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## Drifting Apart

Numerous attempts have been made, most of them unconvincing, to explain how and why, in the late 1930s, a rift developed between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Jim Farley. Somehow, by 1940, Farley had become so profoundly disenchanted with the Roosevelt administration that he felt compelled to stand against his former boss to contest the 1940 Democratic presidential nomination. It was an extraordinary turn of events that brought an end to one of the most successful political combinations in American history.<sup>1</sup>

Roosevelt had always maintained a large and changing pool of policy-makers, speechwriters, and political aides, but Farley was part of the elite group that had been an evergreen presence in Roosevelt's inner circle since the 1928 gubernatorial campaign in New York State. Though their backgrounds were very different—Farley the Irish American and Catholic who, from the age of ten, was raised in a single-parent household; Roosevelt the Dutch Episcopalian born into a life of wealth and privilege on a Hyde Park estate—but their shared interest in the politics of upstate New York and enthusiasm for the Democratic Party brought them together. Theirs was a formidable and famous partnership, one that allowed both men to achieve positions of enormous power and influence, express their considerable political talents, and make a lasting contribution to the politics of the United States. So, what went wrong?

Previous accounts of the Farley-Roosevelt split have portrayed it as a dramatic example of how conflicting personal loyalties terminated a political partnership. Farley's second autobiography falls into this cate-

gory. Published in 1948 and cowritten with *Chicago Tribune* journalist Walter Trohan, *Jim Farley's Story* portrays Farley as a noble, loyal servant cruelly misled by a power-hungry president. Here, Roosevelt is not the magnanimous presence with which readers of *Behind the Ballots* would have been familiar but a man prone to bouts of vindictive behavior, egged on and manipulated by a fanatical cabal of advisers with no respect for Farley's beloved Democratic Party. On being displaced from the center of the Roosevelt administration's decision-making process by Thomas Corcoran and Harry Hopkins, for example, Farley wrote, "White House confidence on politics went to a small band of zealots, who mocked at party loyalty and knew no devotion except unswerving obedience to their leader."<sup>2</sup>

In *Jim Farley's Story*, such events as Roosevelt's attempt at court reform in 1937 and his bid to purge anti-New Deal conservatives in the following year's primary election campaigns are described not in terms of the president's drive to fashion a liberal party or of his frustration at the court's perceived conservatism but as proof of Roosevelt's desire to achieve dictatorial control of the political process.

The attempt to establish a personal party, the neglect of party leaders, the assumption of control over the judiciary and Congress, and the gratification of personal ambition in the third and fourth terms—all were the evil fruit of his breaking the rules of the game.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the publication of *Jim Farley's Story*, former Brains Truster Raymond Moley wrote a sympathetic portrait of Farley that lent further credence to the view that Farley and Roosevelt were divided principally by their differing conceptions of party ethics and by personal differences brought about by "the tortuous ways of Roosevelt with his friends and associates." Moley, whose writings on the New Deal—notably his memoir, *After Seven Years*—showed that he could peddle a fine line in false modesty, had himself ditched the New Deal administration after the 1936 election, frustrated with, among other things, Roosevelt's antibusiness rhetoric and internationalist inclinations in foreign policy. He was happy to depict Farley as a fellow victim of the "smutty face of high politics."<sup>4</sup>

Moley's analysis is in some ways comparable to Arthur Schlesinger

Jr.'s verdict that Farley was a naive figure who did not understand the nature of the events he was caught up in. For different reasons, these two writers found it convenient to think of Farley as a mere cipher of the New Deal era—or, at the very least, a passive victim of political change. Moley's opinion of Farley was positive, Schlesinger's negative, yet both writers presented Farley in a one-dimensional perspective, neglecting to acknowledge the extent to which he contributed to the reshaping of the political world in which he operated.<sup>5</sup>

Because Schlesinger shared the liberal, progressive impulses that, in his view, embodied the New Deal, he found it convenient to paint Farley as emblematic of "old-line" bossism and as being ignorant of the issues that defined the New Deal. "He was beginning," Schlesinger wrote, "to feel that things weren't going altogether right; but he did not know—would never know—why he was in trouble." To the extent that Farley had more than another sixteen years to live when Schlesinger wrote those words, that was a dubious speculation. It was also more than a little condescending.<sup>6</sup>

Another historian, William V. Shannon, in his *The American Irish*, offered a different vantage point from which to view Farley's career. Shannon's interpretation of Farley's role in the Roosevelt administration was more nuanced than either Moley's or Schlesinger's, giving due weight to Farley's progress through the ranks of the New York State Democratic Party and showing an appreciation of the fact that Farley's primary task was that of mediating between the administration and the local party organizations. Shannon also placed Farley in the context of a generational shift in the prospects of Irish American politicians, pointing out that he and his contemporaries—Ed Flynn, Thomas Corcoran, Joseph Kennedy, and Frank Murphy—bridged the period between Al Smith's ignominious defeat in the 1928 presidential election and John F. Kennedy's triumph thirty-two years later, thus becoming "the first generation of American Irish to play a significant role on the national stage."<sup>7</sup>

