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The Breaking Point

Of all the provocations Farley endured in the course of the New Deal's second term, the purge campaign, Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to prevent conservative congressmen from being nominated to stand in the 1938 midterm elections, was the most galling. The purge dramatized and widened the rift between the Democratic Party's ideological wings and alienated a substantial proportion of the party's rank and file in affected state organizations. It propelled Farley, once one of Roosevelt's most loyal lieutenants, toward open conflict with the president.¹

The purge campaign represented the very antithesis of Farley's approach to politics. It broke all of his beloved "rules of the game." As an ideologically inspired attempt to eradicate Democrats who had obstructed the New Deal's programmatic goals, the purge was based on assumptions that were entirely alien to Farley's view that the best means to solving the Democratic Party's problems and to saving the New Deal's legislative program was the application of common sense and a little straight talk between honest men. Further, the purge represented a threat to Farley's role as the key broker between the administration, congressmen, and local and state party organizations, because it was predicated on the idea that, ultimately, the administration's programmatic goals could not be reconciled with the political goals of some of the most powerful figures within the Democratic Party's traditional apparatus.

In his autobiographical writings, Farley argued that the purge campaign was an extension of the president's personal hatred for those members of his own party who had opposed him during the fight over

his plan for reform of the Supreme Court. Farley claimed that whereas he himself had adhered to “the rules of the game,” Roosevelt had broken them. At the end of January 1938, Farley issued a statement explaining that the nomination of candidates was a local affair and that it was not the business of the national party chairman or, especially, of administration officials to interfere in the selection process.

As individuals, the members of the National Committee may have their favorites, but as a body the organization’s hands are off and will continue to be off.²

Farley felt, however, that his “hands-off” policy was compromised from the start, because the president ordered the omission of the statement’s last two sentences, which declared that whatever the outcome of individual battles, the Democratic National Committee would support the victorious candidate in every state and congressional district. Though he piously presented this amendment to his prepared text as an unwarranted and ill-advised intervention that jeopardized any future prospect of party harmony (“An albatross, not of my own shooting, was hung from my neck. From that time on I knew no political peace”), Farley had in fact broken his own rules in the past and would do so again.³

Farley had intervened in local and state elections on Roosevelt’s behalf on numerous occasions, notably by opposing Tammany Hall candidates in New York in 1933 and then helping to establish the American Labor Party in the same state three years later. On these occasions, Farley might be excused on the grounds that he was intervening in a state where he was both party chairman and a voter, but the same could not be said of his actions in 1934 when, albeit reluctantly, he aided non-Democrat progressives by providing advice and information during the midterm elections. Even in May 1938, factional squabbles in Pennsylvania provoked Farley to release a statement urging Democrats to back Tom Kennedy for governor and George Earle for the Senate. He acknowledged that this was a violation of his own rule of noninterference, but he explained that the intervention was justified by the extraordinary circumstances.⁴

Even if there was an element of posturing—even hypocrisy—about Farley’s position on the purge campaign, he was nevertheless correct in

interpreting as unprecedented the scale and ferocity of Roosevelt's 1938 attack on congressional conservatives and on the conventions on federal interference in local matters. The purge campaign sent a clear signal to Democrats that those who had consistently resisted the passage of New Deal legislation, especially in southern and border states, were not part of Roosevelt's plans for the Democratic Party's future as a motor of liberal reform. Overriding the wishes of local organizations and riding roughshod over the established traditions of nonintervention and local autonomy in party affairs might in Roosevelt's view be necessary. In these circumstances, Farley was left with little option but to let others—the so-called purge committee, consisting of James Roosevelt, Thomas Corcoran, Harry Hopkins, Benjamin Cohen, Joseph Keenan, Harold Ickes, and David Niles—do Roosevelt's work, while Farley combined a policy of public silence and lukewarm statements of support for the administration with an increasingly voluminous, sympathetic, and conspiratorial private correspondence with some of the president's staunchest foes.

As Sidney Milkis has noted, it is significant that none of the members of the purge committee were from Congress or the Democratic National Committee. All were lawyers or executives with tenuous or nonexistent links to the party organization. The purge was therefore aimed not at strengthening or overhauling the party apparatus, as Roosevelt and Farley had done first in New York State and then nationally in the late twenties and early thirties, but at shifting the center of power away from local and state organizations in favor of the White House.⁵

Up to this point, Farley had proven himself a remarkably flexible political operator, a man whose political knowledge and skills had enabled him to steer a safe course for the Democratic Party even as America's political landscape altered in response to the new, less localized, more issue-driven politics fostered by the New Deal. He had adapted to wider societal changes, particularly in his support for women's involvement in political campaigning and in his embrace of emergent media and communications technologies. Farley's allegiances and modus operandi had always been oriented primarily around the needs and expectations of local party organizations, yet as national party chairman, he had helped to formalize and centralize the administration

of the party's business. Despite occasional objections and personality clashes, he had cooperated with the Democrats' special divisions, thus making the party apparatus more responsive to the programmatic demands of women, organized labor, and African Americans.

Farley had not been a passive observer of the changing political scene. Without fully realizing the consequences, either for his own future or for that of the Democratic Party, he had helped to bring a new kind of politics into being. While this new politics—which was more national, less dependent on the city bosses of the old school, and more attuned to the demands of interest groups and large-scale organizations—consolidated its position at the heart of mid-twentieth-century American politics, the predominantly service-oriented and largely nonideological form of politics with which Farley was more familiar became relatively marginalized.

