

The Long 1950s as a Policy Era – 2/13/13

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If policy reform amounts to nonincremental change, what can we say about postwar America before the mid-1960s came along? Those early years are often dismissed as the doldrums. It was Deadlock of Democracy time.¹ I argue here that this judgment is quite wrong.

Discernible in those days is a “policy era” of own kind of content and integrity. By the term policy era I do not mean anything fancy. I mean a time span of policy enterprises that can be apprehended using reasonable empirical care, here all entailing congressional action, and that share an animation and a direction and sum to a major cumulative policy record. For political context, think of Frank D. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones’s “waves of enthusiasm” or John W. Kingdon’s “national moods” that can pry open “policy windows.”²

I use a particular empirical wedge. As guides to policy eras I am wary of labels like the New Deal, the Fair Deal, and the New Frontier. Such labels are promoted by politicians for their own purposes, and they coast into usages that are both ideologically freighted and gauzy. They can become impediments to understanding. They can dominate and obscure the contents of their presumed packages.³ Possibly better is a nominalistic course of examining actual policy moves one by one, leaving aside any assumptions about lumping or labels, to see what they are and what they add up to.⁴ A good instance is the sequence of new regulatory legislation from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s. That went from the Traffic Safety Act of 1966 through the Truth in Lending Act of 1968, the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, the Water Pollution Control Act of 1972, the Consumer Product Safety Act of 1972, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974, and the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976. This is far from an exhaustive list. For a decade, the beat went on.⁵ At issue is pattern recognition. Through a one-

¹ James MacGregor Burns, The Deadlock of Democracy: Four-Party Politics in America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

² Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, Agendas and Instability in American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 5; John W. Kingdon, Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies (New York: Longman, 2nd ed., 2003), pp. 146-49, ch. 8.

³ There is confusion, for example, about whether “the New Deal era” encompasses FDR’s policy moves of 1944-45. See David R. Mayhew, “Wars and American Politics,” Perspectives on Politics 3:3 (September 2005), 473-93 at 478-80.

⁴ One workout of this methodology is David R. Mayhew, Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-2002 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2nd ed., 2005), ch. 3.

⁵ See David Vogel, “The ‘New’ Social Regulation in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” in Thomas K. McCraw (ed.), Regulation in Perspective: Historical Essays (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 157; Richard A. Harris, “A Decade of Reform,” ch. 1 in Harris and Sidney M. Milkis (eds.), Remaking American Politics (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989); Robert Higgs, Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 246-54; Mayhew, Divided We Govern, pp. 85-89.

by-one identification of items—not through an overarching label like “the Great Society”—we can see a major “policy era” centering on increases in government regulation.

My pitch here is for “the long 1950s” as an era showing a particular policy content. By the long 1950s I mean chiefly the Eisenhower years of 1953-61, but also before that in a slight role the last years of the Truman presidency, and in a more robust role the full Kennedy presidency of 1961-63. In focus are parts, at least, of those three presidential spans. This longish stretch of history has a reputation as being in domestic policy terms rather fallow. The Fair Deal legislative agenda of Truman’s second term did not go far.⁶ At the other end, Kennedy’s legislative program faltered.⁷ As for the Eisenhower years, those are often seen in policy terms as a forgettable interlude—a kind of time-out. Not much was happening under the former general often dismissed as a centrist placeholder. For political scientists of a certain vintage, the dominant image of the Eisenhower years may still be that supplied by James L. Sundquist in his engaging 1968 book, Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years, which presents a drama, a teleology.⁸ Sundquist, focusing on unemployment, poverty, education, civil rights, health care, and the environment—the standard liberal agenda of that time—saw the 1950s as a scanty preface to, beyond 1963 at any rate, the glorious and productive 1960s.

Yet that view of the 1950s is really quite wrong. The era was enormously busy and consequential in policy terms. We might like or dislike the policies, but that is another matter. In play from 1949 or so through 1963 was a family of interrelated policy goals involving the economy—the aims of growth, development, efficiency,⁹ and productivity. These four nouns or their cognates keep appearing in the accounts. These goals invested Congress as well as the presidency and crossed party lines—making many of the policy drives of the era bipartisan in texture. In general, private enterprise was favored over government control in pursuing these aims—for reasons of presumed economic efficiency as well as basic ideology. But the matter was complicated. It could be more urgent to do something big, as opposed to doing nothing at all, than to favor private enterprise over government. (These two dimensions could be haphazardly related to each other.) One way or another, an explosion of economic inducement or development was what the policy entrepreneurs of the era drove at.

A body of ideological principle, whatever else was going on, seems to have fostered and shaped this era. In the wake of World War II, Charles S. Maier has written, “United States spokesmen came to emphasize economic productivity as a principle of political settlement in its own right.” A

⁶ See, for example, Richard E. Neustadt, “Congress and the Fair Deal: A Legislative Balance Sheet,” in Alonzo E. Hamby (ed.), Harry S. Truman and the Fair Deal (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1974), pp. 15-42.

⁷ See, for example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp. 708, 712; Theodore C. Sorensen, Kennedy (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 339; Richard Bolling, Power in the House: A History of the Leadership of the House of Representatives (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 204-17.

⁸ James L. Sundquist, Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1968).

⁹ Efficiency in the sense of optimal use of resources minimizing waste.

“theme of productivity” took on life.¹⁰ Foreign policy—conducting the Cold War, funding defense, reconstructing allied countries, keeping ahead of the Soviet Union economically—was one reason. But the memory of the harsh unemployment of the 1930s was there, too. Growth and development—what was not to like? Also, in Maier’s view the theme of productivity served as a kind of solvent: It allowed a more or less consensual ticket out of the polarizing and exhausting class politics inherited from the 1930s.