Shannon's generational analysis may have merit insofar as Farley and company's national prominence can be construed as helping to erode the electorate's anti-Irish or anti-Catholic prejudices, but for the purposes of understanding Farley's career after 1936, it is problematic. In trying to explain Farley's split with Roosevelt, Shannon cited personal

and emotional causes; he examined its wider political context in only the most cursory fashion. In Shannon's view, Farley sought the presidency "for emotional reasons deep within himself"; he "very much wanted the formal anointment, the reassuring balm, that only a victory direct from the voters can confer." This, in tandem with his "desire to make money" and his "resentment at Roosevelt's intervention in the party management," led to Farley's alienation.<sup>8</sup>

Shannon's analysis, which places such a heavy burden on the workings of Farley's psychology, chimes with his tendency to attribute to Irish Americans a special propensity for emotionalism. He describes "the Irish community" in 1924 and 1928 as investing their "emotion" in Al Smith's presidential bids, and he makes no mention of Smith's record of governance in New York State or of the intellectual grounds on which he might have been supported, by Irish and non-Irish Americans alike. Shannon wrote that "[m]ore than one Irishman lowered his head and wept" when Roosevelt won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1932. While that was probably true in literal terms, such a lachrymose response may not have been typical. Jim Farley, for example, responded by swiftly taking the calculated and practical step of hitching his fortunes to Roosevelt's rising star.<sup>9</sup>

A more profitable approach toward understanding Farley—and perhaps also other New Dealers, such as Hugh Johnson, Raymond Moley, Thomas Corcoran, and Joseph Kennedy, all of whom left the New Deal as bitter and disillusioned men—comes from an appreciation of the extent to which alienation was provoked by political, as well as personal, factors. At one level, in Farley's case, this involved the impact of the transition, brought about by the New Deal, from local, personalized, predominantly service-oriented politics to more national, issue-based politics oriented around interest groups. This transition was halting, partial, uneven—local politics did not cease to be important, and old-line party bosses did not fade from view entirely—but still it represented a significant and enduring structural change, which challenged the working practices and adaptability of politicians. Related to this shift were the persistent dislocations and conflicts that arose as the reformist thrust of the New Deal continually clashed with the ideas and assumptions of some of the core constituencies within the Democratic Party. As the

political leverage of local and state party regulars diminished, the gulf between them and the administration in Washington became unbridgeable. The straddling act Farley had performed with such skill through the early New Deal was becoming an irrelevance. This changing political environment forms the essential backdrop to any understanding of the trajectory of Farley's career after 1936.

The inadequacy of Shannon's generational thesis is most clearly demonstrated by his decision to place Farley in the same category as Thomas Corcoran. Corcoran was twelve years younger than Farley, and in terms of explaining Farley's career, the differences between the two men are more instructive than are the similarities. Corcoran was born into a family of conservative lawyers and soared into the highest echelons of the legal profession on the back of a sparkling academic career at Brown University and Harvard Law School, where Felix Frankfurter took the outstanding young lawyer under his wing, enabling him to become secretary to Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. In contrast, neither of Farley's parents were professionals, and he failed to gain his high school certificate. Farley's highest educational achievement was a bookkeeping certificate from the Packard Commercial School in New York City.<sup>10</sup>

Farley's path to power was through the New York State Democratic Party, Corcoran's through his legal craftsmanship. Farley's world was bounded by his adherence to a more or less fixed code of beliefs, centered around the primacy of party unity and organizational coherence; Corcoran, under Frankfurter's influence, saw the law more as a flexible tool than as an iron cage. In the period 1934–38, Corcoran gradually displaced Farley as Roosevelt's chief political manager and go-between. Corcoran and Farley were not so much colleagues as competitors. This was not simply a case of one Irish American replacing another; it symbolized an important shift in the administration and orientation of New Deal patronage policy and, by extension, in the relationship between the Democratic Party and the New Deal.<sup>11</sup>

After the 1936 election, Farley seriously considered leaving the cabinet to go into private business. He had worked tremendously hard for relatively little financial reward, and he was still under fire from those who

thought he was nothing more than an unreconstructed spoils man with a malign influence on the nation's government. His departure from the Roosevelt administration looked most likely in December 1936 and January 1937, before the makeup of the second-term cabinet had been finalized.

