Conclusions

We set out to examine political campaigns with four goals in mind: (1) to understand how candidates who are seemingly out of the mainstream of political life can maneuver themselves into position to win office through democratic processes; (2) to provide insights into how the domestic political maneuvers of Ronald Reagan and Boris Yeltsin transformed the international system in the late 1980s and 1990s; (3) to stimulate further research into a cross-national theory of campaigning, especially for the highest executive office; and (4) to illustrate, primarily through the Reagan analysis, how archives can be used to assist in investigating theories of political action. Now, having set out our theoretical claims and having probed successful and failed campaigns, we can offer some thoughts about what we have learned.

The first of these objectives provided the original motivation for this investigation, and it remains our most important concern. When Ronald Reagan first expressed national political aspirations, many thought his “extreme” views could never propel him to the presidency. Republican Party standard-bearer Barry Goldwater had gone down to decisive defeat in the 1964 presidential election. Little had happened in the years between Goldwater’s defeat and Reagan’s failed 1968 bid to alter the perception that Reagan was outside the American mainstream. Yet in 1976 he came close to wresting the Republican nomination away from incumbent Gerald Ford, and in 1980 he won a landslide victory to become President of the United States.

Reagan’s story is about a campaigner who altered his approach from a purely rhetorical strategy to one infused with heresthetic. Most
importantly he saw that the Democratic coalition could be challenged by redefining conservatism to embrace both the traditional fiscal conservatism that dominated the GOP and the social conservatism of millions of American blue-collar workers. In the process of building his own support base, Reagan introduced the idea that the Cold War could be won by launching an arms race that would force the Soviet leadership to choose between military strength and economic well-being. Reagan campaigned on the idea that his deterrence strategy could be financed by cutting taxes to stimulate economic growth. It was a wholly new linkage of guns and butter. With significant, if unintended, help from Boris Yeltsin, Reagan forced the Soviet’s hand. Gorbachev’s USSR was unable to keep up with the U.S. militarily or indeed even to sustain itself.

Boris Yeltsin’s rise to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s owed much to Ronald Reagan’s heresthetical campaign and his subsequent implementation of the policies that had dominated his campaign. Faced with dire economic conditions and a new arms race, Mikhail Gorbachev opened the door for radical change in Soviet politics. With the introduction particularly of his perestroika campaign, Gorbachev inadvertently planted the seeds of his own and the Soviet Union’s eventual political demise.

Yeltsin’s campaign for reform, like Reagan’s before it, began unpromisingly. Like Reagan, Yeltsin initially failed to appreciate the importance of special privileges in any system whose leadership depends on a small coalition. His first effort to achieve national prominence was grounded in a campaign against the very special benefits that the Communist Party leadership doled out to party officials. Such a campaign could not succeed as long as the party’s faithful—and the nomenklatura beneficiaries in particular—retained the power to choose leaders.

After Yeltsin was banished from even his candidate membership in the Politburo, few thought he had any further future in Soviet politics. But Yeltsin gradually came to see how he could exploit the slowness of Gorbachev’s progress toward rebuilding the Soviet economy, and the Russian economy in particular. Through a series of artful maneuvers, he turned Gorbachev’s own policies and political predilections against him. Yeltsin systematically weakened Gorbachev’s coalition, gradually gaining the support of the Russian nomenklatura and a broad segment of the intelligentsia. He did so by arguing that the rights of Russian citizens should be guaranteed just as firmly as the rights of other citizens of the Soviet Union. In partic-
ular, he pressed for Russia’s freedom to determine its own economic future, thereby ensuring that the Russian nomenklatura would be no worse off—and likely would be better off—under an autonomous Russian Republic than they were under Gorbachev’s Soviet Union. He came to appreciate the need to alter the selection process, and maneuvered to promote broad-based real elections that would establish the legitimacy of his pro-Russian stance. To win high office, Yeltsin needed to transform the coalition and selectorate structure into one reliant on a large coalition, drawn from a large selectorate. He succeeded, in the process unraveling the Soviet Union and ensuring the end of the Cold War.

Ronald Reagan certainly set out to re-establish American dominance over the Soviet Union. He hoped that his strategy would lead not only to American dominance but to an end to the Soviet system. But it is unlikely that even he was so optimistic as to have believed that such a result could be achieved during his presidency and soon thereafter. Indeed, if he had not had to face pressure from Boris Yeltsin on Russian autonomy, or from the Baltic Republics on their sovereignty, Mikhail Gorbachev would probably not have allowed his client states to leave the Eastern bloc, or tolerated the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, or, ultimately, surrendered to the conditions that brought an end to the Soviet Union itself.