Such economic ideas drove both the Eisenhower and Kennedy presidencies, according to an analysis by M. Stephen Weatherford and Lorraine M. McDonnell.¹¹ That role has been underappreciated. Those presidents’ “economic ideologies” are said to have guided their behavior. Eisenhower’s approach was “mostly distinctively characterized by its orientation toward the long-term condition of the economy.”¹² The country’s future was at stake. Tax cuts, steady prices, and spurs to private investment would pay off in time. Priming of the economy for just the next election could take a pass: “Conditions were ripe for a political business cycle in 1954, 1958, and 1960, yet [Eisenhower] explicitly abjured the temptation.”¹³ He was against such priming.¹⁴ Concerns for growth, development, productivity, and efficiency pervade the president’s autobiographical account of his first term in 1953-1957.¹⁵ Generally speaking, productivity called for markets rather than bureaucracies: “To stimulate that productivity, I [Eisenhower] dwelt on the need for removing political controls over the American economy.”¹⁶ Efficiency called for, among other things, state and local rather than national government action: “Underlying [Eisenhower’s] preference for decentralized government was [his] confidence that citizens could be relied on to deal with local problems more economically and, in general, more constructively than could the federal government,

¹⁰ Charles S. Maier, “The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy After World War II,” *International Organization* 31:4 (Autumn 1977), 607-33, quotations at 609, 613. See also Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs. 1, 2.

¹¹ M. Stephen Weatherford and Lorraine M. McDonnell, “Macroeconomic Policy Making Beyond the Electoral Constraint,” in George C. Edwards III, Steven A. Shull and Norman C. Thomas (eds.), *The Presidency and Public Policy Making* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), pp. 95-113. See also M. Stephen Weatherford and Lorraine M. McDonnell, “The Role of Presidential Ideology in Economic Policymaking,” *Policy Studies Journal* 12:4 (June 1984), 691-702.

¹² Weatherford and McDonnell, “Macroeconomic Policy Making,” p. 105. See also Grant Madison, “The International Origins of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Political Economy,” *Journal of Policy History* 24:4 (2012), 675-708.

¹³ M. Stephen Weatherford, “The Interplay of Ideology and Advice in Economic Policy-Making: The Case of Political Business Cycles,” *Journal of Politics* 49:4 (November 1987), 925-52, quotation at 932.

¹⁴ To the despair of Nixon in 1960, who needed a better economy for his presidential run that year.

¹⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 12, 121, 122, 124, 208, 287-90, 294, 297, 301, 305, 386-90, 499, 501-02, 547-48. See also Chester J. Pach, Jr. and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991 rev.ed.), pp. 32, 54-57; Iwan W. Morgan, *Eisenhower versus ‘the Spenders’: The Eisenhower Administration, the Democrats and the Budget, 1953-60* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), pp. 17-18; Merlo J. Pusey, *Eisenhower the President* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), chs. 11-12; Raymond J. Saulnier, *Constructive Years: The U.S. Economy Under Eisenhower* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ Eisenhower, *White House Years: Mandate for Change*, p. 124.

acting alone and from a distance.”¹⁷ That is an efficiency argument. Stock or anodyne as these causal stories may be, there does not seem to be good reason to doubt their seriousness.

The case for Kennedy is less familiar. There, too, Weatherford and McDonnell find “a clearly articulated ideology.” Economic growth was the motif—“a strong belief that government should play an active role in stimulating long-term, stable growth.” For both Cold War and domestic reasons, “a long-term expansion in capacity” was needed—a hoped-for annual growth rate of 4.5 percent, a high bar. “Kennedy’s ideology led him to focus on augmenting economic growth and to make redistributive issues secondary.”¹⁸ According to Allen J. Matusow, “The president’s economic policies . . . would be framed above all to create a stable environment for corporate prosperity and corporate expansion. What was good for the corporate system would be good for the country.”¹⁹ Interestingly, both the Eisenhower and Kennedy presidencies seem to have leaned to austerity in a study by Nathaniel Beck mapping immediate unemployment rates from Truman through Carter by individual president, not by party. In conventional Democratic Party terms, the Kennedy presidency underperformed on unemployment. On this front, the advance from Eisenhower to Kennedy was apparently seamless.²⁰

Matching these economic ideologies is an era-long record of particulars, the exhibit of this chapter. It is a story of twenty-one statutes enacted between 1949 (yes, late Truman) and 1964. The list has two foundations. First, in the spirit of my own Divided We Govern work, and of 1965 through 1975 as a regulatory era, it is a presentation of a sequence of events. Second, through various reading I have become increasingly fascinated by the policy production of the 1950s.²¹ Certain of the most thought-provoking works on that era are recent. I used my own judgment to choose these twenty-one statutes. No doubt there are omissions, some of the choices are uneasy fits, and some of them fit into 1949 through 1963 yet their thrusts are not exclusive to that time span. But all of the enactments pertain somehow to some mix of growth, development, efficiency, and productivity as aims. There seems to be a gestalt. The statutes appear in Table 1. Many of them, in an interesting pattern, seem to have unstuck various policy realms of the mid-twentieth century. Deadlock, stalemate, logjams, conflict, and even embarrassment had stacked up during the long years of chiefly Democratic control of the government in the 1930s and 1940s, and now, in a fresh climate, policy

¹⁷ Saulnier, Constructive Years, p. 5.

¹⁸ Weatherford and McDonnell, “Macroeconomic Policy Making,” quotations at pp. 106, 109; Allen J. Matusow, The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 18. The 4.5 percent figure is from Ronald F. King, “Continuity and Change: Fiscal Policy in the Kennedy Administration,” ch. 11 in Paul Harper and Joann P. Krieg (eds.), John F. Kennedy: The Promise Revisited (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1988), p. 173.

¹⁹ Matusow, Unraveling of America, p. 33. This book is the New American Nation Series volume on the 1960s.

²⁰ Nathaniel Beck, “Parties, Administrations, and American Macroeconomic Outcomes,” American Political Science Review 76:1 (March 1982), 83-93. In this study, Truman and Johnson emerge as the star performers regarding unemployment levels. Kennedy and Carter were laggards. Only the Republican Ford underperformed those two Democrats.

²¹ One probe into that production appears in David R. Mayhew, Partisan Balance: Why Political Parties Don’t Kill the U.S. Constitutional System (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), chs. 2-4.

action could come about—often through inventive designs that attracted cross-party coalitions and steered around sticky troubles.