On December 17, the president warned Farley to avoid any job offers made from the movie business, suggesting that a possible opening as a baseball commissioner was less likely to conflict with Farley's political interests and activities. Memoranda Farley dictated at this time show that he was confused as to his future plans. He shared with one visitor his thoughts that by taking a lucrative position, he could then live off the stock interest should he decide to run for governor of New York. On New Year's Eve, he told another friend that the advertising industry, which he thought to be a "clean business," was the best place to go. Ten days later, Robert L. Hague, vice president of Standard Oil, asked him if he would consider becoming czar of the shipping industry. Farley declined, stating that he did not want to be involved in labor disputes. That same day, he had telephone discussions about going into the distillery industry. Clearly, there was no shortage of offers.<sup>12</sup>

Farley's wife, Bess, who hated the dreary circuit of Washington society events that cabinet officers' wives were subjected to and who was disliked by some of Farley's colleagues, wanted Jim to leave Washington. In 1952, Robert H. Jackson recalled that he met President Roosevelt to discuss Jackson's prospects for the race to become governor of New York in 1938. Jackson told his interviewer that when he asked Roosevelt about Farley's ambitions, the president said: "Jim's got to make some money. Bess wants him to be rich. She's very much annoyed that other people have more things than she has." Roosevelt then added that Farley did not seem to appreciate that if he were to become a contender for the presidency in 1940 he needed to "establish an independent record as an administrator."<sup>13</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt had never had to worry about money. His assertion that Bess Farley was motivated by greed and his strong implication that she was driven by a crass, nouveau riche materialism was more than a little snobbish. But the president's view of Bess was shared by other New Dealers. As far back as December 1934, Harold Ickes, describing a White House dinner, wrote:

Mrs. Farley almost made a face when she tasted the champagne. She was quite indignant but consoled herself with the reflection that she had had some real champagne before she went to the White House and that more would be awaiting her on her return to the *Mayflower*. She seems to be quite fussy about the quality and quantity of her wines, although Jim never touches a drop.<sup>14</sup>

In February 1938, at around the time that Robert H. Jackson's gubernatorial candidacy was being discussed, Ickes noted:

Mrs. Farley hasn't the slightest interest in anything except money. She doesn't like Washington and won't come to Washington. She doesn't want Jim to stay on in the cabinet and she doesn't want him to be governor of New York, something that he has probably had in the back of his head for a long time. She wants money and she is the kind that brings all the pressure to bear that she can.<sup>15</sup>

Bess Farley, who never publicly involved herself in political affairs, was frequently made the scapegoat for her husband's increasingly fraught relationship with the New Deal administration in general and with Roosevelt in particular. By mid-March 1938, Ickes wrote, "Jim Farley is getting further apart from the President," and in an aside not printed in his published diaries, he added, "Tom Corcoran's comment was, 'This is the case of another woman getting in her work.'" Ickes also implied that Bess was anti-Semitic, recording that he had heard Bess ask why Henry Morgenthau's wife had not had an operation on her nose, which Ickes described as Mrs. Morgenthau's "distinguishing, if not her most attractive, characteristic." In September 1938, Ickes called Bess a "rough, heavy-handed dame."<sup>16</sup>

Despite the numerous job offers, Bess's distaste for Washington, and his colleagues' hostility toward his wife, Farley found he was unable, at this stage, to drag himself away from Roosevelt's side. On January 11, 1937, Roosevelt told Farley he would send his name up to the Senate for reapproval as postmaster general immediately after the inauguration. The president agreed that he could remain in the cabinet until his move into the business world was finalized. In fact, Farley did not move out of the national political arena until late 1940, after he had failed to gain the

presidential nomination. The forces that did finally succeed in separating Farley from Roosevelt were much more powerful, complex, and historically interesting than a mere business decision, the alleged carping of a cash-starved wife, or even the personal, emotional traumas invoked by Raymond Moley and William V. Shannon.<sup>17</sup>

Farley's role of bridging the differing ideas and agendas of party factions, state organizations, government administrators, and presidential advisors had been a delicate and difficult balancing act from the very start of his career in national politics. On many occasions, notably during the 1933 New York mayoralty contest and in the 1934 campaign for the midterm elections, Roosevelt's progressive political impulses, particularly his willingness to endorse non-Democrats against candidates from his own party where it suited his long-range political goals, caused considerable strain. Even Farley's prodigious efforts were insufficient to prevent conflict when the expectations of the party rank and file clashed with the New Deal's embrace of progressive policies and politicians.

After the 1936 election, these conflicts erupted in a more regular and sometimes spectacular fashion, starting first with a bitter contest for the House speakership and culminating, eighteen months later, in the extraordinarily divisive purge campaign—Roosevelt's largely unsuccessful attempt to replace conservatives with more liberal candidates in the 1938 congressional primary elections. These surface developments were the immediate cause of the Farley-Roosevelt split, but they were underpinned by deeper, structural change that served to erode the leverage of the party regulars and, consequently, of the old-school broker politicians who were best equipped to represent their interests.

