

Brief Chapter Summaries

Group 1: Innovators

Innovators are risk takers, plain and simple. There is no data, no precedent, and no safety net. Every decision is the first decision. In each case, we see presidents forging a new path and creating an identity where nothing existed before...and trying to be taken seriously by those inside and outside their sphere of influence.

President	Quick Summary	Modern Angle
George Washington	A unified currency was one of the most important ways the states became united. Washington helped people trust the government enough to trust its money.	Trust is the real problem with Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, not bubbles and speculation.
John Adams	Along with his wife Abigail, Adams was the conscience of the new United States, shining a spotlight on the gap between its ideals and its reality.	We can understand modern movements and people (e.g. Black Lives Matter, Greta Thunberg) in the same way – they’re simply asking us to live up to the promises the United States makes in its marketing material.
Thomas Jefferson	Everything about the Louisiana Purchase was a gamble – including exploring it. That’s why Jefferson sent <i>multiple</i> expeditions, not just Lewis and Clark’s.	We’re hard on people and companies who fail, and only tend to remember those that succeed. We should celebrate failures like Google Glass (or whatever the latest failure is). Without failure, there is no success.
James Madison	Each participant in the War of 1812 – the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and the Native Nations –created their own narrative about the war, and its results.	People often say we’re not even agreeing on the facts, but most often, it’s the stories we tell ourselves that guide actions – different stories with different sets of facts can all be true.
James Monroe	Monroe and Hamilton almost dueled! With pistols! The episode gives us a window into the changing culture of “honor” in the early United States, and the role the church and women had in extinguishing dueling culture. Having other nations take you seriously is critical.	Cancel culture is the modern equivalent of dueling culture – with many of the same rules, and sadly, the same risks. They both answer the same need: How do we resolve a conflict when it’s our reputation on the line?

Group 2: Early Adopters

Early adopters are beginning to get traction for their ideas and are the first generation to rely on some basic precedents. That removes some of the burden of everything being new. However, here's where they need to put up or shut up. Many new ideas and products fail to take advantage of the energy and grow beyond their original idea.

President	Quick Summary	Modern Angle
John Quincy Adams	He is the author of the Monroe Doctrine – a bold statement of purpose to the rest of the world (especially Europe) when few there believed America had standing to make any demands.	Jeff Bezos did something similar with the creation of Amazon – the big players (Walmart, etc.) didn't take him seriously. (Hint: They should have.)
Andrew Jackson	Contrary to popular belief, Jackson's most effective Indian Removal policy was persuasion – specifically, bad faith negotiation.	We see these same techniques at play in modern negotiations – basically, anywhere a power imbalance exists.
Martin Van Buren	Van Buren believed in the value of strong political parties to drive participation at all levels of government – competition versus cooperation. It's why we have a two-party system.	The same tension was at play with industry competition (Blu Ray versus HD-DVD) versus cooperation (Bluetooth as a single industry standard). Both approaches can work.
William Harrison	Harrison's was the first campaign to take advantage of an insult and turn it back on its opponents by "owning" it instead of trying to refute it.	Owning an insult robs it of its power. Additionally, the more an opponent continues to use it, the more it helps rather than hurts. Modern examples include the "Like A Girl" advertising campaign.
John Tyler	Tyler set the tone for strong leadership transitions by being the first person to assume the office after a predecessor died.	What if the CEO died and stock price improved 9%? Leaders have become increasingly important in our business lives. That's both good and bad.
James Polk	Polk goaded Mexico into war and bluffed Britain out of a war to increase the territory of the United States.	This is the same Merger and Acquisition strategy used by businesses ever since to grow quickly when the opportunities arise – ethics be damned. It's easier to ask for forgiveness than negotiate for permission.

Group 3: Early Majority

The Early Majority presided over a period of rapid growth and expansion. Like most new innovations, any problems you could sweep under the rug in the early days burst into full view...and can even threaten to derail the entire thing.

President	Quick Summary	Modern Angle
Zachary Taylor	Taylor's presidency saw the rise of groups (such as the Mormons) attempting to carve out their own semi-autonomous zone.	The connection with "semi-autonomous" zones now is obvious. This is different than the difference between state and federal power; this is based only on ideology, not geography.