Local party politics did not cease to matter after the New Deal. Local and grassroots initiatives continued to make an impact—in some cases, a profound one—on postwar politics. Two potent examples are the now well-documented revival of the grassroots right in the 1960s and the tax revolts of the 1970s. Even machine politics did not die with the New Deal, though it did have to adapt its relationships with voters, government officials, and agencies.⁶

The irony of Jim Farley's career is that while he played a vital role in managing the transition between the worlds of pre- and post-New Deal politics and had indeed prospered in times when these two worlds coexisted and intermingled, he was not able to complete the journey. In other words, he was to some extent a victim of his own success. There were limits to Farley's adaptive ability, and the purge exposed them. After the purge, the quality of his political relationship with Roosevelt deteriorated rapidly, and it became clear that Farley preferred to get into bed with some of Roosevelt's most reactionary opponents—Senators Josiah Bailey (North Carolina) and Carter Glass (Virginia), to name but two—rather than passively accept, let alone actively endorse, Roosevelt's ideologically motivated assault on Democratic Party conservatism.

On May 10, 1938, Farley told President Roosevelt point-blank that he did not want to involve himself directly in any of the forthcoming primary battles. It was not, he said, "the smart thing to do." He had close ties to

many of the figures Roosevelt sought to purge, and as he explained in a June letter to his friend Claude Bowers (who was in Madrid as U.S. ambassador to Spain), he felt indebted to many of them.

We are having a little difficulty in some of the states where the old guard senators are going to be opposed. Remarks have been made by some of our over zealous fellows who have no knowledge of the activities of our men in the past. Some of the most decent fellows, to my mind, are being unfairly opposed. In the pre-convention days and during the campaign of 1932 these same men were most helpful to me.⁷

Three prime targets of the purge were Walter George (Georgia), “Cotton Ed” Smith (South Carolina), and Millard Tydings (Maryland). George, in particular, was singled out for special attention. In August 1938, Roosevelt told George, in front of a crowd of fifty thousand at Barnesville, Georgia, that only federally directed policies could ameliorate the region’s social and economic malaise and that these policies would materialize only if Georgians elected congressmen “who are willing to fight night and day for federal statutes . . . with teeth in them, which go to the root of the problem, which remove the inequities, raise the standards and, over a period of years, give constant improvement to the conditions of human life in this state.” Roosevelt then noted that Senator George could not “be classified as belonging to the liberal school of thought,” thereby endorsing the candidacy of George’s opponent, Lawrence Camp.⁸

Three months earlier, anticipating such an attack, George had used Farley to negotiate with the president in a bid to avoid just this situation. Having spoken to George, Farley informed Roosevelt that though the Georgia senator was implacably opposed to the proposed Wages and Hours Bill, he would not aid the filibuster. Farley noted that this cut no ice with his boss and that though George was “honest in his views,” he was also a “real Conservative” who would always vote against administration policies.⁹

Farley therefore was not oblivious to the ideological divisions within his party. He recognized that a conservative congressional bloc was obstructing the administration’s legislative agenda and that this was a

serious problem. However, he thought the situation would be exacerbated by crude presidential interventions. Given his predilection for rigid, rule-bound thinking on matters political, he was particularly susceptible to the arguments of those who couched their opposition to the purge in constitutional language. North Carolina senator Josiah Bailey had been taking this tack since December 1936 at the latest. Bailey's aim was to use the issue to mobilize conservative Democrats, with a view toward a showdown in 1940.¹⁰

Like many other southern Democrats who knew of Farley's long and loyal service to Roosevelt's career, Bailey thought there was a chance that Farley might be sympathetic to the purge. Press reports and Farley's confused comments did little to make his position clear. In his efforts to satisfy both the administration and the party stalwarts, Farley made himself appear to support both purgers and purgees, a situation that pleased nobody.¹¹

Bailey began to woo Farley in June 1938, when he sent him a letter requesting that he elaborate on and clarify the constitutional implications of the proposed purge. The courtship was still going strong when they exchanged gossip in October, with Bailey stressing his distaste for Roosevelt's support for liberal Republicans, a theme that struck a chord with Farley. Significantly, Bailey felt confident enough to emphasize his sectionally and racially motivated agenda. The politics of race only very rarely surfaced in Farley's correspondence, but this was one occasion when the issues and related fears that underpinned southern Democrats' concerted effort to obstruct their party's drift toward liberalism were made explicit. Bailey used the coercive "we" to implicate Farley in the senators' attempts to preserve the racial status quo.

We are going to maintain the Democratic Party and we are not going to back any radical for President in the United States . . . Another thing we are determined upon is that Northern Democrats shall not frame our racial policy in the South. We can win on these issues.¹²

Farley—who chose Carter Glass to nominate him as a presidential candidate at the 1940 Democratic convention and went on to support another racially reactionary Virginian, Harry Byrd, in 1944—made a

habit of ignoring or skirting around the issue of race. In *Jim Farley's Story*, for example, he never acknowledged the extent to which his alliances with southern conservatives made him complicit in their fierce defense of the South's racial order. Farley was never at the vanguard of his party's liberal wing on racial matters; even if he had been, he would not, as party chairman, have sacrificed party unity at the altar of racial equality. Importantly, Roosevelt's attack on southern conservatism was couched not in terms of the need to promote a revolution in race relations—that would have been tantamount to political suicide—but as an argument for economic liberalism. As Kevin McMahon has shown, to the extent that Roosevelt pursued the politics of racial liberalism, he did so more aggressively through the judicial branch of government than through the congressional branch. Even some of the most liberal of southern congressmen, Florida's Claude Pepper for example, were apologists for Jim Crow. Opponents of the purge finessed the question of race, making their case along the lines of party regularity, the merits of laissez-faire economics, and the integrity of the Constitution.¹³

There was one partial exception to Farley's refusal to participate in the party purge. This involved the candidacy of Maryland's Millard Tydings. Tydings was a prominent figure in the bipartisan senatorial opposition to the New Deal and, like Josiah Bailey, interpreted the New Deal as representing an assault on the traditions of constitutional democracy. Farley, in his memoirs, gave the impression that he opposed all of the purge campaigns with equal vehemence. He noted that he had told Vice President Garner, "the whole situation is most aggravating." He made no mention of the fact that he signaled a measure of support for the purge by agreeing to accompany the president on a Labor Day trip to Maryland during which Roosevelt endorsed the candidacy of one of Tydings opponents, Alan Goldsborough.¹⁴