Gorbachev’s efforts to hold the Union and its allied states together were hampered by Yeltsin’s pressure, especially following the Baltic republics’ declarations of sovereign rights under the Soviet constitution. The rise of nationalist movements within the federal Soviet structure pushed Gorbachev to allow competitive legislative elections and was central to Yeltsin’s success. Thus, in his efforts to salvage support within his own coalition, Mikhail Gorbachev found himself cornered by the superior strategic maneuvering of his seemingly extreme-reformist rival, Boris Yeltsin. To be sure, Gorbachev made mistakes that created opportunities for Yeltsin, but just as Reagan showed great heresthetical skill in exploiting Carter’s errors, Yeltsin too manifested enormous heresthetical ability—and institutional savvy—in forcing Gorbachev into errors and then turning Gorbachev’s mistakes to his own advantage. Indeed, Yeltsin, perhaps even more than Reagan, proved himself master of his own destiny.

Gorbachev was dealt a tough hand, a hand made tougher by Reagan’s policies, but without Yeltsin’s prodding, probably Gorbachev’s circumstances in the Soviet context would not have been as dire politi-
cally as Carter’s were in the United States. After all, small coalition leaders, such as Gorbachev, are generally much better at surviving policy failures than are large-coalition, democratic leaders. Their political survival depends on delivering private benefits, not effective public policy, to their support coalition and Gorbachev steadfastly protected those private benefits. Carter’s bad luck, as we noted earlier, increased the odds that he would lose in 1980. Reagan’s great skill was in putting together a policy-based coalition that neither his Republican rivals nor the incumbent president could pull apart without jeopardizing their own base of support. Yeltsin did that too, but first he had to change the context of debate so that policy grounded in a large coalition rather than the privileges of a select few would matter for his success. He, more than Gorbachev’s errors, must be credited for seeing how to gain mastery over a situation that was structurally biased against his success.

While Yeltsin may have been an even more skilled heresthetician than Reagan, it is hard not to acknowledge that, unlike Ronald Reagan, Boris Yeltsin lacked a clear vision of what he wanted to do once he achieved high office. His heresthetic campaign for Russian autonomy set Russia on a path to freedom and democracy, but his failure to incorporate those changes into law has opened the door to deviations from this path. Still, whatever Yeltsin’s weaknesses once in power, his creation of the opportunity for Russians and, indeed, all former Soviet citizens to define their own destiny, cannot be overstated. Nor can his role in ending the Cold War, even if, unlike Reagan, this was never his intention. We hope that this study will help future scholars explore this fact, which has, until now, largely been overlooked.

Lessons about Rhetorical Campaigns

All campaigns are rhetorical. A few are more than that. The puzzle of purely rhetorical campaigns is why anyone is persuaded to change allegiance from one candidate to another. After all, voters know that each candidate, to recall the words of Quintus Tullius, must “change his air and his statements in accordance with the opinions of the people he meets.” In short, the successful rhetorical campaigner must lie. But knowing that they are being lied to, why would voters be persuaded by a candidate’s promises? William Riker suggested the dominance and dispersion principles as a partial answer to this question.

Voters are not so much fooled into believing that the successful can-
Candidate will deliver on his or her promises as they are made to fear the awful things that one candidate persuades them might occur, if they mistakenly elect his or her opponent. Turning once again to Quintus Tullius, the successful rhetor must “Slander . . . opponents as often as possible, reckon their crimes, their sexual depravity, or their attempts to bribe other candidates—all according to the character of the individual opponent.”

Negative campaigning is not some quirk of modern politics; nor is it a character flaw of this or that candidate. Rather, it derives its power from the fact that it will always be easier to persuade voters to fear an opponent’s flaws, real or imagined, than to convince them of one’s own merits. Negative campaigning should be understood as a rational strategy, a way to influence voters in one’s own favor. Cicero learned this from his brother. Thomas Jefferson used it to impede the prospects of Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and even—albeit cautiously—George Washington. Nor were the other founding fathers any more reluctant to enlist slanderous tales to advance their own prospects, at the expense of their political foes. Their use of negative campaigning is well-documented. And in this they were no different from many modern American or other politicians, who seek office at almost any cost to their own dignity or that of their political foes. We saw numerous examples of negative campaigning and mud-slinging in our examination of the 1968, 1976, and 1980 presidential campaigns in the United States and in the political struggles between Gorbachev, Ligachev, and Yeltsin in the Soviet Union and in the nascent Russian Republic.