A series of minor crises surfaced in the early months of 1937, leading the press to take interest in the notion that all was not well between Roosevelt and Farley. The battle between the Texan Sam Rayburn and New York's John O'Connor for the House speakership discomfited Farley considerably. He was determined to remain neutral, but his efforts to do so were consistently undermined by some of his New Deal colleagues. When O'Connor discovered that Farley's former assistant at the Democratic National Committee, Emil Hurja, had lunched with Rayburn, he

reported the incident, and Farley had to make a phone call telling Hurja not to get involved. A couple weeks later, Richard Leche, governor of Louisiana, told Farley over breakfast that Jesse Jones and Harry Hopkins had given him the impression that both Farley and Roosevelt favored Rayburn, which had prompted Louisiana's delegates to vote for Rayburn. When Leche heard that Farley was in fact neutral, a few of his delegates switched their votes back. Later that day, Farley met with the Speaker of the House, William B. Bankhead, and then with the president himself, telling both men that he felt compromised by the pro-Rayburn activities of Jones, Hopkins, and Harold Ickes.<sup>18</sup>

Farley's unease at the Roosevelt administration's handling of the Rayburn-O'Connor contest provided a foretaste of the deterioration of the relationship between Roosevelt and Congress that marked the second term. Farley's involvement in the distribution of federal patronage and his role in liaising between the administration and congressional Democrats placed him in an awkward position, especially as his attempts to placate his congressional colleagues were increasingly thwarted both by the president's failure to consult him over important legislation and appointments and by what Farley regarded as the counterproductive activities of interfering New Dealers.

Farley had never enjoyed unfettered control of federal patronage, nor had he always been the sole means of communication between the president and Congress. But throughout the first term, he had enjoyed regular access to Roosevelt. Farley and Roosevelt's patronage work in the wake of the 1932 election has been cited as a major factor in the subservience of Congress in the early New Deal. Farley was consulted over major appointments, even when he had little say over who received them. Such courtesies were, in Farley's view, the lifeblood of politics; they lubricated the political process, helping to smooth over potential conflicts and reassure wavering allies. By paying scrupulous attention to these details and keeping all parties informed, politics could, in Farley's view, be made easy. But increasingly, after 1936, as a new kind of politics—more issue-driven, less dependent on traditional party organizations, and more amenable to interest groups—came to predominate over the more localized and less ideological politics of the old school,

these niceties were not observed, and it was Farley who had to pick up the pieces.<sup>19</sup>

Farley could tolerate the inclusion in the cabinet of such men as Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, and Henry Wallace, none of whom had close ties to the Democratic Party before their appointments. What he found difficult to accept was the involvement of agency chiefs and government lawyers in what he regarded as the party's internal affairs—meaning patronage, the business of corraling votes, and the logistical and organizational aspects of campaign management. Farley was especially disturbed when Roosevelt asked Thomas Corcoran to engage in negotiations with congressmen concerning pending legislation. Corcoran had no local political ties or obligations and did not need to seek reelection. Unlike Farley, he had no political organization to run, so he was free to go about his business with the kind of brash self-confidence that was guaranteed to alienate party stalwarts, which he certainly did in his work on Roosevelt's behalf for the court plan in 1937, the Wages and Hours Bill and the purge campaign in 1938, and Robert H. Jackson's 1938 New York gubernatorial bid.

A canny behind-the-scenes operator, Corcoran used the White House switchboard and his access to the office of Roosevelt's personal secretary, Missy LeHand, to bypass the party apparatus and gain influence with the president. He saw himself as the "connective tissue" between the new agencies and the established government departments, combining this with intelligence work in the Senate. He employed his legal skills to political advantage, gaining the respect of leading legislators—Sam Rayburn, Burton Wheeler, Hugo Black—in a bid to erode the manipulative powers of perceived conservatives, Farley included.<sup>20</sup>

Looking back on his career, Corcoran described his role in the second term of the Roosevelt administration as follows:

I became an agent in the realm of pure politics. No longer would I work solely on projects close to my heart or philosophical head. I wrote speeches. I carried messages. I dealt with the press, telling trusted reporters where to find the stuff that made front page news. I took care of the President's friends and shunted his enemies aside. . . . Most important, I worked at being what might now be called a "polit-

ical environmentalist.” My primary task, day in and day out, was to create an atmosphere among our allies and adversaries that would nurture whatever policy, propaganda or personal appointment the boss had in mind.<sup>21</sup>

In many ways, Corcoran was doing the same kind of work as Farley. He had some of the skills commonly associated with the old-fashioned broker politician: an engaging personality, a wide range of contacts, a persuasive manner, and an acute awareness of the balance of political forces operating at any one time concerning any given issue. Yet Corcoran’s brand of political environmentalism was very different from Farley’s. Where Farley assumed that with a little straight talk and arm-twisting, the politics of his party would revert to its natural, harmonious state, Corcoran, working not for the party but for the administration that employed him, assumed that politics was adversarial and ideological and made it his task to divide friends from foes to further the president’s programmatic agenda. Men who Farley thought of as merely needing an occasional reminder of the importance of party discipline were, in Corcoran’s view, beyond redemption. Corcoran relished the purge campaign’s assault on Democratic conservatives; Farley thought it not just an unnecessary and damaging misadventure but a flagrant violation of the “rules of the game.”<sup>22</sup>