Farley had major reservations about the campaign to purge Tydings: he thought it was poorly managed and that the administration's final choice of candidate, David Lewis, was too sympathetic to the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Farley told Garner that he "did not ask a living soul" to vote against Tydings but that he had nevertheless agreed to accompany Roosevelt on the Maryland trip because Tydings did not "play the game the way I like to see it played." By this, Farley meant that

unlike other targets of the purge, Tydings had not cooperated with his patronage requests, nor had Tydings participated fully in supporting fund-raising events, such as highly profitable Jackson Day dinners. Moreover, Farley thought that Tydings had “acted like a kid” in initially refusing to second Roosevelt’s presidential nomination at the 1936 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia.¹⁵

In the failure of Tydings to abide by “the rules of the game” as Farley defined them, Farley found justification for his own involvement in aiding, albeit in a small way, the doomed bid to oust the Maryland senator from office. Yet the victory of Tydings over the administration’s candidate, David Lewis, was not half as galling to Farley as it was to his boss. He insisted that all successful candidates receive the same letter of hearty congratulations, and he defied the president’s request that “hearty” and “all other adjectives” be left out in the case of Tydings.¹⁶

By the late 1940s, when he was writing *Jim Farley’s Story*, the Maryland trip had taken on new significance for Farley. He remembered it as only the second occasion that he was invited to spend a night on the presidential yacht, the *Potomac*. He interpreted this as reinforcing his claims that the president had never given him due recognition and that, by 1938, Roosevelt was forming a “personal machine,” cut off from party leaders and Congress.¹⁷

Despite his involvement in the Maryland trip, Farley’s general hostility to the purge campaign and its perpetrators was widely reported by mid-1938, as were rumors of a growing split between Farley and the president. The *New Republic* noted reports that Farley was “ready to join in a conservative holy war.” In *Colliers* magazine, Walter Davenport observed, “to Mr. Farley a Democrat is a Democrat whatever his batting average in the New Deal League and to hell with the color of his shirt, whether his name be Glass, Wheeler, Guffey, Hague or Pendergast.”¹⁸

For reasons that went far deeper than the matters of character and personal loyalty that have preoccupied many previous commentators and historians, Farley was utterly disillusioned by the purge campaign. It was premised on ideas that he could not accept and executed by men—Ickes, Hopkins, Corcoran—for whom he had little respect, using methods that he deplored. On September 8, shortly after returning from his Maryland trip, Farley indicated, in a private memorandum, just how

frustrated he had become with the administration's campaign activities and their impact on party unity. Reporting a conversation with vice president Garner, Farley wrote:

I told him I had gone through a number of hectic weeks, but that I was doing the best I could to keep my feet on the ground and that after the primaries are all over, I will try to put the pieces together again. He asked me if I were a Democrat and I told him yes—that after my country, my family and my church, the Democratic Party came next and he said that was the way he felt about it. He said he thought the President was making a mistake and I agreed with him.¹⁹

Coming in the wake of the hard-fought and divisive intraparty squabbling over the House and Senate leadership contests, the congressional fight over court reform, and the protracted and debilitating congressional stalemate over Roosevelt's legislative program, the purge set Farley—together with a large, but diffuse, crowd of congressional conservatives, party regulars in the Democratic Party's state organizations, and even some of his own similarly troubled administrative colleagues—on a determined course to prevent the nomination of a New Dealer for president in 1940. In mid-September, both the secretary to the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau Jr., and the Texan chief of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Jesse Jones, told Farley that they opposed the purge and feared that its political consequences might be grave.²⁰

This opposition never managed to make itself into a cohesive force or to articulate a coherent set of positive proposals sufficient to attract a broad base of support. Its failure to wrest control of the Democratic Party's future was hardly surprising given that its goals were always defined in negative terms. First, it was directed against preventing a New Dealer, chosen by Roosevelt, from gaining the succession; later, once it became clear that a third-term bid was in prospect, it sought to block the reelection of Roosevelt himself. For the next two years, between 1938 and 1940, the various hostile factions that opposed the president searched for a candidate who might embody their common desire to check what they perceived as a dangerous erosion of constitutional democracy and party autonomy, sponsored by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the form of the New

Deal. Eventually, and most ironically, they found a potential savior in Jim Farley—one of the two men Roosevelt cited as being most responsible for making him president in 1932. But by the time Farley was selected for the job, it was much too late for him to succeed.

Jim Farley was very far from being an ideal presidential candidate: he lacked experience as an elected official, was largely ignorant of foreign affairs, was not an outstanding orator, and had no clear policy program to offer. His biggest problem, though, was that the political forces he claimed to represent—the party stalwarts in the states and the organizations they served—had lost their grip on the nation's politics. He was fighting a battle that was already lost. By 1938, the traditional powers and prerogatives of the state organizations and their representatives had been displaced from the heart of the political process by a form of politics that Farley, in happier times, had himself helped to strengthen. The Democratic Party's center of gravity had shifted, away from its bias toward the traditional party organizations of the South, in favor of new forms of programmatically oriented urban liberalism, attuned to the interests of voters who looked for political leadership not in the Democratic strongholds of the South (even when represented by those with liberal credentials, such as Alben Barkley, Claude Pepper, and Lyndon Johnson) but among the progressive legislators, mayors, and union leaders of the North and the East—Robert Wagner, Fiorello La Guardia, David Lawrence, John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther. Above all, they looked to the principal figurehead and architect of the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who maintained an extraordinary level of personal popularity throughout the New Deal. By the late thirties, a more centralized politics, issue-sensitive and focused on interest groups, was in the ascendancy. Once-powerful party organizations were, with only a few exceptions, either forced to take a backseat to other organized interests or compelled to compete with them for attention and influence.

