be successful. Ultimately, the use of a backfire may only provide a pause in the conflagration of a major scandal. The harm that may be done to our political and social institutions by the deception a president harvests from such misdirection, however, is beyond what should be acceptable in a democratic nation.

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