Table 1 here

Housing Act of 1949. Early in Truman’s second term, this enactment was framed and passed under Democratic Party auspices. That is clear enough. Authorizing as it did a large stock of public housing units, it is often seen as a victory for a long skimmed-on liberal aim of direct government provision of housing, a redistributive program. In fact, it was a turning point. Support on Capitol Hill for public housing had been and remained precarious. Conflict on the matter was unending. Most of the units authorized in 1949 were, in fact, never built. Here was a cause going politically stale. The future of the cities pointed elsewhere in the enactment of 1949, a hammered-out compromise. A “progrowth coalition,” in John Mollenkopf’s phrase, was rising to power at that time in both the cities and Congress, and the new measure reflected that rise. “Largely giving up any emphasis on aiding the urban poor,” Congress now wrote an act that was “clearly designed to benefit private development.” Federal money and plans would spark that development. From now on, the lexicon of federal urban policy would feature such phrases as blight, central business districts, redevelopment agencies, slum clearance, and urban renewal. Bulldozers would roar.²² Mayors and their business communities would join in visions of renovation. New Haven under Mayor Richard C. Lee would become a showcase example.²³

Creation of the National Science Foundation – 1950. This is an uneasy fit. It was World War II that triggered federal support for science, and a good deal was under way by 1950. But there is a point. For five years, deadlock had persisted over the institutional design of a general program. Congressional liberals and President Truman, who vetoed one plan, leaned toward a model of central bureaucratic control. This idea was a hard sell on Capitol Hill. After drawn-out contention and bargaining, the legislation of 1950 enacted the plan of individual application, peer review, and discretionary funding that we are familiar with today. It was an efficiency design, of a sort, offering a widely dispersed decision process as a route to scientific development.²⁴

Submerged Lands Act of 1953. Better known as the “tidelands oil” act, this measure followed on offshore discoveries of oil and rising demand for it, yet there had been years of explosive controversy about how to proceed. At issue was public versus private development. A tangle of court decisions, presidential vetoes, and failed congressional initiatives left an impasse as of 1952 in which

²² John H. Mollenkopf, The Contested City (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), Introduction and ch. 2, quotations at pp. 3, 74, 78. See also Ashley A. Foard and Hilbert Fefferman, “Federal Urban Renewal Legislation,” ch. 4 in James Q. Wilson (ed.), Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966); Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1949, pp. 273-86.

²³ See Robert A. Dahl, Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 116-18.

²⁴ Bruce L.R. Smith, American Science Policy Since World War II (Washington, DC.: Brookings Institution, 1990), pp. 36-52; Nelson W. Polsby, Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Initiation (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 35-55; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1950, pp. 183-86.

virtually no oil was being taken from the Gulf of Mexico.²⁵ Cheered on by oil companies, certain coastal states with their eyes on royalties kept campaigning for legal title to lands immediately off their shores. In this 1953 enactment, with the Republicans now controlling the government, they got what they wanted. A supportive House committee “stressed the ‘vital necessity’ of legislation to promote the exploitation and development of oil deposits in the submerged lands.”²⁶

Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act of 1953. A lesser-known companion to the tidelands act, this measure was in fact more consequential. It was the “drill baby drill” initiative of its time. At stake was oil exploration beyond the immediate coastal areas. Little was happening out there, either. A legal basis was needed. This enactment supplied it, empowering the Interior Secretary to lease oil and gas deposits in outer waters to private firms, charging royalties. Some twelve million acres thus came to be leased during the next quarter century.²⁷

Authorization of the Saint Lawrence Seaway – 1954. Here the gridlock went back decades—thanks chiefly to various U.S. regional interests that feared the economic downside of competing with Great Lakes transportation. In 1954, authorization finally occurred. The White House and Canada’s government weighed in, Capitol Hill stirred to action, and an agreeable plan was arrived at.²⁸ Eisenhower saw the seaway as “an economic necessity” and “a vital addition to our economic and national security.”²⁹ In defense terms, it would offer a way to move iron ore from Labrador to the Great Lakes industries in an emergency.³⁰ Navigation channels, seven new locks, and a key New York hydroelectric plant were approved. User fees would pay the bill. This was a gigantic enterprise. The country would gain a “fourth seacoast,” it was said.³¹ In the end, 210 million cubic yards of earth would be dug up and moved—twice the volume removed in building the Suez Canal.³²

²⁵ California was pumping somewhat more.

²⁶ Ernest R. Bartley, The Tidelands Oil Controversy: A Legal and Historical Analysis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1953), chs. 1, 13, 15; Richard H.K. Vietor, Energy Policy in American since 1945: A Study of Business-Government Relations (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 18-19; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1953, pp. 388-96, quotation at 390.

²⁷ Tom Arrandale, The Battle for Natural Resources (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1983), p. 109; Warren M. Christopher, “The Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act: Key to a New Frontier,” Stanford Law Review 6:1 (December 1953), 23-68, at 23-28; Vietor, Energy Policy in America, pp. 18-19; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1953, pp. 397-99.

²⁸ Ronald Stagg, The Golden Dream: A History of the St. Lawrence Seaway (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), pp. 158-68; Donald F. Wood, “The St. Lawrence Seaway: Some Considerations of Its Impact,” Land Economics 34:1 (February 1958), 61-73; Congress and the Nation, 1945-1964 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), pp. 955-61; Jean Edward Smith, Eisenhower in War and Peace (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 650.

²⁹ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, p. 301 (first quotation); Gary W. Reichard, The Reaffirmation of Republicanism: Eisenhower and the Eighty-Third Congress (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), p. 168 (second quotation).

³⁰ Pach and Richardson, The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, p. 58; Wood, “The St. Lawrence Seaway,” p. 61. Eisenhower’s defense argument is emphasized in Stagg, The Golden Dream, p. 165; Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, pp. 287, 301.

³¹ Wood, “The St. Lawrence Seaway,” p. 62.

³² Stagg, The Golden Dream, p. 169.