Seen in this light, Farley's bid for the presidency in 1940 takes on a new significance, not least because it raises important questions about the relationship between Farley's career and the long-term decline of American party organizations. Was Farley engaged in a noble attempt to restore integrity to the fabric of American democracy by putting the

prerogatives of party unity and local organizational strength before those of executive power, administrative government, and ideologically motivated organized interests? Or was it, rather, a selfish and ill-considered effort to salvage a largely redundant form of politics that was no longer capable of meeting the needs of the citizenry of a modern state?

That Farley really wanted to become president is not in doubt. Though, in *Jim Farley's Story*, he tried to give the impression that his campaign for the nomination was undertaken reluctantly and only as a result of his conviction that a third term was wrong in principle, his memoranda and correspondence from 1939–40 tell a very different story. He was not just angling for a vice presidential spot under Garner or Cordell Hull (then secretary of state) either, though he would have happily taken such a position if it had been offered. He made this plain in a memo dictated in October 1939.

Garner and Hull will both want me to swing my support to them and in return for it take the Vice Presidential nomination. That may be the wisest thing to do and if it is I will make the decision at that time, although, if there is decided sentiment for me, and positive strength in the Convention, I don't see why I should not take it.²¹

In January 1939, Farley had composed a comprehensive assessment of his nomination prospects and those of his principal rivals. In this memo, he noted that the possibility of a third term for Roosevelt was something of a wild card and that everything might change if U.S. involvement in a European war became likely. He judged that the best tactic on foreign affairs was to “refrain from making any public utterances” and that, in any case, he was better placed than another of the contenders, Cordell Hull, who, in his capacity as secretary of state, had, in Farley's estimation, alienated German and Italian Americans, both of whom were “potent factors in many of the northern states.”²²

Farley was sure that vice president Garner was an active candidate for the presidency but that Garner would not pick up sufficient liberal votes and, like Hull, would not appeal to African Americans in the north and border states, whose votes Farley felt would be critical in the forthcom-

ing election. Farley rather naively regarded his own liberal credentials as immaculate, because he had been a key figure in engineering the passage through Congress of important legislative components of the New Deal. Farley asserted that he had “always been considered fair insofar as the negro problem is concerned,” citing his support for the African American boxer Harry Wills in the days when Farley was head of the New York State Athletic Commission.²³

Among Roosevelt’s favorites for 1940, Farley thought the president preferred Harry Hopkins, Robert H. Jackson, and Frank Murphy, in that order—though Farley was at a loss to understand why his boss was considering Hopkins, a “known Socialist.” Farley believed that his control of local leaders in New York State would be enough to stymie Jackson’s chances and that, provided Roosevelt was not involved, the convention would have to choose between Farley himself, Hull, and Garner. Farley was convinced that in these circumstances, he would control the vast majority of state delegations and would be the president’s choice, despite reservations. Farley expressed his optimism in a memoranda of September 1938.

I am of the opinion that of the three, the President would prefer to see me elected. I am of the impression he feels my religion and my background would be a barrier if nominated . . . It is apparent that the leaders of the Party generally are in favor of my nomination, feeling I am entitled to it because of my service to the Party, particularly since 1932. There is no doubt that the leaders of the Party, big and little, feel that if I were the nominee and successful at the polls, I would do my best to make the Party a strong and unified one, from top to bottom.²⁴

Immediately after the 1938 midterm elections, Farley began to seek the support of state organizations for the presidential nomination. Before then, in September 1938, Farley was using his close relationships with leading journalists to raise his public profile. He appeared on the front cover of *Life* in conjunction with an interview conducted by Joseph Alsop. This, Farley noted in a November memo, gave him “a lot of publicity and free advertising” and “unquestionably” put him “in a different light before the public.” He was especially keen to ensure that “friendly

articles” appeared emphasizing his “ability as a business man,” because he knew that he would elsewhere be attacked for being nothing more than a politician.²⁵

In mid-1939, Farley embarked on two trips—one national, one international—in an effort to assess how much support there was for his candidacy and because he knew he needed to cultivate a more statesmanlike image. In May 1939, he made a western trip that echoed his Elks tour on Roosevelt’s behalf in June and July 1931. He covered 7,748 miles in thirteen states over sixteen days, speaking at gatherings of postmasters’ associations and Elks clubs and at civic dinners, meeting party leaders at every stop, sweet-talking the editors of local newspapers, and frantically shaking hands at every opportunity. On returning, he confided in a private memorandum that almost all the party leaders were opposed to a third term, that party workers were alarmed by the influence of “the group around the President—Murphy, Wallace, Corcoran, Hopkins,” and that the party regulars felt that “proper consideration” was not being given to “the real leaders of our party.” He concluded with much optimism for the prospects of his nomination.

They are all whole-hearted for me if I decide to make the race, and it made me feel good. There is great loyalty among the party workers—so many of whom I have come in close contact during the past several years; they are all right—the backbone of the party and I know if they have an opportunity to express themselves they will stand by me.²⁶

Farley’s reports of his travels in 1939 were excessively optimistic, certainly much more so than those of 1931. He exaggerated the extent to which his face-to-face contacts with dyed-in-the-wool Democratic Party regulars, friendly newspapermen, and business contacts were a true barometer of national sentiment. Gallup polls of Democratic voters consistently showed Farley in the top three choices for the presidential nomination, but he lagged well behind Vice President Garner, and Roosevelt was not yet listed as an option.²⁷

