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### THE ROLE OF ETHICS AND PRUDENCE IN POLITICS

A recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, <sup>which</sup> ~~is~~ the Wall Street Journal of colleges, featured on the front page a story about the mutual recriminations two presidential candidates are making of each other and their respective alma maters, Yale and Harvard. One says Yale is elitist, the other says Harvard is radical. The author of the story concludes ~~by saying~~ that candidates who intend to run for office should pick non-elitist institutions like the University of Minnesota to avoid <sup>or minimize</sup> such charges. Is this an indication of growing anti-intellectualism in American politics where the best educational institutions in America are considered threats to the body politic?? Are we seeing the ultimate development of Aristotle's description of politicians in a democracy when he says: "at least <sup>businessmen</sup> ~~tradesmen~~ know their trades but politicians know nothing unless it is the ignoble art of appealing to the "great beast". The "great beast" being public opinion. Lets look at the

implications of this division between the university and American political life. *And how it has evolved.*

Change in American Constitutionalism

*Historically,*

*where masses of people become dominating*

The American political and constitutional system has moved strongly away from the intentions of the Founding Fathers. *From a republican form of government to a direct democracy. it has evolved into* The Founding Fathers believed strongly in a government for the people but less strongly in a government by the people. They feared the emotions of the masses and sought to screen out emotion and passion in various ways, including restricted suffrage, checks and balances, and indirect election. They would agree with Plato that an elite should govern but an elite not of wealth and power but of wisdom and virtue.

When Thomas Jefferson supported the establishment of a general system of common schools to upgrade the ability of Americans to govern themselves he assumed, as most of his contemporaries did, that schools would develop character, moral virtue, and principal. *The aim was a commitment to the public or common good and a disciplining of the personal interest.* It is questionable whether Jefferson's hopes have been realized. *Modern times.* Most schools



no longer seem to believe that moral virtue is one of the most important goals of education. <sup>And in the political arena</sup> Self-interest rather than public good seems to be the prevailing rule in our political life. <sup>has been moved to the back burner</sup> and the concept of the public or common good is ~~seldom~~ discussed in political science classes.

Politicians find it difficult or inadvisable to appeal for sacrifice in the name of the common good. <sup>We not in the current campaign</sup> ~~which of them~~ dare talk of taxes <sup>in order</sup> to provide better education, homes for the homeless and food for the hungry if it means giving something else up?? Public discussion seems relegated to basically safe topics and candidates who come from top educational institutions must be defensive about the proper role of such institutions <sup>in society</sup> to get to the roots of social problems. <sup>They are</sup> because ~~this is termed~~ <sup>described as radical.</sup> "~~radicalism~~". Now the word "radical", of course, derives from the Latin word for "root". <sup>It is a seminal concept that has been corrupted by the politicians.</sup> ~~and, as everybody knows, radicalism is dangerous to the stability of society.~~ Instead of discussing basics in our political forums, <sup>therefore,</sup> we prefer superficialities which are less threatening. <sup>the over cherished prejudices.</sup> Public opinion does not wish to hear discussion of fundamental or root solutions, for these impinge on a mass of myths and prejudices by which social cohesion is maintained.

Both candidates have to be  
message workers promising  
something for nothing... and  
against the common  
loss of almost  
all desired  
interests  
that it  
is possible  
to do  
nothing  
that new  
spending money  
must be  
made

But, this isn't only a concern of modestly educated voters in a democracy. It is shared in a more fundamental way by some of the great classical commentators on society. Plato <sup>for instance, in his Republic</sup> wants rule by the wise because he can avoid political superficiality by not having to appeal to <sup>an electorate</sup> the voters to accept wise social policy.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, the eloquent proponent of democracy and equalitarianism, values social cohesion and stability so much that he believes the absolutely just and wise man is a threat to society and should be set aside from the main stream of political life. He says there is incompatibility between moral virtue and civic virtue (or patriotism). <sup>(He is talking about philosophers and scientists)</sup> He thinks philosophers and scientists <sup>(He is talking about philosophers and scientists)</sup> rock the boat and have to be contained even though they have insights which are valid. But these valid insights are too dangerous to <sup>the</sup> accepted mores of society and how to be ignored.