At the beginning of 1937, Farley was looking for a way out of politics. By November of that same year, he was discussing with trusted friends the possibility of contesting the presidential nomination in 1940. Farley’s change of heart can best be explained in the context of his involvement in and responses to the court-packing plan and contest for Senate leadership that followed the untimely death of Arkansas senator Joseph T. Robinson. These events accelerated preexisting divisions within the Democratic Party, caused new fissures to open up, and precipitated both a partial collapse of the party’s internal cohesion and a breakdown in its relationship with the Roosevelt administration. They blunted the reformist thrust of the New Deal and, exacerbated the following year by economic recession and the purge campaign, helped to push Farley into the arms of the party’s alienated conservative wing, whose power lay predominantly in an increasingly recalcitrant Congress and in the disaf-

fect state organizations that had always been his prime constituency of support.<sup>23</sup>

The first Farley heard of the president's plans to reform the Supreme Court was when he read the newspapers following Roosevelt's message to Congress on February 5, 1937. Farley had missed the hastily convened cabinet meeting the previous day, as he was in New York on business. Until late January, only a very small circle of the president's advisers had known about his plans: the attorney general, Homer Cummings, and the solicitor general, Stanley Reed; Donald Richburg, the former chairman of the board of the National Recovery Administration; and speechwriter Sam Rosenman. Unusually for Roosevelt, he deliberately neglected to prepare Congress for the announcement, preferring to rely on the element of surprise.<sup>24</sup>

The president had miscalculated. In November 1936, Democrats won three-quarters of congressional seats; congressmen returned to session in a buoyant mood, ready to assert their independence. Roosevelt had expected conservatives to oppose the plan, but he had not anticipated the liberals and moderates that swelled their ranks, many of them unnerved by Roosevelt's readiness to take on the Supreme Court, perhaps the nation's most revered institution. His strategy was to hold back legislation on agriculture and on wages and hours until the court plan was made law, but this strategy backfired. Shrewdly, the Republican opposition chose a Democrat, Burton K. Wheeler, widely regarded as a liberal, to lead the attack on the administration's proposal. They succeeded in shifting the debate away from the court's perceived economic obstructionism, instead portraying the plan as an assault on the court's status as a protector of American liberties. Given developments in Europe, where Hitler and Mussolini's dictatorships were increasingly powerful, that argument had a deep resonance.

In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley dwelled only very briefly on the court plan, and though he did not express his unequivocal approval of the measure, his account gives the impression that he was happy to associate himself with the effort to pass the Court Reorganization Bill, despite the "family quarrel" that it provoked. Ten years later, in *Jim Farley's Story*, Farley was quite clear about his opposition to the bitter purge campaign of 1938 but expressed mixed feelings about the court plan. His chapter

“The Court Fight” emphasized the meddling of Thomas Corcoran and Joseph Keenan, the lack of consultation that marked the administration’s approach to congressional relations, and the damage inflicted by Roosevelt’s reluctance to compromise in order to salvage the Court Reorganization Bill.<sup>25</sup>

In *Jim Farley’s Story*, which was published in 1948, the closest Farley came to expressing his feelings on the matter was to make a decidedly elliptical statement in reference to Roosevelt’s assessment of presidential contenders.

[I]n the months to come, he was to find fault with a long list of suspected and actual aspirants to his succession. They were either too old or too young; too ambitious or too unknown; too conservative or too radical, or in too poor health or too lacking in personality. Basil O’Connor had revealed the President as cataloguing me in the ambitious class. In many cases, displeasure was rooted in the Supreme Court reorganization plan; I am not sure that it was not so in my case.<sup>26</sup>

As evidence of Farley’s contemporaneous opinion of the court plan, a qualified double negative written more than ten years after the events described (“I am not sure it was not so”) is hardly conclusive, but the impression of confusion and unease conveyed in the phrase is reinforced by memoranda Farley dictated in the spring and summer of 1937.

Even before he returned to Washington from New York on February 10, Farley was aware of rumblings of disapproval on Capitol Hill concerning both the content of the proposals for court reform and the manner of their submission. Once back in Washington, Farley told reporters that, contrary to press rumor, he was “one hundred percent” in favor of the court plan. Later that day, he spoke to Wyoming senator Joseph O’Mahoney, who said that Senate leaders were disturbed by the president’s failure to consult them about his plans and that they particularly resented “the activities of Charles West and Tom Cochran [*sic*], and other representatives of the Administration who are active on the Hill.” Farley’s response, beginning the following day, was to launch himself into a series of consultations with his contacts in the Senate and to warn

Roosevelt that he needed to communicate more effectively with Senate leaders. On February 15, at a huge testimonial dinner held in Farley's honor, Farley, according to a memo he dictated that evening, determined, with the president's approval, to withhold patronage for judicial appointments from senators and congressmen hostile to the Court Reorganization Bill.<sup>27</sup>

The politics behind the administration's efforts on behalf of the court plan were complicated by the incessant gossip and speculation—indulged in by both the press and politicians—concerning the likely contenders for the presidency in 1940. After a two-week break in Florida, Farley returned to Washington in early March confident that despite Republican opposition and the lobbying efforts of the American Bar Association and utility corporations, the Court Reorganization Bill would pass through the Senate. One factor that may have bolstered Farley's willingness to work for the bill was his intense suspicion of Montana senator Burton K. Wheeler, who was leading the opposition. Wheeler was the only other Democrat to have backed Huey Long's efforts to launch a formal investigation into allegations of graft and corruption in Farley's business dealings in 1935, when the Louisiana senator, a masterful self-publicist, was seeking to embarrass the administration. Farley could not understand why someone who had "been construed as a great Democrat" could oppose the court plan, unless he had presidential ambitions.<sup>28</sup>