On November 6, 1939, the first time that Gallup gave Democrats the chance to choose Roosevelt from a list of potential presidential nominees, 83 percent chose him, 8 percent named Garner, and Farley landed

in fifth place at a paltry 1 percent. When the same sample was asked their preference if Roosevelt decided not to run, Farley still only mustered 8 percent, behind Garner (45 percent), Paul McNutt (18 percent), and Cordell Hull (13 percent). Even more telling was a Gallup poll conducted on May 20, 1940, that asked whom voters would opt for if Farley ran for president against Thomas Dewey, the Republican district attorney from New York whose successful prosecution of the gangster Jimmy Hines in 1939 had sent his presidential ratings soaring above those of more experienced Republican contenders, such as Senators Arthur Vandenburg and Robert A. Taft. Excluding the 15 percent of respondents who gave no preference, Dewey beat Farley by 58 to 42 percent. The only region in which Farley did better than Dewey was the South. When respondents were asked to choose between Dewey and Cordell Hull, Hull fared far better than Farley, though he beat Dewey only by the narrowest of margins, 51 to 49 percent.²⁸

This last poll was conducted just a few weeks before Farley returned from spending five weeks in Europe, starting in Germany, then moving on to Poland, Italy, France, and Ireland. The purpose of the trip was to impress on the American public that Farley was a leader of international standing, but it was not entirely successful. The fact that Farley enjoyed an audience with Pope Pius XII—and gave a press conference about the meeting afterward—merely reinforced the impression that he was, more than anything else, the Catholic candidate.²⁹

The pope's estimation of Roosevelt's third-term intentions proved more astute than Farley's; when Farley explained that by running for a third term, the president would be "breaking a practically unwritten law," the pope replied that he had been the first Italian papal secretary of state to become pope. But most troubling for Farley was the fact that almost everyone he spoke to on his travels told him that war was imminent. Indeed, events in Europe so accelerated during Farley's visit that, when he arrived back in New York in the first week of September 1939, he felt it would be unwise to make the statement he had initially prepared for his return. Farley was unfortunate that the crisis in Europe deprived him of an important opportunity to present himself as serious presidential contender. The statement, if made, would very likely have created a political storm, because it made clear that Farley was at war

with Roosevelt and the New Dealers over the control of the nomination. It read:

I am devoted to the Democratic Party. I certainly have no present intention of abandoning my interest in public affairs. You ask what would be my attitude if effort should be made to cripple my influence in the Democratic Party. The answer is that no man or group of men will be able to drive me or my friends out of the Democratic Party. I am there to stay and whatever influence I have will be asserted for the preservation of what I deem to be the best interests of the Democratic Party.³⁰

Farley's travels raised his profile, but his efforts to demonstrate that he was cut from presidential cloth were undermined at every turn by Roosevelt's refusal to remove himself from the race. It is perhaps conceivable that had Roosevelt put the weight of his authority behind Farley, then the latter could have won both the nomination and the presidency. But without the president's explicit backing, Farley's campaign could never gain momentum.

Effectively, Farley's ambitions for higher office were smothered by presidential cunning. Had Farley taken the president's advice in 1938 and made a challenge for the New York governorship, he would perhaps have been in a stronger position. But even then, Farley would hardly have topped the list of Roosevelt's favorites—unless he was second on the ticket to an ardent New Dealer, such as Harry Hopkins or Robert H. Jackson, neither of whom were acceptable running mates to Farley. Roosevelt and Farley played cat and mouse right up until the 1940 Chicago convention, as each man tried to divine the other's intentions.

Farley's tactics were of the wait-and-see variety; he wanted to "let things ride along and let nature take its course," believing that if he was patient, the president would eventually be flushed out and forced to make a definitive statement of his intentions. But Farley was wrong, and his strategy merely played into the president's hands. From a political point of view, it suited Roosevelt that he and Farley shadowboxed around the edges of the issue without ever exchanging blows. Whether he regretted it on a personal level, he never said.³¹

When Farley spoke with the president, as he did on dozens of occa-

sions in 1939–40, he somehow never managed to pin his adversary down. The following extract from a memo written in June 1939 is typical.

In our talk he started to talk about the future and mentioned Garner a few times in an off-hand way as “good old Jack,” etc., but said nothing else. I thought he started to say something and then decided he would not. There is no doubt in my mind that he is anxious to discuss the future with me and he is just trying me out with these remarks in the hope I may make an observation as to my feelings about the situation.³²

This uneasy, distrustful tone pervaded Farley’s private musings on Roosevelt’s intentions.

Suspicion developed into genuine ill feeling when Farley’s Catholic faith was brought into play in July 1939, following a meeting between Farley and Cardinal Mundelein that the president had arranged. Farley was a committed Catholic, but he was adamant that his faith, like the family life about which he said so little, was a private affair and that these parts of his life should be kept out of politics. Having witnessed the battering Al Smith received in 1928, Farley knew that his religion might affect his vote-winning potential, but he was convinced, perhaps naively, that among Democrats at least, party loyalties were stronger than religious prejudice. He told the cardinal, “there are hundreds of thousands of Democrats on the payrolls of the Government and whether or not they liked the name of Farley they would not vote their own Party out of office just because the candidate happens to be a Roman Catholic.” When Mundelein told Farley that he thought Roosevelt would run for a third term and that a Catholic could not be elected president, Farley responded with a fierce defense of his position.

I told him it does not matter to me that Roosevelt does not think I am qualified for the office of President; that there are many other people of intelligence, wisdom and weight, and whose judgment cannot be questioned who think I am alright—and I do not think the President of the United States should take that position.³³

Farley told Mundelein that he thought times had changed since 1928, that Smith had been running against the party in power at a time when

the economy was in reasonably good shape and when prohibition was a prominent and divisive issue. Smith's campaign management, Farley explained, had been "anything but skilful and diplomatic," and unlike Smith, Farley had the support of senior political figures in states where anti-Catholicism was a potential factor, such as the Carolinas. Whereas Smith's support in the South hemorrhaged comprehensively in 1928, Farley knew he could count on powerful endorsements from prominent Southerners, such as his friend Carter Glass, the Virginia senator who would rise from his sickbed to propose Farley for the presidential nomination at the 1940 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The irony of this choice was not lost on the president, who, shortly after the convention, wrote to a correspondent in the State Department, "When I think of Carter's failure in 1928 to lift one finger against the raising of the religious issue in Virginia, it lowers my respect for the fundamental integrity of the old man."³⁴

Farley was convinced that the votes of postal and other government workers would see him through. In his private report of his conversation with Mundelein, he gave the impression that he genuinely believed that his service to the party entitled him to the nomination and that the contacts he had made over the years would guarantee it.

