Authority is difficult to establish and indispensable to effective government. The problem faced by new leadership in most cases is the difficulty caused by the intercurrence of authority. The solution to the dilemma is paradoxical. As Skowronek (1997) points out, perhaps the most salient characteristic of new leadership is the disruption of accepted legal and organizational norms. Again, it is leadership in political time—leadership that repudiates, reinforces, or opposes established ideological justifications and policy commitments—that creates the basis for the authoritative exercise of executive power by new leaders and their associates. As the course of regimes changes through time, the character of leadership needed to establish authority does as well. Skowronek elaborates a complex scheme for determining the leadership strategies available to U.S. presidents at different points in political time. Here I will generalize parts of his framework to a consideration of the establishment of authoritative leadership in two very different contexts: the United States in the early twenty-first century and the Soviet Union in the late 1930s.

Skowronek’s typology is based on a pattern of regime stability and vulnerability tied to the constitutional electoral cycle seen in the United States. He postulates that the transformation of U.S. political regimes begins with a repudiation of previous states of affairs. Such repudiations are particularly useful for establishing legitimate grants of power for new leaders. The “great repudiators” who begin them are in a unique position. The bankruptcy of previous regimes, dislocated by both the pressure of events and the difficulties of maintaining political coalitions, can make substantial new constituencies available for mobilization and create new ties between previously embattled and disunited elites once the moment in political time presents itself. Regimes can be reconstructed on this basis.
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(Skowronek 1997). By galvanizing both ideological elites and mass publics for change, great repudiators have an unequaled opportunity to establish new policies and institutional changes without at the same time fracturing the new coalitions. Shortfalls in programatic agendas can be effectively blamed either on the priorities forced by the need to solidify regime foundations or on the ultimately futile resistance of the remnants of the opposition. In either case, great repudiators are generally spared recriminations from dissatisfied partners in their new regime. They have, after all, cleared the decks for the future and delivered power into the hands of the previously marginalized (Skowronek 1997).

Subsequent loyal rulers called on to articulate the regime’s vision, however, face a much more arduous task. These “orthodox innovators” must turn the capabilities of executive power from disruptive acts to the task of fulfilling the agendas left to them. This might sound easy enough, but, as Skowronek (1997) points out, the process of doing so is fraught with peril. Those who established new regimes often cut corners for a good reason. Either the opponents of their innovations—in and out of politics—were too strong, members of their own coalition disagreed too much about the course to follow, or the resources available to the new government were insufficient to the tasks involved. Given their status as creators of new political opportunities, the great repudiators can get away with half measures. The orthodox innovators who follow, however, are expected to fulfill the regime’s promises, no matter the consequences for the political alliances that sustain it. The almost inevitable result is fragmentation of the political support of the regime. As these leaders use their power to create their own recasting of the policy arrangements necessary to fulfill regime agendas, they also destabilize the delicate balance between regime supporters that sustains their actions (Skowronek 1997). It is no wonder that so many presidents in these circumstances are considered failures.

Skowronek’s scheme, once shorn of the constitutional framework of U.S. political history, reveals a relatively familiar pattern of results to analysts of executive power. As I have already asserted, the United States is not the only place where regimes are assaulted by repudiative leaders, where there are difficulties for those who loyally follow them, and where the legitimacy of regimes (though not necessarily their power) degrades over time. Since modern regimes, with few exceptions, have presented themselves as embodying popular will and as reflections of policies aimed at fulfilling it, it is not surprising that the pattern of difficulties and opportunities that Skowronek finds recurring in U.S. presidential history appears to challenge leaders in other institutional frameworks as well. The problem of using, disrupting, and, if possible, transcending the legacy of the past is alive and well in any political system with a strong executive and a set of relevant