Through the first half of 1937, Farley devoted more space in his private memoranda to ruminations on the 1940 presidential nomination, which was three years away, than to reporting his activities on the court fight. On March 7, for instance, he dictated a lengthy memo that mixed analysis of the court plan's prospects with an assessment of Roosevelt's state of mind and the merits of the likely contenders for the presidential nomination. Farley's memorandum demonstrated a sound awareness of the political forces caught up in the court fight and recognized the importance of the Court Reorganization Bill to the success of Roosevelt's legislative ambitions, but its argument was confused. Twice he stated that he was "quite confident" that the bill would pass the Senate, yet sandwiched between these assertions were such statements as "I am not in a position to definitely say at the moment whether or not there will be any

amendments” and “There may be some trouble as far as the age of the Judges is concerned.” Despite having spoken to the president just three days previously at a Democratic victory dinner celebrating the 1936 presidential election, Farley was clearly unsure of his ground. He was not quite sure what he thought and was using his private memoranda to work it out.<sup>29</sup>

Farley also used his private memoranda to let off steam, indulge in political prophecy, and speculate on the president’s mind-set and physical well-being. He noted that Roosevelt had told him at the victory dinner that “he had no desire for a third term.” Farley then added, “I am satisfied that that is exactly how he feels at the moment,” implying, first, that Farley was still suspicious and seeking reassurance concerning the president’s intentions and, second, that Farley knew Roosevelt might change his mind. Farley acknowledged this latter possibility when he noted that “the situation abroad” might make it “compulsory for [Roosevelt] to carry on so that the affairs of our country would be in the hands of a person who would be familiar with the foreign situation.” This last comment is significant in that Farley knew that the more the United States involved itself in foreign affairs, the less credible he himself appeared as a presidential contender. Farley’s knowledge of foreign policy was slight, and his experience of overseas travel was limited. In the late summer of 1939, when he was openly challenging for the nomination, Farley embarked on a major international trip around Europe with the intention of carving out a more statesmanlike image, as if to suggest to skeptics that he was capable of dealing with foreign crises.<sup>30</sup>

Farley couched his survey of Democratic presidential contenders in terms of how he and Roosevelt saw the competition. He appreciated that Roosevelt wanted to be succeeded by someone sympathetic to New Deal policies; Farley wrote, “[Roosevelt] will definitely be opposed to anyone being nominated by the party who would in any way be opposed to his policies and who would want to set aside the accomplishments of his administration.” Cordell Hull was too old and indecisive and would be a poor administrator. Ickes was not a Democrat and had the wrong “frame of mind.” Wallace was “too visionary” and did not have “the Democratic viewpoint embedded in his makeup.” Roosevelt would not back Pennsylvania governor George Earle, Alben Barkley was not strong

enough in the party, and Millard Tydings (Maryland) and Harry F. Byrd (Virginia) were mere favorite sons. Carter Glass was too old and sick, and Michigan governor Frank Murphy, who was riding high in March 1937 owing to his intervention in the Flint sit-down strike, was too much of an “idealist” and had insufficient party backing. The man most feared by Farley was former Indiana governor Paul McNutt, who had just been made high commissioner of the Philippines. Farley, who thought that McNutt was “in with the President more than anyone else,” was frustrated by Roosevelt’s apparent refusal to recognize that McNutt had proved himself untrustworthy when he had refused to instruct Indiana’s delegates to vote as a unit for Roosevelt at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1932.<sup>31</sup>

Farley’s fixation on the race for the presidential nomination may have affected his assessment of the court fight, but he had a clear understanding of its political importance. “This form of Judiciary,” Farley noted in a private memo, “is closest [*sic*] to [Roosevelt’s] heart than almost anything else.” Farley also anticipated that willingness to go along with the court plan would be interpreted as a test of loyalty and that his own role was to emphasize this in his discussions with senators. This focus on the question of party loyalty in Farley’s negotiations with senators and in his private memoranda was not, however, exposed in his public pronouncements. In March and April 1937, Farley gave straightforward speeches toeing the administration line, arguing that the Supreme Court was obstructing economic recovery and that its judgments ran counter to the democratic will of the majority of Americans, as expressed in the 1936 presidential election.<sup>32</sup>

Farley had never written his major speeches, but on these occasions, he was not just mouthing other people’s words; he was offering opinions that jarred with his commitment to party unity and that flatly contradicted the views of his southern allies. The addresses, most probably prepared by Charlie Michelson, repeated the president’s argument that the courts were overloaded and that the justices were “wedded to the opinions of a bygone day.” His speech on March 9 before an audience of three thousand at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), was a particularly weak, warmed-over reiteration of the administration’s defense of court

reform. Before making the speech, Farley had called to warn Virginia senator Carter Glass (to whom he was to become increasingly close, both politically and personally) that he was about to come out in favor of the court plan.<sup>33</sup>