I told him . . . that I know I have a larger personal acquaintance among the people around the country than any other man in either of the major political parties; that there are more obligated to me for positions secured; favors received; help given, etc., than any other man in the Administration.³⁵

Farley knew that the president had manufactured the meeting with the cardinal. At a later, unspecified date, Farley indicated his fury at the nature of the president's intervention—and at Mundelein's complicity in the plot—by scrawling a handwritten note on the bottom of the typed text of his report of the conversation, stating indignantly that he had told the cardinal "he was the first person in the Church who ever tried to influence me on a political matter."³⁶

In early March 1940, fully eight months after his strained discussion with Cardinal Mundelein, the religious issue surfaced once again in the form of a newspaper article written by Ernest Lindley, which made pub-

lic the president's reservations about Farley's electability, even as vice president. The article said that Roosevelt favored Hull for president but that if Farley shared the ticket, Hull would be perceived by some as "a stalking horse for the Pope." Farley found this suggestion extremely offensive, and when he later wrote *Jim Farley's Story*, he made it the centerpiece of his argument that Roosevelt was ungrateful, disloyal, and vindictive. Farley knew very well that Roosevelt thought Farley's Catholicism might harm his chances, but Farley did not want these sentiments made public. Most alarming to Farley was Roosevelt's reluctance to kill the story or to disassociate himself from it.³⁷

The injection of Farley's religious convictions into the political arena just a few months before the party convention deeply offended his sense of fair play. But even if the president was behind the Lindley article, Farley's response to it was disproportionate. All the president had said was that some people harbored anti-Catholic feelings and that these might harm the ticket if Farley were nominated. In March 1940, this was news to no one. Adolf Berle—who was embarrassed by Farley's candidacy, in part because he had agreed to write two speeches for him—noted in his diaries that he was sure the Lindley story was accurate. "The President," Berle wrote, "was simply talking the plain political truth."³⁸

Farley's schemes to prevent Roosevelt from dictating the 1940 nomination went back to November 1937, when he began discussing the matter with Vice President Garner. As the 1940 convention approached, Farley met frequently with Garner, Hull, and their supporters to discuss tactics. Farley's position, then, was hardly neutral, and his subsequent pose as a wounded innocent did not convince the president's supporters. Soon after Farley formally announced that he was seeking the nomination on March 19, 1940, Harold Ickes wrote in his diary that there would be trouble if Farley did not resign from his position as chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

It is highly improper for a candidate to use the party machinery in his own cause and Jim has been doing that for months . . . As a matter of fact, I have resented this for some time and suggested to Tom Corcoran that we ought to begin to stir up sentiment about it . . . Ben [Cohen] is also interested in stirring up sentiment. I told him to talk to some of the correspondents and columnists.³⁹

Farley was unable to match his private displeasure at the Lindley article with an effective public response. The best he could do was to string together some clichés in a speech to the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick.

We must never permit the ideals of the Republic to sink to a point where every father and mother, regardless of race, color, or creed, cannot look proudly in to the cradle of their newborn babe and see a future President of the United States.⁴⁰

More important than the personal battle of wits between Roosevelt and Farley or the likely attitude of voters to Farley's Catholicism was the fact that if Farley were to make himself a credible presidential candidate, he had to define his candidacy in relation to specific policies and a coherent and plausible set of wider objectives. That was true regardless of whether or not Roosevelt ran; and though Farley tried hard, he never managed to do this. He ended up posing merely as a symbol of principled resistance to a third term.

Farley was motivated to seek the presidential nomination by his personal ambition and by his resentment at the way he had been sidelined by his boss. But his candidacy was really about his conviction that local and state party organizations and the party workers who maintained them should be restored to their rightful position at the heart of political life. Though he struggled to articulate the message, Farley was fighting for the restoration of a dying form of politics in which parties—not administrative agencies, labor unions, or interest groups—were the principal mediators between government and the people.

Farley was never convinced that the fact that he had never held a major elected post was an obstacle to his gaining the presidency. Franklin Roosevelt thought otherwise and told him that he should consider putting himself forward for the New York gubernatorial contest in 1938. Farley told the president that he could not afford it. In 1940, Farley's strategy was in fact not so different from that he had pursued in the 1910s in his campaigns for minor party offices in Grassy Point. He believed that if he met enough people, if he pressed enough flesh, anything was possible.⁴¹

During the 1940 campaign, Farley told his friend Max Gardener that as a result of radio talks and nationwide trips, Farley had shaken the

hands of thirty thousand women and children and signed fifty thousand letters to people who had met him on his travels, and five hundred thousand copies of his speeches had been circulated. Farley became practically obsessed with his handshaking abilities, so much so that, in April 1940, when he toured the southern states on his last significant campaign trip before the national party convention, he had someone conduct a handshake count. Extraordinarily, he amassed a grand total of 9,847 hands, and he was proud to note that it was “estimated that another 1,500 persons shook hands with me at times when it was not possible to count.” Sometimes Farley gave the impression that he thought that politics was no more than a contact sport culminating in a quadrennial popularity contest. Joseph Alsop, preparing to write a *Life* article on Farley’s relationship with the president, noted that “Farley’s whole life seems to be dedicated to ‘keeping in touch.’”⁴²

Farley’s contact approach to political campaigning, a classic expression of the mode of predominantly nonideological, localized politics he had learned in upstate New York in the 1910s and 1920s, was not very helpful to his chances of gaining the nomination. Regardless of the internecine squabbles that dogged them throughout Roosevelt’s second term, Democrats knew that they must find a candidate who appealed not only to party delegates but also to the voting public beyond the convention hall. Farley was immensely popular with party workers and with the postal officials he met on his frequent inspection tours, but these constituencies, while they might contribute toward securing the presidential nomination, were not going to win a presidential election.