But negative campaigning alone is rarely sufficient to win election. Candidates do not compete only by slinging dirt at each other. The campaigner’s quiver contains arrows honed on slander and scandal, but these are not the only weapons with which to wound one’s rivals. A rhetorical campaign also highlights a candidate’s claim that they, and not their opponent, are best able to solve the problems of the day. The problems confronting voters change from election to election, of course; but negative campaigning and claims of competence are constants of the rhetorical landscape. Every now and again, however, candidates emerge who have honed a different type of strategy for seeking office. These are the heresthetical candidates. While they rely on rhetoric to persuade voters that their message is right, their message is fundamentally different from that of most campaigns. Theirs are messages that redefine political debate and that assemble previously seemingly impossible coalitions.
Lessons about Heresthetical Campaigns

The heresthete goes much further than the rhetor in establishing why voters should support his or her campaign. The heresthetical campaigner argues that politicians are debating the wrong issues; that the received wisdom about which problems need to be solved is misplaced. In doing so, they box their opponents into a corner from which it is difficult for them to escape. The opponent cannot embrace the heresthete’s position without giving up core members of their coalition; nor can they deny the validity of the heresthetical agenda without losing core supporters. Indeed, the heresthetical campaigner’s agenda is likely to be misunderstood by rivals (and voters) at the outset because it is founded on a completely novel set of assumptions about the political environment. The heresthetical campaign shifts debate to a new, previously undefined locus, where issues are linked together in novel ways and where formerly centrist, mainstream politicians seem askew, quaintly clinging to old ideas even after the new center has emerged.

Abraham Lincoln famously cornered Stephen Douglas with such a maneuver during their senate race. By recasting the slavery debate in the Illinois election to focus on the American Constitution’s relevance to the territories—and, in particular, on the applicability of the Dred Scott decision—Lincoln ensured that Douglas would either have to give up his antislavery backers in Illinois, costing him the senate seat and thereby diminishing his future presidential prospects, or retain them at the expense of his appeal among Southern Democrats, without whom he would have little chance to win the presidency. Douglas chose the latter, gaining the senate seat but sinking his presidential prospects. Lincoln’s maneuver succeeded in splitting the Democrats in 1860, thereby improving his own chances of becoming president. While both Lincoln and Douglas performed abysmally in the southern states during the 1860 election (garnering 3 and 7 percent of the popular vote, respectively), the outcome was much costlier to Douglas’s electoral prospects than to Lincoln’s.

As we have seen, Ronald Reagan and Boris Yeltsin both learned the pitfalls of rhetorical campaigning early in their quest for office. Each emerged as a heresthete capable of recasting national debate to their advantage, redefining the political mainstream to exclude their key opponents while placing themselves in the newly defined core.

Reagan entered the post-1976 electoral scene arguing, in essence, that the debate over how best to coexist with the Soviet Union was the
wrong debate, on the wrong problem. He contended that the issue was not how to coexist, but rather how to defeat the Soviets peacefully, bringing an end to the Cold War and the global Communist threat. He also argued that the Republican Party had defined itself in a way that had alienated a vast array of potential allies. As early as January 15, 1977, before Jimmy Carter was inaugurated and long before he found himself hemmed in by double-digit unemployment, double-digit inflation, and the Iran hostage crisis, Reagan was arguing to his party that they needed to expand their view of conservatism to embrace socially conservative blue-collar workers. In doing so, he laid the foundation for a newly constructed Republican coalition that could draw support from Catholic blue-collar workers who had traditionally voted Democratically; from evangelical Christians who were little understood as an electoral bloc at the time, and who had no clear political home at all; and from national-security oriented Democrats like those in the Scoop Jackson wing of that party. To a significant degree, the broadened, conservative, “values”-oriented constituency that Reagan heretically created, remains central to the Republican Party’s electoral prospects even now, decades later.