Millard Fillmore	The United States struggled to “keep up” with European powers on the global stage. In its rush to keep up, it forced the Japanese to open for trade. The Japanese...would hold a grudge.	The United States remains an economic (rather than territorial) imperial power. China is following that example today.
Franklin Pierce	This is the point where Cuba nearly became a state in the power play between North and South for control of the Senate.	We still face “control of Senate” issues today – that’s the main driver of statehood for the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and other remaining territories and protectorates. It didn’t work out so well before; we should be careful now.
James Buchanan	Bleeding Kansas was the last best chance to prevent the Civil War. It was a failure of imagination...and of audience segmentation.	This chapter is an instruction manual for each current political party on how to reach out to members of the other side and crush their opposition for a generation. Will they do it?
Abraham Lincoln	Lincoln used humor to diffuse some of the tensest situations. The country deeply needed it, and it’s one of the most underreported aspects of his personality.	Humor is <i>still</i> underused by politicians. If Lincoln could do it at the height of the Civil War, why can’t we?
Andrew Johnson	Johnson had a great chance – as a Southerner who supported the Union, he could have been a great bridge, but he messed it up spectacularly.	Johnson is a case study in how to contain the impact of a bad leader – in politics or in business: Publicly make the case, alter the rules, implement policy around them.
Ulysses Grant	Grant gives us a leadership lesson in the “Quiet Ego” – how to be strong yet understanding and yielding.	Humility remains underappreciated in leadership because we struggle with the supposed association with “weakness” – humility doesn’t mean that at all.
Rutherford Hayes	This is the carpetbagger era, where the struggle for power meant that people were bending the legislative apparatus to lock in control of resources.	Rent seeking (regulatory capture) continues to this day, making it difficult for individuals to ply their trade. Does a hairdresser really need a “license” for “safety”?
James Garfield	It took <i>this long</i> to unwind the Jacksonian Spoils System of patronage appointments. It’s a mark of a turning point in the American innovation.	We continue to struggle understanding the right balance between being “too close” to an industry to regulate it...or “too far” to understand it.
Chester Arthur	Arthur was the first time we see a president’s health become a major issue – should we have known that he was dying?	Health remains an issue. How much should we know about a leader’s health? We never really resolved this question.
Grover Cleveland	This is about the Pullman Strike and the nature of the company town and giving business control over people’s lives.	Data is giving large companies similar power today...and we’re likely to see the same kind of pushback.

Group 4: Late Majority

During the Late Majority, businesses (and nations) can do whatever they set their mind to. If they made it through the challenges of rapid growth, the only limit is imagination. This is the United States most people think of when they think of the good old days.

Benjamin Harrison	The Sherman Antitrust Act is the turning point because it asserted government balance with (and the limits of) American commerce.	Success is still a paradox in American life – we respect it and want it...until we see it, and then we want to bring them down a peg.
William McKinley	This is the first time we talk about the media and its role in shaping opinion – we learn that to think of journalism as “neutral” is incorrect.	We seem to be returning to an era of partisan media. We lived through it before, but it was ugly.
Theodore Roosevelt	Roosevelt realized (through personal experience) that the practices of the time were unsustainable and forced the issue to protect and manage natural resources.	Investing in sustainability was something we were thinking about long before it became fashionable. It requires a mix of mandates and incentives.
William Taft	The 16 th Amendment made the biggest change in history on the expectations people have of government. New taxes gave the government much more money to work with.	This is the classic debate of the role of government in American life. Right now, the government is about 20% of the economy. Should it be more? Or less? Are we spending on the correct priorities?
Woodrow Wilson	Wilson attempted to control information flow about the 1918 pandemic because of the war mobilization efforts. Even with a limited media environment and strict controls, he failed.	The similarities to the COVID-19 pandemic are profound – not the disease itself, but the communication surrounding it.
Warren Harding	Harding was the first president of an era of rapid change driven by industrial revolution and World War I. This was a major turning point of investing in roads versus trains.	We struggle with 100-year infrastructure investments today. Is it a return to trains? Hyperloops? Digital? Healthcare? Childcare? Something else?
Calvin Coolidge	Coolidge (with Bruce Barton) invented much of modern political campaigning and essentially the Republican playbook.	They’re still using it 100 years later. Does it still work? There are signs the edifice is cracking.
Herbert Hoover	The most surprising president – an engineer who would have been among the greatest had he been elected eight years earlier.	We could use more engineers and scientists in politics today, especially given the increasing technological complexity of our world.
Franklin Roosevelt	The American people absolutely knew that FDR was disabled, and they elected him anyway.	People still value individual accomplishment over group identification. Today’s identity politics movement could learn something from one of its heroes.
Harry Truman	Truman came from behind to beat Thomas Dewey in the 1948 campaign with an “honest” approach in sharp contrast to a “platitudes” approach.	Honesty and directness can work, but there’s a catch: It can’t be just the other side that needs to accept the honesty.
Dwight Eisenhower	The “U-2 incident” is a way to explore the acceleration of decision making in a complex situation.	We still struggle with having all the information we want to make decisions, even in an era of “Big Data” – data doesn’t solve the problems.
John Kennedy	Health issues resurface here in a big way, but this time, the debate is more about drug policy than healthcare.	The war on drugs is doomed to fail, and frankly, it has. We’re likely very close to complete decriminalization.
Lyndon Johnson	The War on Poverty was supremely effective...when you look at the data.	Why is it not remembered that way? It’s because we’ve changed the yardsticks on poverty. Is that good? Or bad? Neither?