Behind the troubling mismatch between Farley's public pronouncements on the court plan and his private misgivings, and behind the intertwining of the court issue with the question of the presidential succession in Farley's private memoranda, was the ongoing and increasing friction between the Democratic Party and the reformism of the New Deal. From the start of his first term of office, Roosevelt had shown a willingness to reach out to non-Democrats sympathetic to the New Deal. He had appointed Republicans to his cabinet, placed some of them at the head of powerful government agencies, nurtured the political career of Fiorello La Guardia in New York City, and forged links with a host of Republican progressives and Farmer-Laborites. Even in the early stages of the New Deal, Democrats were entitled to ask how far the president was prepared to go.

Paradoxically, the unprecedented electoral triumph of 1936 added fuel to the fires of Democratic Party discontent. First, it emboldened New Deal legislators, who proposed an ambitious raft of reforms to, for instance, increase the provision of low-cost housing and regulate hours and wages. Such proposals, which appealed primarily to the party's new constituencies of urban voters in the northern cities, antagonized many Democrats representing rural regions, especially in the South, where the question of wage differentials was conditioned by widespread hostility to union organization, to any federal assault on labor practices, or, indeed, to any challenge to the region's racial status quo.

Second, the Democrats' massive majorities and the concomitant weakness of the Republican Party ensured that the main sources of opposition to the administration would come from within Democratic ranks. The organizational complexity of the 1936 campaign—in which the traditional party apparatus was buttressed by a series of auxiliary structures created to attract new voters to the party, primarily on the basis of Roosevelt's personal appeal and the promise of programmatic benefits in the event of victory—highlighted the extent to which the New Deal coalition was freeing itself from its moorings in the Democratic

Party's state organizations and their congressional representatives. As Sidney Milkis has argued, when Roosevelt began to advocate reforms that had a bearing on constitutional issues—namely, the court plan and the Executive Reorganization Bill—conservative senators from both parties were provided with an issue around which they could rally. Congressional conservatives could emphasize the need to prevent the executive from dominating government in ways that compromised the constitutional separation of powers. They could portray themselves as the guardians of the Constitution's protection of limited government. Farley's preoccupation with the presidential succession during the court fight was an implicit recognition of the fact that a significant portion of the official party was in increasingly open conflict with the New Deal and that the choice of the party's next presidential nominee might well determine whether or not the Democratic Party's future as an agent of progressive reform was secure.<sup>34</sup>

Conflict between the president and Congress escalated in July 1937 when Senate leader Joseph T. Robinson died after suffering a heart attack. Robinson had been an extremely important force in helping the administration garner support for its legislative program in the Senate. Robinson had personal reservations about much of the administration's agenda and was conservative by inclination, but he had proven himself a loyal lieutenant for the New Deal, playing a critical role in using his authority to prevent other conservatives from becoming openly hostile to the president's proposals, especially the court plan. Robinson's funeral, at Little Rock, Arkansas, became the scene of a series of intensive political consultations as Farley met with congressmen to discuss the coming contest for the Senate leadership.

Before taking the train to Arkansas, Farley was called to the White House for an afternoon meeting with the president. Roosevelt instructed Farley to "get a line" on what the senators were thinking. Farley had already been unsettled by the president's letter to acting Senate leader Alben Barkley of Kentucky, which Roosevelt wrote to quell rumors that the Court Reorganization Bill would be dropped. The letter was interpreted by Barkley's main opponent for the leadership, Pat Harrison (Mississippi), as evidence of the president's support for Barkley. Roosevelt denied that his intervention was a signal of support, but it

nonetheless undercut Farley's authority and compromised the integrity of his "hands-off" approach.<sup>35</sup>

The train journeys to and from Robinson's funeral gave Farley ample opportunity to explain his neutral position to congressmen. He told Barkley and Harrison that he did not have a preference as to who should be the next Senate leader and would not lift a finger to help either one of them, a message that he also conveyed to their supporters. It was a very tight contest. From the administration's point of view, it is arguable that Harrison was the better choice, because he was the more senior and more conservative candidate and was therefore more likely to be able to play on his colleagues' personal obligations to persuade them to vote with the administration on issues where they might otherwise defect. Moreover, Farley thought that Harrison was entitled to the president's favor because he had held the Mississippi delegation in line at the 1932 national convention. But there was no guarantee that Harrison would not at some point use the Senate leadership to scupper the administration's plans, thus forging a more concerted oppositional bloc in Congress than already existed.<sup>36</sup>