Boris Yeltsin, too, used heretical maneuvers to recast himself and his country in a way that advantaged him over his rivals, including both nearly forgotten figures such as Yegor Ligachev and the seemingly unchallengeable Mikhail Gorbachev. In some ways, as we have argued, Yeltsin’s path was an even more difficult and more unlikely one than Reagan’s. The platform on which Yeltsin settled required a fundamental redefinition of Soviet politics that would relegate the seemingly all-powerful central Soviet institutions virtually powerless in the face of a newly invented Russian Federation. Yeltsin needed first to convince a substantial portion of Russia’s polity to abandon Gorbachev and the idea of Soviet rule, instead casting their political futures with an emerging Russian Republic. And he needed to attract support from key members of Gorbachev’s small winning coalition despite his notoriety for waging an antiprivileges campaign that had challenged the personal interests of the very individuals whose support he needed. Perhaps even more dramatically, he needed to redefine the institutions of Soviet or at least Russian politics so that office-holding involved competition for support from a large electoral coalition, rather than a small, elite group of Communist Party members.

Both Reagan and Yeltsin found paths back from the wilderness of political defeat to the center of power. It is tempting to see their maneu-
vers as idiosyncratic manifestations of political genius, or as the confluence of circumstances that through serendipity brought them to power. We would not deny the value of good fortune, nor have we challenged the significance of personal genius. But neither do we endorse a “Great Man” theory of politics which suggests that history is governed by the decisions of unusual, great figures. Neither Ronald Reagan nor Boris Yeltsin is best understood in that light. Yeltsin, in particular, made decisions with momentous consequences for the end of the Soviet Union, as we have noted; but there is scant evidence to support the idea that this was his intention.

We have tried to show that neither Reagan nor Yeltsin was innately a heresthete (nor, for that matter, was Lincoln or any of the other successful examples). Each pursued high office for a long time without evident success. In those efforts, each acted as a rhetor who tried to persuade prospective constituents that he could most effectively advance their interests. This early, more populist period in their careers offered few hints of the ways in which they eventually would redefine political debate, box in their opponents, and secure a winning coalition forged out of a complex web of voters or selectors who only a short time earlier could not imagine themselves voting for Reagan or Yeltsin. Each saw how to reframe policy debate by linking issues in ways not previously done. Each saw how to create the perception among voters that their nation was headed for a political crisis if they did not embrace a new way of looking at old problems—if they did not eschew the received wisdom in favor of a totally new perspective.

Negative campaigning has a rather different meaning for the heresthetical campaigner than it does for the strategic rhetorician. The rhetorical campaigner follows the path exemplified by Cicero’s campaign for Roman consul. The heresthetical campaigner may use slander as a rhetorical device, but is less reliant on it than the rhetor. The heresthete instead suggests that he or she sees the real problem, while the opponent does not. One might almost portray this as a positive method of negative campaigning. There is no need to slur the opponent’s character or good intentions, nor even the opponent’s competence to manage affairs as conventionally understood. Rather, the heresthete highlights the inadequacy of the rival’s understanding of what the real problems are. We often observe successful heresthetical maneuvering in apparent crises because the heresthete is well-situated to accuse the rival or rivals of precipitating the crisis through their misunderstand-
ing; or because the heresthete can actually foment a crisis (as Boris Yeltsin did) for political gain.

While Jimmy Carter argued that hard economic times required belt-tightening and changed expectations, Ronald Reagan argued that America’s economic problems were the product of government policies rather than external forces that could only be overcome by personal sacrifice. While Jimmy Carter followed in the footsteps of Nixon and Ford by endorsing and encouraging détente with the Soviet Union, Reagan argued against détente. He went on to link economic policy and defense policy in a new way by contending that the American people could enjoy both economic prosperity and peace by increased spending on defense and by a reduced income tax.

While every seeker of the presidency since the end of World War II had debated how best to live with the Soviet threat (encirclement, mutually assured destruction, flexible response, détente, etc.), Reagan was the only major party candidate for president who argued that the Soviet threat could be defeated, rather than simply managed. While candidates debated how to balance the budget through spending cuts and changes in spending priorities, Reagan argued for massive spending that would supposedly produce what later came to be called a “peace dividend,” and which would trickle down to benefit everyone in society. It did not matter for his electoral prospects whether hindsight would show him to be right. What mattered was that he could persuade voters to dismiss his rivals as archaic thinkers who did not understand the real problems of the day. That his success made it possible to spend the Soviet government into a rapid collapse was a bonus that few voters foresaw at the polls.