Atomic Energy Act of 1954. Atomic energy dated to 1945, but what to do with it stayed in question as of the early 1950s. Legally, a government monopoly existed. Public versus private development framed a debate. In the general public, a go-go enthusiasm pushed toward action of some kind.³³ The enactment of 1954 brought a private-side solution—in Eisenhower’s words, “a program for harnessing atomic energy for the commercial production of electricity,” featuring “the private manufacture, ownership, and operation of atomic reactors.”³⁴ This was a tricky blueprint. It involved heavy regulation and some subsidy as well as the statutory design of an industry that could thrive in the private market. Several nuclear plants were online or under construction by 1960.³⁵

Agriculture Act of 1954. Here also there was impasse, to the point of embarrassment. Neither the Truman administration, with its imaginative Brannan Plan defeated in 1949, nor free-market advocates had been able to dent the high “parity” crop prices guaranteed to farmers during World War II and protected by organized agriculture since. To assure those prices, the government kept buying up crops. “Wasteful, extravagant, and ineffective” was said to be Eisenhower’s take on the situation.³⁶ The 1954 enactment was a private-side efficiency move using a mechanism of “flexible prices” to lead producers toward market constraints.³⁷ In general, according to a recent analysis that ends up appreciative, the Eisenhower farm programs “took cognizance of technological advances, the need for American agricultural products to compete in world markets, and the fact that farmers should be reacting to consumer preferences rather than producing for government warehouses.”³⁸

Housing Act of 1954. In this measure, the second shoe dropped. The Housing Act of 1949 had brought a compromise between public housing and urban redevelopment. Now with Eisenhower and a Republican Congress came a clear switch. The 1954 act “transcended the acrimonious divide between liberals and conservatives, forging a new consensus that employed commercial redevelopment instead of public housing as the answer to central-city decline.” “The class politics of the New Deal yielded to a new model.” In consequence, public housing kept tailing off. Federally supported urban renewal projects grew from 260 in 1953 to 1,210 in 1962.³⁹ Many more bulldozers would roar. For its mechanisms, “the 1954 act was hailed by large builders as ‘an aid to private

³³ Baumgartner and Jones, Agendas and Instability, pp. 59-67.

³⁴ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, p. 294.

³⁵ General references: Robert J. Duffy, Nuclear Politics in America: A History and Theory of Government Regulation (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), pp. 34-38; Wyatt Wells, “Public Power in the Eisenhower Administration,” Journal of Policy History 20:2 (2008), 227-62, at 246-54; Congress and the Nation, 1945-1964, pp. 935-39; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1954, pp. 534-48.

³⁶ Morgan, Eisenhower versus ‘the Spenders,’ p. 17.

³⁷ The Brannan Plan, rejected by a Democratic Congress, was a public-side efficiency proposal. It aimed to serve both farmers and consumers through a design of tight regulation. General references on the 1954 measure: Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, “Eisenhower and Agricultural Reform: Ike’s Farm Policy Legacy Appraised,” American Journal of Economics and Sociology 51:2 (April 1992), 147-59; Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, pp.287-90.

³⁸ Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, “Eisenhower and Agricultural Reform,” p. 154.

³⁹ Richard M. Flanagan, “The Housing Act of 1954: The Sea Change in National Urban Policy,” Urban Affairs Review 33:2 (November 1997), 265-86, quotations at 265, 283; data at 266. See also Foard and Fefferman, “Federal Urban Renewal Legislation,” pp. 96-99; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1954, pp. 198-205.

enterprise,” not least in the suburbs.⁴⁰ Related tax changes in 1954 (see below) helped along malls, roadside strips, office parks, and industrial parks.⁴¹

Revenue Act of 1954. This was a mammoth overhaul of the tax code wrung from Capitol Hill compromise and laden with a great many provisions. For purposes here, it is said that Eisenhower saw the measure as “a cornerstone of his economic program . . . a means of stimulating growth while maintaining price stability.” Tucked in were depreciation allowances, a credit for shareholder dividends, and a modest tax cut for individuals.⁴² “Substantial stimulants to economic activity” were seen as the aim.⁴³ This was standard Republican fare.

Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA) Extension of 1955. Here is another measure keyed to efficient use of resources. It fits snugly into the policy era under discussion but was not exclusive to it. A regime of tariff reduction through presidential authority began in 1934 and (notwithstanding certain gaps) continues today. A classic of political science, **American Business and Public Policy**, centers on the complex enactment of 1955.⁴⁴ With Eisenhower, leadership on the Republican side joined the cause of tariff reduction, although a Democratic Congress in 1955 proved more enthusiastic on the question than had a Republican Congress in 1953-54. “The advantages to the United States of increasing two-way trade,” the textbook economics case, figured in Eisenhower’s reasoning as well as a need to prop up the economies of U.S. allies.⁴⁵ The president won three-year authority to cut duties by 15 percent.⁴⁶

Authorization of Upper Colorado River Storage Project – 1956. Closing out (nearly: central Arizona was to get its share of Colorado River water in 1968) a half-century-long reclamation drive in the U.S. West, this was a big one. It was “the largest reclamation project ever authorized in a single piece of legislation,” claimed Eisenhower. Through a complex of dams including a gigantic one at Glen Canyon, coaxing into existence today’s 186-mile-long Lake Powell, it “would bring light and power and irrigation water and flood-control benefits to five mountain states in the growing West”—Colorado,

⁴⁰ Barry Checkoway, “Large Builders, Federal Housing Programmes, and Postwar Suburbanization,” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 41 (1980), 21-45, quotation at 32.

⁴¹ Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000 (New York: Vintage, 2003), pp. 162-64.

⁴² Pach and Richardson, The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, quotation at p. 54; Reichard, The Reaffirmation of Republicanism, pp. 110-13; John F. Witte, The Politics and Development of the Federal Income Tax (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 144-50; Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, p. 303.

⁴³ Pusey, Eisenhower the President, p. 244.

⁴⁴ Raymond A. Bauer, Ithiel de Sola Pool, and Lewis A. Dexter, American Business and Public Policy: The Politics of Foreign Trade (New York: Atherton, 1964).

⁴⁵ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, pp. 208-11, 292-93, 498, quotation at 293; Dwight D. Eisenhower, The Eisenhower Diaries (New York: Ed. Robert H. Ferrell, W.W. Norton, 1981), pp. 228-29, 244-45 (an especially clear guide to the president’s thinking); Bauer, Pool, and Dexter, American Business and Public Policy, pp. 29-30; Pusey, Eisenhower the President, pp. 245-48; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1955, 289-301; Reichard, The Reaffirmation of Republicanism, pp. 78-84.

⁴⁶ Robert Pastor, Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, 1929-1976 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 101-04.

Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico, and a slice of Arizona.⁴⁷ Utah's agriculture would gain. Vast resources of coal, uranium, and oil shale to be tappable as a result of "ensured industrial growth in the West." A delicate congressional compromise clinched the measure, which was to be paid for by using Glen Canyon Dam as a "cash register" to tax electricity generated there.⁴⁸ "And so the list of great projects goes on and on," it was commented later on in the 1970s, "fostering new cities and desert-land agriculture."⁴⁹

The Interstate Highway System – 1956. Another logjam broken. A congressional act in 1944 had promised a national highway system, but a decade later only 1 percent of it was built. Financing was the hitch. Eisenhower took a vigorous interest. He had seen the poor American roads during an Army tour in 1919 and Hitler's Autobahn system as allied armies entered Germany in 1945.⁵⁰ As of the 1950s, the slow level of U.S. construction had "failed to solve the traffic crisis and failed to serve as a long-range foundation for economic growth."⁵¹ Congress was ready, too. The 1956 measure, which followed on considerable dickering but then passed nearly unanimously, hinged on a congressional scheme for a trust fund into which user taxes could be poured.⁵² A total of \$31.5 billion was thus committed to build 41,000 miles of roads.⁵³ It was, Eisenhower wrote, "the biggest peacetime construction project of any description ever undertaken by the United States or any other country." It would "move enough dirt and rock to bury all of Connecticut two feet deep."⁵⁴ "The

⁴⁷ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, quotations at 389, 499.

⁴⁸ General sources: Mark W.T. Harvey, A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), ch. 10 (a fine case study of the enactment process), quotation at 266; Charles W. Howe and W. Ashley Ahrens, "Water Resources of the Upper Colorado River Basin: Problems and Policy Alternatives," ch. 5 in Mohamed T. El-Ashry and Diana C. Gibbons (eds.), Water and Arid Lands of the Western United States (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 180; Neal R. Peirce, The Mountain States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Eight Rocky Mountain States (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), pp. 17-18, 188, 267; Donald Worster, Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 273-74 on the "cash register" design; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1956, pp. 408-10.

⁴⁹ Peirce, The Mountain States of America, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, p. 548; Stephen E. Ambrose, Eisenhower: Soldier and President (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 387-88; Smith, Eisenhower in War and Peace, pp. 651-54.

⁵¹ Eisenhower's view cited in Mark H. Rose, Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), p. 69.

⁵² Eric M. Patashnik, Putting Trust in the US Budget: Federal Trust Funds and the Politics of Commitment (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 6.

⁵³ General references: Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, pp. 501-02, 547-49; Pach and Richardson, The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, pp. 123-24; Rose, Interstate, chs. 6, 7; James A. Dunn, Jr., Miles to Go: European and American Transportation Policies (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 118-22; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1956, pp. 398-407; Gary T. Schwartz, "Urban Freeways and the Interstate System," Southern California Law Review 49 (March 1976), 406-513, at 427-39.

⁵⁴ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, quotations at p. 548.

largest public works program in history,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan denominated it.⁵⁵ Its effects on the American economy and society would be immense.⁵⁶

Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act (RTAA) Extension – 1958. Here was another trade act extension. This time, four-year authority went to the president to cut duties by 20 percent.⁵⁷

Agriculture Act of 1958. Another move away from crop supports.⁵⁸

Establishment of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) – 1958. This act committed the nation to development on a new front—space. It was a quick reaction to the Soviet launch of Sputnik. On this measure, Eisenhower lay back as Senator Lyndon B. Johnson took the legislative lead. With NASA, American satellites would go up. Kennedy’s pledge of a moon landing would come three years later. With luck, spinoff benefits would accrue to the U.S. economy and society.⁵⁹ Eisenhower, once on board, foresaw “a new system of global communications through television, radio, and telephone.”⁶⁰

National Defense Education Act of 1958. Not until 1965 did the U.S. government commit general funds to elementary and secondary schools. However, improvement of high-end human capital to compete with the Soviet Union was something else. That came in this 1958 measure, like NASA a reaction to Sputnik. At stake was scientific development. On offer would be loans to students and schools to perk up science and math education.⁶¹

Area Redevelopment Act of 1961. In the 1950s, both parties had hatched plans to combat “structural unemployment” in chiefly rural areas, but the plans clashed, and two Eisenhower vetoes left the policy shelf bare. Enter Kennedy, who had witnessed appalling poverty in West Virginia during his election campaign in 1960. He made the matter a priority. The 1961 act, generally liberal-tilting in various ways, targeted development money to areas of high unemployment. The

⁵⁵ Quoted in G.T. Schwartz, “Urban Freeways,” p. 408.

⁵⁶ See, for example, D.W. Meinig, The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, vol. 4, Global America, 1915-2000 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 61-69; Richard A. Schwartz, The 1950s: An Eyewitness History (New York: Facts on File, 2003), p. 284; Hayden, Building Suburbia, pp. 165-72.

⁵⁷ Pastor, Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, p. 103.

⁵⁸ Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, “Eisenhower and Agricultural Reform,” p. 153; Charles O. Jones, “The Agriculture Committee and the Problem of Representation,” ch. 8 in Robert L. Peabody and Nelson W. Polsby (eds.), New Perspectives on the House of Representatives, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 3rd ed., 1977); Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1958, pp. 269-75.

⁵⁹ Walter A. McDougall, The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age (New York: Basic Books, 1985), chs. 6, 7; Dwight D. Eisenhower, The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 205-12, 257-60; Pach and Richardson, The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, pp. 179-80.

⁶⁰ Eisenhower, White House Years: Waging Peace, p. 258.

⁶¹ Sundquist, Politics and Policy, pp. 173-80; Lawrence E. Gladieux and Thomas R. Wolanin, Congress and the Colleges: The National Politics of Higher Education (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1976), pp. 8-9; Eisenhower, White House Years: Waging the Peace, pp. 241-44; Pach and Richardson, The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, p. 178.