Though Farley later claimed that he thought Harrison was the better choice, he was more disturbed by the manner of the outcome than by the result itself. He felt that Roosevelt had undermined him by asking him to intervene on Barkley's side. On the evening before the deciding vote, Roosevelt called to ask Farley to contact Chicago boss Ed Kelly. The president wanted Farley to persuade Kelly to put pressure on Illinois senator William Dieterich, so that he would vote for Barkley. Roosevelt knew that Farley had publicly and privately committed himself to neutrality. In suggesting that Farley go back on his word, Roosevelt was, to Farley's mind, breaching the "rules of the game." Farley was adamant about this both in *Jim Farley's Story* and, much more forcefully, in later oral interviews.<sup>37</sup>

As President Roosevelt's plans for court reform unraveled in the wake of Senator Robinson's death, Farley felt increasingly alienated and misunderstood. He was sometimes asked to intervene in political matters in ways that contravened his principles—as in the Barkley-Harrison fight—and he was sometimes overlooked or ignored. In a private memo written in early March 1937, Farley noted that Alabama senator Hugo

Black had complained that Farley had not been consulted over appointments to the Maritime Commission. Farley had been away in Florida when the appointments were announced, so, at the time, he was not particularly disturbed. But the lack of consultation became increasingly serious through 1937–38, as the president relied more and more on White House staffers Thomas Corcoran and Harry Hopkins to take care of what had previously been Farley's political terrain. Hopkins, for instance, made the call to Ed Kelly that Farley refused to make during the Barkley-Harrison fight; and ironically, Farley was kept in the dark when Hugo Black was nominated to the Supreme Court. Black's appointment, Farley claimed, was the most important appointment he had not been informed of in advance since Josephus Daniels was made ambassador to Mexico in 1933.<sup>38</sup>

During Roosevelt's second term, Farley drifted from the center to the margins of New Deal politics, but that did not prevent him from conducting a tremendous volume of party business. Shortly after the 1936 election, he sent out over two hundred thousand Christmas cards. "This is going to be a huge job," he wrote in a private memo, "but I feel sure that it will be worth the effort." The following year, in early October, he signed twenty-eight hundred letters in one day. This was not atypical; thousands of Farley's correspondents were still getting letters with his personal signature written in green ink. But while keeping in touch was still at the heart of Farley's political method, it was no longer enough on its own. The character of national politics was changing. Green ink and glad-handing only went so far. As the second term progressed, Farley's status was increasingly that of a mere talisman. He was always prepared to sit at the president's side at presidential rallies or to make a speech talking up or playing down the significance of his party's electoral performances, but he was less implicated in matters of substance.<sup>39</sup>

If the president's decisions to exclude Farley from prior knowledge of the court plan, the lack of consultation that marked Roosevelt's relationship with Congress, and the president's efforts to force Farley to take sides in the Senate leadership contest had not persuaded him of the fact that he was no longer the administration's number-one political fixer, a visit Farley received from Thomas Corcoran on November 12, 1937,

should have convinced him beyond all reasonable doubt. According to Farley, “White House Tommy,” despite his official position at the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, did “practically nothing except personal work for the President.” On November 12, they discussed Hugo Black’s appointment to the Supreme Court, agreeing that the revelation that Black had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan had been ineptly handled.<sup>40</sup>

Rather than expressing resentment at Corcoran’s influence, Farley chose to emphasize their shared frustrations, especially the fact that both men had “taken it on the chin” for Roosevelt when the press and politicians blamed them for decisions they had nothing to do with. Farley insisted that the Court Reorganization Bill had been “very badly handled” and that if only Roosevelt had compromised earlier, he could have avoided “much embarrassment and bad feeling.” In response to Farley’s complaint that he had not been told about the Black appointment, Corcoran asserted that Roosevelt was making a series of impulsive moves and that he needed Farley’s “sound political advice.” It must have been humiliating for Farley to have to ask Corcoran about the origins of the court plan. His surprised response on learning the extent of the involvement of the attorney general, Homer Cummings, hints at Farley’s growing isolation.

That was a surprise to me and while I knew Cummings had participated in the discussions I did not know he had prepared the draft or made the suggestions. Sometime I am going to talk to Homer about it.<sup>41</sup>

On this occasion, Farley and Corcoran parted on amicable terms. Farley described Corcoran as a “sincere little fellow [who] wants to cooperate and assist in every way he can.” In the following twelve months, however, as it became increasingly obvious that Corcoran was intimately involved in offering Roosevelt political advice and intervening in the affairs of the Democratic Party, Farley’s opinion of Corcoran became less generous. By January 3, 1938, Farley was complaining that Roosevelt was only getting advice from the “liberal element,” from “fellows like Tom Corcoran, Ben Cohen, Robert H. Jackson, Secretary Ickes and

Harry Hopkins.” He bemoaned the fact that “the conservative Congressional leaders are not consulted at all.”<sup>42</sup>

The gulf between the presidential wing of the party and the conservative component of its congressional wing was now so wide that it could no longer be bridged. The politics of the second term had pressed Farley to the margins of the New Deal. Now he was forced to make a choice. Either he would bite his lip and stay loyal to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, reject the overtures of disgruntled congressmen, and face a future in which he would be increasingly irrelevant; or he would jump ship and fall into the wide-open and welcoming arms of the president’s most bitter foes.