Throughout 1939–40, Farley persisted in exaggerating the extent to which the Democratic Party would dance to his tune; he clung to the belief that by calling on the cumulative impact of personal acquaintances and the sense of obligation party workers felt for their national chairman, he could glide to victory. He thought he could simply transpose to his presidential campaign the methods and political style that had helped him to rise through the ranks of the New York Democratic Party in the 1920s. This style could easily be applied to some of the tasks of patronage and party management that Farley undertook as party chairman and postmaster general, but it was not sufficient to launch a credible presidential bid, at least not after the New Deal. He failed to

grasp the extent to which his party had already been transformed—not least by his own hand—in the course of the previous two presidential terms.

Focusing on the meeting and greeting techniques that the popular press associated with corrupt city bosses only served to reinforce the impression that Farley's candidacy, if it should be taken seriously at all, was little more than an attempt to make Tammany Hall a national concern. Most Democrats knew there was more to their party chairman than that, but they also recognized that Farley needed to make clear his position on the key issues of the day, particularly the war in Europe and how to alleviate the nation's continuing agricultural and industrial malaise. Surely, as long as the war continued, the American public would not be interested in electing a candidate who was primarily identified with campaign management, patronage, and oiling the wheels of the party machine.

In 1939–40, Farley had ample opportunity to make a case for himself, but he was never able to explain precisely what was at stake or why he, as opposed to any of the other potential nominees, was best placed to lead the United States in times of depression and war. Farley was not completely mute on matters of economic and foreign policy. Certainly, he was a more assertive presence in the cabinet in the second term than he had been in the first. He supported the efforts of Henry Morgenthau and Dan Roper to rein in Roosevelt's spending policies, arguing that recovery would come not through financial profligacy but through the restoration of business confidence. He told Roosevelt in front of the entire cabinet that the public saw him as stubborn and that "the impression had been created [that] he had no interest in business." Even Harold Ickes, who thought of Farley as a "square shooter, but fundamentally . . . a conservative, organization Democrat without any social or economic background," felt able to praise Farley, in September 1938, for supporting Ickes's management of the Public Works Administration and for reassuring cabinet colleagues that, unlike most American Catholics, Farley did not support Francisco Franco's Nationalists in the civil war currently raging in Spain.⁴³

The closest Farley came to explaining how he might manage the economy as president came in late January 1940, in a speech at Winston-

Salem, North Carolina, which was widely interpreted in the national press as the opening blast of his presidential bid. The dominant theme of the speech was the importance of establishing a harmonious relationship between government and business. Echoing Roosevelt's rhetoric on economic recovery from 1932–33, Farley called for equilibrium between agricultural and industrial sectors. Seeking to capitalize on anxiety that the United States was lagging behind European dictatorships, especially Germany, in its commitment to advanced scientific research, Farley asserted that advances in crop technology and concerted investment in scientific research held the key to progress.⁴⁴

In words that chimed with his deeply held conviction that American democracy was essentially and instinctively consensual, Farley called for “genuine understanding and cordial cooperation between those forces affecting industrial production.” These forces fell into five categories: the employer, the employee, the stockholder, the consumer, and the government. Notably, he did not count organized labor. Recognition of the “the legal validity of the status and the moral rights of the worker” was entirely consistent with an economic system based on the “profit motive,” the absence of which would lead inexorably to “the foundation of the totalitarian State.”⁴⁵

Farley expressed his distaste for the “theory that government and business are naturally arrayed in hostile camps.” Government's job was to act as a neutral arbitrator, “to call fouls when fouls are committed, and to follow the ball without prejudice.” He spoke not of government *and* business, but of government *in* business. He did not advocate large-scale government intervention in business affairs; rather, Farley thought government and business operated on the same principles. He saw his own career as a businessman politician as its perfect illustration.⁴⁶

The Winston-Salem address was unusual in that Farley spoke at some length, if a little vaguely, about areas of economic and agricultural policy that were not directly related to his work as party chairman and post-master general. Farley was attempting to present himself as an informed thinker on matters of policy; he wanted to distance himself from his public image as a narrowly focused political boss. More typical of Farley—and, in many ways, more powerful as an expression of his political ideas than the Winston-Salem address—was “Politics as a Profession for Business Men,” a speech he gave at the Agricultural and Mechanical Col-

lege of Texas on April 4, 1940. Its argument was that government should pay more attention to business and that business people should get more involved in politics.⁴⁷

Politicians, Farley asserted, were essential to the effective functioning of American democracy: "It is they who must harmonize conflicting points of view; who must reach compromises, who must always look for the greatest common divisor of public opinion, and give the result form and substance." Farley argued that without effective politicians, political structures would break down, leading to dictatorship in some cases. Success in politics, as in business, came, according to Farley, through honesty, courtesy, moderation, and self-control. He therefore argued that politicians should be ambitious, just as businessmen should seek a profit. In Farley's view, the only important difference between the two professions was that politicians' choices were more circumscribed by the complexity of public opinion and organized interests.⁴⁸

Farley's call for politics to be regarded as a noble profession and for government to be more attentive to the needs of business was his best effort to communicate what was important about his candidacy. He believed that the New Deal was in danger of alienating business and that unless more businessmen took up politics, then politics in general and the Democratic Party in particular might come to be dominated not by the compromisers and deal makers whose sensitivity to established codes of political conduct and adherence to the basic tenets of party regularity brought order and cohesion to the American polity but by divisive, ideologically motivated social workers and lawyer-politicians, such as the New Dealers Harry Hopkins, Tom Corcoran, and Ben Cohen.