Department of Commerce would preside. Some \$400 million in loans would go for new public and industrial facilities. Rural renewal, so to speak, was the goal.⁶²

Communications Satellite Act of 1962. A large battle took place in 1962 over what to do with the new satellite technology. A design was needed. Public versus private framed the terms of debate. In the end, the Kennedy administration and Congress wired a private-tilting compromise that yielded COMSAT— in effect, a consortium of private firms authorized to establish, own, and operate a new system.⁶³

Investment Tax Credit – 1962. A Kennedy priority, this was a standard boost to business in tax credits and depreciation allowances.⁶⁴

Trade Expansion Act of 1962. Another bow to freer international trade, this measure trumped those of the 1950s in importance. Kennedy threw himself into it. In 1962, he “proclaimed it his number-one legislative priority.”⁶⁵ It became “the centerpiece of all that year’s efforts” entailing speeches, pep talks, other political spectacles and intense White House lobbying.⁶⁶ Foreign policy and the domestic economy were seen as benefiting. The president pretty much got what he wanted, including five-year authority to cut all tariffs by as much as 50 percent; in compensation, there would be “adjustment assistance” for adversely impacted sectors of the economy.⁶⁷ This trade act is said to have been the first “modern” one in “complexity and comprehensiveness.”⁶⁸

The Kennedy tax cut – 1963-64. This was Kennedy’s project, his signature domestic policy aim going into calendar 1963, although it did not reach final passage until Johnson became president after Kennedy’s assassination. A huge tax cut, this measure, among other things, cut the top-bracket personal income-tax rate from a war-level 91 percent down to 70 percent.⁶⁹ It is indicative to see how the Kennedy administration put the plan together. In a long run-up of economic and political calculation, economic growth crystallized among politicians and advisers as the unifying policy goal.⁷⁰ Other aims got shorter shrift. In the end, some liberals had misgivings: Various liberal tax reforms fell away; redistribution of income was largely sidelined; the AFL-CIO would have preferred a stimulus

⁶² Paul C. Light, The President’s Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Clinton (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 70, 77; James N. Giglio, The Presidency of John F. Kennedy (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 103-04; Sundquist, Politics and Policy, pp. 57-73, 83-85; Sorensen, Kennedy, p. 404; Congressional Quarterly Almanac pp. 247-56. Some of the money went to urban areas, too.

⁶³ Matusow, Unraveling of America, pp. 36-37; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1962, pp. 546-58.

⁶⁴ Matusow, Unraveling of America, p. 35; Weatherford and McDonnell, “Macroeconomic Policy Making,” 106-07; Julian E. Zelizer, Taxing America: Wilbur D. Mills, Congress, and the State, 1945-1975 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 185-87; Witte, Politics and Development of the Income Tax, pp. 156-58; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1962, pp. 478-509.

⁶⁵ Matusow, Unraveling of America, p. 35.

⁶⁶ Sorensen, Kennedy, p. 410; Pastor, Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, p. 108.

⁶⁷ Sorensen, Kennedy, pp. 410-12; Pastor, Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, pp. 105-17.

⁶⁸ Pastor, Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, p. 190.

⁶⁹ Zelizer, Taxing America, pp. 204-06.

⁷⁰ Herbert J. Parmet, JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy (New York: Dial Press, 1983), p. 94; Sorensen, Kennedy, pp. 429-30.

of public works spending; permanent, as opposed to temporary, tax reduction raised questions in theoretical Keynesian terms. The liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith called Kennedy's speech pitching the measure to the Economic Club of New York "the most Republican speech since McKinley." "New Dealers," it is reported, "preferring public spending, called the President's basic premise contrary to thirty years of Democratic philosophy." (Eisenhower, on another note, back at his farm in Pennsylvania, saw "fiscal recklessness.") In a nutshell, the measure was a large, permanent, more or less across-the-board tax cut to spur economic growth.⁷¹

That completes the list of statutes. It goes without saying that legislative drives on other subjects, some successful, some not, took place during the long era of 1949-1963. Civil rights, Medicare, and comprehensive aid to education, to cite some examples, kept being pursued.⁷² I have selected here on the cues of growth, development, efficiency, and productivity. But, in general, that is where the successful legislative action was. That case is easy enough to see for the Eisenhower years, but it holds for the Kennedy years, too. Generally speaking, it is questionable to see the Kennedy years as Act One of the redistributive and regulatory politics of the Johnson and Nixon years (often due, in the Nixon case, to leverage by Democratic Congresses).⁷³ Kennedy's aims lay largely elsewhere, and the final legislative product of his years, once it ground through the coalitional politics on Capitol Hill, which always seemed to feature the pivotal House Ways and Means Chairman Wilbur D. Mills of Arkansas, lay decisively elsewhere. Free trade and tax reduction were the standout emphases.

The bent for the private side shared by Eisenhower and Kennedy drew fire in an intense, if sporadic, opposition in the Senate. A bloc of senators in the groove of Progressive antimonopolism took great alarm at the "giveaways" seen to inhere in the tidelands act of 1953, the atomic energy act of 1954, and COMSAT in 1962—all favored by the Eisenhower or Kennedy White House.⁷⁴ The public domain was being frittered away to private capitalism, it was argued. Voters needed to be alerted. Civil rights aside, rhetorical resistance to these measures seems to have brought the most prominent use of the Senate filibuster during 1949-1963. It was filibustering from the left. Night sessions were scheduled, the sleeping cots came out, the senators talked on. Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon, a loquacious would-be blocker of all three of these legislative drives, set a chamber record with a 22-hour, 26-minute speech against the tidelands act in 1953. All three measures passed. On COMSAT in 1962, the Senate voted cloture for the first time on any question since 1927.⁷⁵

What did this long era amount to? In policy terms, many of the tangible deposits of its lawmaking are common knowledge—the space rockets, the dams, the drill platforms, the shopping

⁷¹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 427-33, quotations at pp. 430, 431, 432; Matusow, *Unraveling of America*, pp. 42, 49-59; Witte, *Politics and Development of the Income Tax*, pp. 158-65.

⁷² Eisenhower pressed for the first and third of these, Kennedy for all three.

⁷³ On the Nixon years, see for example Mayhew, *Divided We Govern*, pp. 81-91.

⁷⁴ In the Kennedy case, that conflict also surfaced over regulation of pharmaceutical drugs in 1962.

