Chapter 3

The President as Anti-Hero

In his 1960 book about American political drama, Casper Nannes concluded that despite exposing some flaws in the nation’s government, the plays he analyzed “express confidence in the inherent good of our country and of its government. The searching playwright lays bare the imperfections of our political figures, but he also points out the unsung heroes who fight the evil, and who, in the end, win. That is the encouraging conclusion to be drawn from these plays.” What Nannes could not realize was that he was witnessing the end of an era. *Sunrise at Campobello*, which he praised as “a memorable play about one of our country’s greatest presidents,” had recently completed its run and would not be followed by any comparable successors.

A major reason for this change has been the public’s loss of faith in government and many of its institutions. In 1958, the University of Michigan’s American National Election Study asked voters, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?” Sixteen percent answered “just about always,” while a majority of 57 percent responded “most of the time.” As can be in chart 1, the numbers remained high during Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 electoral landslide victory. However, as the Vietnam War continued, they began to decline. By 1972, the year of Richard Nixon’s reelection, they had been reduced to 5 and 48 percent. Watergate made matters worse as the shrinkage reached 2 and 34 percent in 1974, then continued to decline during the Carter administration to 2 and 23 in 1980. There was a rebound during Ronald Reagan’s first term, most of which was lost during the George H. W. Bush administration and the first of Bill Clinton’s two terms. The surge after the events of Sept. 11, 2001 to 5 and 51 percent has proven temporary. By 2004 trust had declined to 4 and 43 percent. In 2008, the two categories together totaled only 30 percent. A 2010 Pew survey showed a further decline to 22 percent.

Although comparable survey questions about faith in the executive branch have not been asked for as long a period of time, and vary
more depending upon the public’s support for the incumbent, there has been a similar decline. Since 1972 Gallup has periodically asked “How much trust and confidence do you have at this time in the executive branch headed by the president—a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?” The Watergate scandal led to a decline from 24 percent, itself not a very high number, responding a “great deal” in 1972 to 12 percent two years later. The percentage recovered to 24 percent by the end of Bill Clinton’s second term, increased to 28 percent for George W. Bush in 2002, and has steadily declined since, reaching only 12 percent by September 2008. Early in Barack Obama’s term there has been significant improvement. A February 2009 Harris Poll found 36 percent expressing a great deal of confidence in “the White House,” compared to 15 percent a year earlier. Whether this simply reflects the common “honeymoon” period or heralds a long-term trend remains to be seen as 50 percent expressed a great deal of confidence in the Bush White House in January 2002, a few months after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Obama’s own approval ratings declined from a high of 68 percent at the beginning of his term to 50 percent a year later.4

There has been significant debate over exactly what these questions measure, but similar results for surveys asking whether government wastes a lot of tax money; is run for the benefit of a few big interests; or has quite a few people running it who are “crooked,” confirm that

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