In the final months of the campaign, Farley added little of substance to the arguments he had sketched out in his Winston-Salem and Texas A&M addresses. He spoke before students at Lafayette College and Oglethorpe University and at the Seventy-Five Years of Negro Progress Exposition in Detroit, but his formulaic speeches on those occasions consisted of little more than exhortations to patriotic idealism, a predictable theme given the worsening war situation. By mid-July, when delegates gathered in Chicago for the national party convention, the Farley bandwagon, which had never gathered much speed, had more or less ground to a halt.

Farley left for Chicago on 8 July determined that his name would be

put before the convention and that Bess and the children would be there to see it. Soon after arriving, he was besieged by party leaders dropping in to his rooms in the Stevens Hotel to persuade him not to put his name forward, for the sake of the party. But he fended them all off, insisting that it was essential that he made his stand against the third term. "The only way I can publicly show how I feel, without misunderstanding and with dignity and honor, is to permit my name to go before the convention," he told Ed Flynn. A little earlier, he had informed James Byrnes that between 120 and 150 delegates would vote for him. It was an ill-tempered convention. Farley would later accuse the pro-Roosevelt forces of hypocrisy. In *Jim Farley's Story*, he was critical of "the effort put forth to make it appear that the President was being drafted, when everyone knew it was a forced draft fired from the White House itself."⁴⁹

On July 15, Farley opened the convention in his capacity as national chairman. "As I stand here facing the representatives of democracy," he said, "I am overwhelmed by a flood of recollections." Looking out at the hundreds of delegates before him, he made plain his intimate connection to the party's rank and file.

I see hundreds of familiar faces; the faces of men and women who have been tried and who have shown themselves worthy of the high trust imposed on them by the Democratic Party. Nor is there any doubt about the new people who are serving as delegates to this convention. Every one of you, whose history I know, has labored shoulder to shoulder with the party veterans. You are all loyal soldiers gathered here to defend a worthy cause.⁵⁰

It was a poignant occasion, not least because Farley and most delegates knew that this would be the last time he would speak to them in this capacity. He thanked the Democratic National Committee and the state, county, and local organizations and expressed his gratitude to "the precinct and district captains, and the people who, under their leadership, labored day and night to spread the doctrine of democracy and to see to it that the people who shared their views came to the polls and voted their convictions." Then, to great applause and cheers from the floor, he relinquished the gavel. A musical tribute in the form of a rendi-

tion of *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling* was supposed to follow Farley's speech, but it never materialized. Farley claimed that supporters of Chicago boss Ed Kelly, who was backing Roosevelt, had pulled the plug.⁵¹

In the end, Farley's bid for the presidential nomination petered out rather feebly. On July 17, 1940, to a chorus of boos from the public galleries and convention floor, Carter Glass rose to propose Farley for the nomination. His speech, littered with barbs aimed at the president, called delegates' attention to Farley's record of "loyal attachment to the Democratic party," describing him as "a man who never in all his lifetime violated a pledge once given, a man who believes in the unwritten laws and traditions of the Democratic party." But in the final analysis, Farley was supported by only a small fraction of his party's delegates. The roll call suggested that Glass was speaking for only a tiny rump of disillusioned southern stalwarts: Roosevelt won 946½ votes to Farley's 72½, Garner's 61, and Millard Tydings's 9½.⁵²

Farley's lack of experience of elective office, relative ignorance of foreign affairs, and inability to establish independent policy positions on the key areas of economic and social policy would in all probability have doomed his presidential bid to failure at the best of times. That he was challenging a popular president while the war situation in Europe was becoming blacker by the day sealed his fate. He was not, after all, a credible candidate, and many of those who sympathized with him preferred to cast their vote for Roosevelt rather than risk pariah status and loss of patronage by backing Farley.

Yet Farley's campaign was not an entirely futile gesture. Nor should it be thought of solely as the bitter fruit of Farley and Roosevelt's personal differences over questions of loyalty and party ethics. The most important aspect of Farley's challenge to the president was that it illustrated a major and enduring shift in the American political environment. Farley sought to defend the traditional powers and prerogatives of political parties and the politicians who worked through them. Having helped to transform the Democratic Party to make it more amenable to new voters and to interest groups who viewed the party as a vehicle toward the furtherance of their programmatic goals, Farley reached a point beyond

which he ceased to feel comfortable. For several years, he operated with great skill and some success in a world where the kind of localized, largely nonideological politics he had grown up with mixed freely—if not always easily—with the more national, issue-based politics oriented around interest groups and consolidated by the New Deal; but Roosevelt's second term dealt Farley a series of body blows—the fight over court reform, the Senate leadership battle, the purge campaign, the issue of a third term—that exhausted Farley's patience and convinced him that resistance was necessary.

Farley's ambition drove him to challenge for the presidency; so, too, did the fact that he felt personally aggrieved by the way former friends and colleagues had ostracized him. But his presidential bid was also an attempt, however clumsy and inarticulate, to highlight the extent to which the New Deal and the kind of politics it fostered posed a threat to the future vitality of the Democratic Party and even to parties in general, especially at state and local levels. In this respect, Farley's candidacy was a more noble—perhaps even prophetic—enterprise than contemporaries and subsequent historians have recognized.

Farley did not offer a vision of how parties might maintain their influence without conflicting with or compromising the persistent, perhaps irresistible demand for continued expansion of the state's administrative capacities. He did not explain how expectations of the government's role as a provider of goods and services—which had risen substantially during the New Deal—could be met without discarding or at least relaxing his rigid adherence to political values, styles, and practices characteristic of pre-New Deal America. But he did point, albeit inadvertently, to the ambivalence of the New Deal's legacy for American politics. To the extent that it fostered the erosion of the influence of state and local party organizations or forced them into new, more compliant forms of relationship with the federal government, the New Deal can be interpreted as a more or less successful continuation of the progressive crusade for good government. But at the same time, it would be difficult to argue that Farley was not justified in his fear that shunting parties—and the politicians who worked through them—to the margins of the political process would inflict lasting damage on the fabric of American democracy.