⁷⁵ *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1953*, pp. 393-94; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1954*, pp. 540-42; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1962*, pp. 546-58; Reichard, *The Reaffirmation of Republicanism*, pp. 151-53, 159-60; Matusow, *Unraveling of America*, pp. 36-37; Mayhew, *Partisan Balance*, pp. 148-50.

malls, the industrial parks, the nuclear plants, the urban beltways, and the rest. The new highway system revolutionized the urban and rural landscape.⁷⁶ Many were the kinds of change that came about. For self-congratulatory testimony, it is interesting to witness Eisenhower's boasting, which I have supplied instances of. The president was thrilled by material improvement. Chapter 15 of his memoirs, "Power—Electrical and Political"—reads like a bulletin from the Kremlin in the 1930s. In January 1953, he writes, the United States had "a total installed capacity of 97.3 million kilowatts. By January of 1960 that figure had soared to 175 million—almost twice as much." During his presidency, power facilities were built "on a scale historically unprecedented."⁷⁷ The Russians were being left in the dust.⁷⁸

How did this collection of policy moves affect the U.S. economy in the long run? That I do not know. A deep answer would require a different project and a different author. Certain clues are available. The Kennedy tax cut is often celebrated for its growth impact. The Saint Lawrence Seaway seems to have boomed during the 1970s but then lost its zing due to, among other things, competition from truckers using the new interstate highway system.⁷⁹ Regarding those highways, a new scholarship on "infrastructure investment" that took shape in the 1990s seems relevant. To economists, a prominent puzzle was and is: Why did the productivity of the U.S. economy fall off in the early 1970s? "After averaging 2.0% during the two decades from 1950 to 1970, the annual growth rate of total factor productivity in the private business economy slumped to 0.8% per year during the period 1971 to 1985." The new scholarship says, in one diagnostic report: "The data seem consistent with a story in which the massive road-building of the 1950's and 1960's offered a one-time boost to the level of productivity...." But after that, the bulldozers idled. Investment in public capital stock, the general argument goes, has been an overlooked ingredient in the ups and downs of the overall productivity of the economy.⁸⁰

But of course another key question arises. How about the politics? How did these policy moves play out politically in the long run, or even the medium run? Immense kickback, it is fair to say, has been a leading theme. Grist for decades of angst, regret, critical scholarship, mobilizing activity, and corrective lawmaking were supplied by this policy production of the long 1950s. The demolishing of city neighborhoods soon came into question, as did government-fostered suburbanization. In retrospect, were the strips and malls a great idea?⁸¹ The long, fast roads brought a new specter of

⁷⁶ See, for example, Meinig, The Shaping of America, pp. 61-69.

⁷⁷ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, p. 388. The president credits this rise to a variety of policy moves, including bureaucratic spurs to private power development, not all encompassed in the statutes under consideration here.

⁷⁸ Eisenhower, White House Years: Mandate for Change, p. 390.

⁷⁹ Stagg, The Golden Dream, ch. 5.

⁸⁰ David Alan Aschauer, "Is Public Expenditure Productive?" Journal of Monetary Economics 23 (1989), 177-200, first quoted sentence at 194; Edward M. Gramlich, "Infrastructure Investment: A Review Essay," Journal of Economic Literature 32:3 (September 1994), 1176-96; Catherine J. Morrison and Amy Ellen Schwartz, "State Infrastructure and Productive Performance," American Economic Review 86:5 (December 1996), 1095-1111; John G. Fernald, "Roads to Prosperity? Assessing the Link between Public Capital and Productivity," American Economic Review 89:3 (June 1999), 619-38, second quoted sentence at 620-21.

⁸¹ See, for example, Hayden, Building Suburbia, ch. 8.

freeway murderers.⁸² The new dams and highways destroyed natural landscapes. Air pollution surged. The Saint Lawrence Seaway brought pollution, zebra mussels, and an upending of native populations.⁸³ The atomic plant at Three Mile Island ended in a spectacular nuclear meltdown. Goopy oceanic oil spills became a fact of life. In general terms, the country's heavy dependence on oil and automobiles drew ceaseless fire. As the decades wore on, public interest in space development flagged, and the teleology of free trade lost its luster as older industries folded and U.S. jobs went abroad. And why slash taxes on the rich? The whole preceding era became a violation of, by later standards, political correctness.

To put it another way, the stage was set by the mid-1960s for reaction and repudiation, which indeed did come. What was the vehicle for it? One line of analysis owing to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Samuel P. Huntington points to reform waves, or periods of public-spirited passion, that have emerged now and then in American history in the wake of spans of contrasting tendency.⁸⁴ In the present case, the private-minded 1950s hit the wall in the public-minded, movement-driven 1960s and 1970s. Certainly the latter era is exhibit A for movement activity. The many statutes regulating business were a product of it.⁸⁵ Nothing exceeded the force and prominence of the era's surging environmental movement, which had plenty to chew on. Already in 1956, the drive for the Upper Colorado Project had stirred mobilization among environmentalists who managed to kill one of its dams at Echo Park.⁸⁶ By the mid-1960s it was full steam ahead for the environmentalists. Many, perhaps most, of the policy achievements of the long 1950s fed into their cause.

For Schlesinger and Huntington, things go back and forth. There is homeostasis. History motors in and out of contrasting and compensating eras. Similar is a recent interpretation based in opinion data offered by Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen and James A. Stimson.⁸⁷ The government shifts policy to the left, voters react after awhile and elect a conservative government, which in turn shifts policy to right, voters react again, and so on. The effect is of "decade-long swings in the fortunes of ideology and party."⁸⁸ The progression from Eisenhower to Johnson is a plausible instance.

⁸² Ginger Strand, Killer on the Road: Violence and the American Interstate (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

⁸³ Stagg, The Golden Dream, pp. 238-42; Neal R. Peirce and John Keefe, The Great Lakes States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Five Great Lakes States (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), pp. 25, 200-01; Joe Barrett, "Lake Invaders Face a Salty Rebuff: Salinity Test Aims to Catch Creatures Sneaking Into U.S. in Ballast of Ships," Wall Street Journal, May 12-13, 2012, p. A4.

⁸⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Cycles of American Politics," ch. 2 in Schlesinger, The Cycles of American History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986); Samuel P. Huntington, American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁸⁵ See, for example, R. Shep Melnick, "Risky Business: Government and the Environment after Earth Day," ch. 7 in Morton Keller and Melnick, Taking Stock: American Government in the Twentieth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸⁶ See Worster, Rivers of Empire, pp. 273-74; Harvey, A Symbol of Wilderness.

⁸⁷ Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, The Macro Polity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ch. 9.

⁸⁸ Erikson et al., The Micro Polity, p. 374.