Boris Yeltsin likewise reframed political debate. While Gorbachev regarded the centrality of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union’s core institutions of government as beyond dispute, Yeltsin argued that however effective these central organs of power might be for the national elite, they were unfair and ineffective from the perspective of Russians or Lithuanians or Georgians. In the process he showed his political opponents as incapable of unleashing the economic potential of their own citizens. He challenged the very idea that the central government was truly committed to socialist principles. In the process, he drove Russian bureaucrats, intellectuals, and—eventually—ordinary citizens and voters to look to their own government as the cause of their problems, rather than to the capitalist West, as they had always
been taught to do. That these hardships were exacerbated for many Russians in the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union does not diminish the strategic insight of Yeltsin’s heresthetical moves. He succeeded in redefining debate, fostering his own rise to power while rendering Gorbachev, the architect of glasnost and perestroika, politically irrelevant.

How Did Our Hypotheses Fare?

We began by sketching a theory of how heresthetical maneuvers and institutional constraints shape the strategy of campaigning. Our work implied several hypotheses, including the influence of the dominance and dispersion principles, the purpose of negative campaigning, the role of coalition size, and the implications of drawing a winning coalition from a larger or smaller pool of selectors. We have seen that the campaigns of Boris Yeltsin and Ronald Reagan support the ideas set out in our opening chapter.

We reported evidence of off-the-equilibrium-path thinking, as in Reagan’s decision not to raise his ideas about a strategic defense initiative during the 1980 campaign. He suppressed his opinions not because he had doubts about their merits, but because he believed that expressing them would diminish, rather than expand, his coalition of support. Thus, while he may have told the truth to voters as he saw it, he did not tell the whole truth. He left out those elements of his heresthetical outlook that were likely to hinder his rhetorical mission to persuade voters to support him.

We have also seen that negative campaigning was used strategically to raise doubts about rivals and, thereby to invoke caution on the part of voters who were more concerned to avoid later regrets than to seek current gains. This was, of course, a hallmark of the anti-Goldwater campaign in 1964 and of Rockefeller’s efforts in 1968. We have seen that messages, like Nixon’s law and order message in 1968, were clung to as long as they resonated with relevant voters, whether they were the barons of the Republican Party or the broader base of Southern voters. And we have also seen how messages, like Romney’s embrace of a Vietnam policy not very different from Lyndon Johnson’s, were abandoned when they seemed no longer capable of attracting further supporters to a prospective electoral coalition.
We saw the elements of the dominance and dispersion principles, of heresthetic and rhetoric, of coalition size and off-the-equilibrium path calculations not only in the American context, where politicians were experienced with broad, open, public campaigning, but also in the Soviet context. Yeltsin learned the pitfalls of his message against special privileges when he needed to attract support from a small coalition of party apparatchiks whose very welfare was defined by their access to those privileges. He muted his opinions about privileges until the political climate was more hospitable—a change that came significantly through his own efforts to expand the voting coalition from a small elite group dependent on private rewards, to a broad-based electorate facing competing candidates in an American-style race for office. We also saw how Gorbachev backed away from the logical implications of his own perestroika campaign, as he came to recognize how its implementation would jeopardize his appeal to moderate conservatives in the Communist Party, even as Yeltsin was stripping him of backers by pushing for faster economic reform.

As we urged at the beginning, so we urge now that the reader recognize that we do not claim to have offered definitive proof that the strategic thinking we have highlighted is central to all campaigns. Nor do we claim to have proven that heresthetic maneuvers inevitably improve a candidate’s prospects of political success. Rather, we have expanded the set of cases that reinforce the messages we laid out in our first chapter. And we have seen, by probing the archival records as well as secondary sources, that the candidates in question seem to have consciously and intentionally chosen courses of action that match the general principles we have presented.

Heresthetic maneuvering is difficult, but it appears capable of improving a candidate’s prospects, offering a way to understand how apparent outlier candidates can nonetheless triumph over rivals in the political center. Finally, we have seen that in some cases radical, extraordinary changes in foreign policy can result from campaigns that were run largely on domestic issues. Boris Yeltsin’s focus on internal Soviet and Russian questions nonetheless catalyzed the end of the Cold War. Domestic political maneuvering, more than grand strategy, contributed to the most important international political change of the latter half of the twentieth century—and, arguably, of modern history.

The more campaigns—both successful and unsuccessful—that we probe for insight into the forces governing strategic campaigning, the
more we will learn to identify and gain confidence in general principles of electoral strategy, and the less likely we will be to rely on anecdote or idiosyncratic accounts. We close with the recognition that even after all his machinations, Quintus Tullius ultimately offers his brother Cicero—and all of us—a surprisingly hopeful instruction that we would do well to remember and apply to politics in the future: “When seeking a public position you must work in two directions: one is to ensure the support of your friends, the other is public benevolence.”