Richard Nixon	When you choose to look at the data rather than Nixon’s personal failures, you see a <i>lessening</i> of the true impact of the role of the president.	When the leader has less of an impact, it’s a good sign that the “innovation” has passed its peak. It’s one of the best ways we know that the United States stagnated.
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Group 5: Laggards

Laggards still command respect in the market, but they’re not unbeatable. Usually, a high-profile loss is the turning point. In the USA’s case, that was the resignation of Nixon.

Gerald Ford	Ford’s major actions were the pardon of Nixon as well as the pardon of “Draft Dodgers” – this is all about the attempt to heal.	We still struggle with apologies in general, but without them, we can’t move on – making them <i>and</i> accepting them.
Jimmy Carter	Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech did not persuade anyone who didn’t already agree with him. That was the true failure, not the message itself.	Climate change advocates struggle with this same problem. They’re preaching to the choir and that’s why they tend to fail.
Ronald Reagan	Reagan meant lots of things to lots of people. He was supremely effective at shifting what people thought of him.	Politicians are too quick to “brand” themselves with a singular focus. Reagan was an example of a different path.
George H.W. Bush	Opinion polling is a mess. We show how the polls don’t really explain why Bush lost – but a disruptor does (Perot).	Behaviors are superior to opinions in understanding what people are <i>really</i> thinking.
Bill Clinton	Clinton’s presidency marks a sharp change in the opinions about sex in general, and homosexuality specifically.	The current discussions of gender could not have happened without the Clinton experience.
George W. Bush	Bush’s lies (and yes, they were lies) about WMDs in Iraq was a case study in the different types of deception.	Some deception strategies are more effective than others – partial truths often “work” best.

Group 6: Disruptors

Not really part of Roger’s framework, it’s what happens next. You can either stick with the past or jump to a new risky innovation curve. Sticking with the past is a slow death. Jumping can be a success...or a fast death. It’s best to make multiple bets, much like Jefferson did with his exploration expeditions into the Louisiana Purchase.

Barack Obama	This isn’t “hope and change” – this is a much more important disruption in armed conflict and the psychology of why.	We’re seeing other countries begin to use robots and cyber warfare to powerful effect.
Donald Trump	This chapter isn’t about “the Trump brand” – it’s a much more important disruption in how audiences are persuaded to vote.	Focusing on “voting access” is a bit of a red herring. Digital persuasion is more important to understanding shifting American elections.

Epilogue

Joseph Biden	There are two major strategies you can try when faced with disruption: Kodak tried to remain the same, IBM tried to change. Kodak died a slow death, while IBM rebounded.	Biden can be successful in his efforts, but it's risky and it takes strong, empathetic leadership...and multiple bets.
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