But homeostatic interpretations have a drawback. They lack a developmental theme. They tend to skim on path dependence.⁸⁹ For the history under inspection here, dialectical change seems to be a better conceptual fit than homeostasis taken straight. In general, the initiatives of the 1950s were pretty well laid. Returning to square one was a scarce option. To creations embedded in the countryside like the new highway system, the Saint Lawrence Seaway, or Lake Powell, the familiar process tropes of “reform,” “repeal,” “retrench,” or “amend” have an awkward fit. How could the highways or the seaway be retrenched or repealed? The financing schemes for the highways, dams, and seaway were models of credible government commitment.⁹⁰ NASA, COMSAT, and the NSF were sturdily built. New Haven’s old slum neighborhoods were gone forever. The high top-bracket tax rates that preceded the Kennedy tax cut were unlikely to come back absent a major war, and they have not. Yes, there was Three Mile Island. And yes, in general a distinct thrust toward reaction or repudiation did come about. But in process terms it diffused into a complicated mix of railing, reform, adaptation, letting things run their course, inventive workarounds, and changing the subject. Much of the American scene today is a deposit of the policy drives of the long 1950s blended with, somehow, reaction to them.

Another take on the long 1950s is that it was just plain different from what came later. Perhaps it sampled the past better than the future, at least in its big-projects emphasis. Robert D. Leighninger, Jr., writing from the perspective of 2007, drops an interesting comment in his book on the ample public investment during the New Deal: “Since the 1930s, there have been only two comparable public works programs of national scope: the interstate highways program of the Eisenhower administration and the space program launched by John F. Kennedy. Both of these received broad support. Both were justified as matters of national defense. No other program of public building since then has involved the nation as a whole and taken place in the public eye.”⁹¹

At any rate, it is well to see that the long 1950s as I have characterized it (convincingly, I hope) was indeed a time of major policy enterprises. For Eisenhower, think highways. For Johnson, think Medicare. Which of these creations has had more impact on American life? The case for the policy punch of especially the Eisenhower years is uncanonical, even in light of Fred I. Greenstein’s revisionism about that president,⁹² and it is worth asking why. Why have we missed this punch? I can see at least three reasons, each entailing a branch of scholarship.

First, the themes of mainstream political science have not been much help. Analysis of summary roll call data, which among other things ordinarily hinges on ideological unidimensionality,

⁸⁹ Yet a side feature in the Erikson et al. account is that statutes do tend to stick. On path dependence, see Paul Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 94:2 (June 2000), 251-67.

⁹⁰ On the politics of government commitment, see Patashnik, Putting Trust in the US Budget; Eric M. Patashnik, Reforms at Risk: What Happens After Major Policy Changes Are Enacted (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁹¹ Robert D. Leighninger, Jr., Long-Range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), p. 210.

⁹² Fred I. Greenstein, The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader (New York: Basic Books, 1982). Greenstein does not dwell on Eisenhower as legislative leader.

can fall short of illuminating what is actually going on in policymaking. There is not enough flesh, not enough content. Moods and impulses specific to eras can be missed. Policy inventiveness, as seen here in trade adjustment assistance, NSF peer review, highway trust funds, and the COMSAT consortium, has no place in conventional scatterplots. The privileging of conflict, which often occurs in roll-call analysis and otherwise, can take the spotlight off productive non-conflict. Laws that pass unanimously or virtually so, such as NASA, may bypass datasets. Of the twenty-one statutes taken up here, all but one—the Saint Lawrence Seaway—passed with at least two-thirds support (or by voice vote) in at least one chamber, and all but nine in both chambers. (See Table 1.) All but one—area redevelopment—passed with the backing of majorities of both parties (or by voice vote) in at least one chamber, and all but eight in both chambers. Inventive cross-party coalitions, as on agriculture and trade measures, the Saint Lawrence Seaway, and the Colorado project, can fall between the cracks. Over-reliance on the formalities of politics—for example, the configurations of Democrats and Republicans in the various branches—can cloud the picture. There is no good substitute for inspecting and characterizing what actually happened.

Second, much work that I have located on the economics of this long era—especially the Eisenhower years—has dwelt on short-term stimulation of the economy or its absence. Did the government perk up the economy during this or that two-year or four-year interval? There is a strong flavor of the managerial Keynesianism of the 1950s and 1960s, of near-horizon macroeconomics.⁹³ Less evident is an emphasis on the direct government investment, inducement of private investment, creation of institutions, or shaping of societal incentives that might have affected the economy in the long run.⁹⁴

Third, the scholarship in policy studies and history has likely had an ideological skew. Moynihan wrote in 1970, in prefacing his against-the-grain remarks on the interstate highway program, “One of the received truths of contemporary liberal history is that no domestic initiatives of any consequence occurred during the Eisenhower Presidency.”⁹⁵ The reference is to “liberal history,” but that is where the main U.S. narrative has been crafted. In the absence of initiatives to foster entitlements or government regulation, it has been easy to slip into a mindset that nothing is

⁹³ Examples are Harold G. Vatter, The U.S. Economy in the 1950's: An Economic History (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963); John W. Sloan, Eisenhower and the Management of Prosperity (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Morgan, Eisenhower versus 'the Spenders'; Anthony S. Campagna, U.S. National Economic Policy, 1917-1985 (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1987), ch. 8; Collins, More, chs. 1, 2.

⁹⁴ Relatively underinvestigated in policy studies is “the capacity of presidents to influence long-term economic developments.” See Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, “Presidents and the Political Economy: The Coalitional Foundations of Presidential Power,” Presidential Studies Quarterly 42:1 (March 2012), 101-31, quotation at 101.

⁹⁵ G.T. Schwartz, “Urban Freeways,” 408. This view is not universal, at least not anymore. Jacob S. Hacker, for example, points to Eisenhower’s “active leadership in codifying the unique public-private structure of U.S. social policy.” The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 238. Meredith Levine discusses the ambitious infrastructure initiatives of the Eisenhower years in “Shovel Ready: The Politics of Public Works, 1800-Present,” paper presented at the annual conference of the Western Political Science Association, San Francisco, April 1-3, 2010. Stephen J. Wayne reports that “the Eisenhower administration retained and even expanded the presidency’s capacity to develop, coordinate, and achieve legislative policy.” The source is “The Eisenhower Administration: Bridge to the Institutionalized Legislative Presidency,” Congress and the Presidency 39:2 (2012), 199-209, quotation at 199-200.

happening at all. But promotion of the economy is policymaking, too. It is in a long line starting with Alexander Hamilton.