Even Aristotle says he prefers to have political power in the hands of young men from affluent families who have studied at the feet of philosophers but <sup>who</sup> understand worldly ways and human nature. Such politicians <sup>who</sup> do have moral ideals <sup>but</sup> understand the prejudices

and myths of society and are able to get some of these ideals accepted without creating social instability by offending too many prejudices and exposing too many myths. So, sequester the absolutely wise and just men in academies and let them infuse social ideals as best they can in <sup>their students</sup> ~~young men~~ and let these sell the ideals to the voters in small pieces. The central theme, therefore, of Aristotle's book on Politics is prudence: the need to get as much of one's ideals accepted as the political context permits without destroying them or one's own career. (Aristotle)

Contrast the comments on this subject by two noted statesmen: Lloyd George, British prime minister, who said "there is little glory and still less constructive purpose in being defeated for failure to do the impossible" with that of Woodrow Wilson, possibly our most idealistic president and a former college teacher, who said "there is nothing more honorable than to be driven from power because one was right." Who is more appealing to you? Agreement with Lloyd George might mark you as a political pragmatist. Agreement with Woodrow Wilson might mark you as a "moral idealist." Perhaps we might have some very admirable human beings in Congress if they were all Wilsons. But



not many of them would acquire seniority.

Let me give you an example of a moral idealist caught in the web of pragmatic politics ...

During the Kennedy administration, the President called together a small group of top advisers. Should he support the extension of price supports for cotton? His personal advisers reminded him of the bonanza which price supports give to the biggest and wealthiest cotton farmers. Legislative advisers reminded him that a Presidential veto on an important agricultural bill could mean forfeiting key and critical legislative support on subsequent domestic and international issues of over-riding importance to the nation's security and welfare. The president agreed not to veto the bill, but the moral torment was there. He turned to the wall and mumbled to himself "there is something wrong here. We are giving money to those who don't need it. If I am re-elected in 1964 I am going to turn this government upside down." ...

We see this tension between moral idealism and political realism best exhibited in young people who have not yet been tempered by experience and who

become cynical about politics and the "establishment" when they see injustices or imperfect policies tolerated. Remember that the most frequent and volatile political protestors are university students who may have seen the "truth" in the classroom but fail to find it in the political order. Gene McCarthy's "clean Gene" squads in the 1968 presidential <sup>race</sup> ~~politics~~ or the rioting youths in Korea <sup>who</sup> object to a divided Korea are only two examples. *Not surprising. Quite a common young people.*

What kind of myths, prejudices, and injustices do <sup>young educators seem</sup> ~~they~~ see? One is extreme

patriotism or nationalism (my country right or wrong), <sup>anathema in frequently</sup> ~~which~~ is based on a sense of moral superiority, false interpretation of history, or racism. *Korea & Lyndon*

(Emerson said "Patriotism" is the last refuge of scoundrels; Rousseau says civic virtue or patriotism, no matter how it is encouraged [~~and he suggests some methods~~], is more important to society than the rational insights of philosophers and scientists; Joe McCarthy did Rousseau one better by proclaiming scientists and scholars as subversives; and Barry Goldwater, <sup>as</sup> a presidential candidate, declared that "excesses in the pursuit of patriotism are not an evil.") *gens*

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~~Some~~ of the other closely held beliefs and biases which appear fairly impregnable to rational examination would include <sup>the</sup> an obsessive fear of Communism that pervades so much of our public policy, domestic and foreign. Other sacred cows more or less immune from political discussion (as contrasted with academic discussion) would be nationalism, <sup>the</sup> free market system, federalism, the United States constitution, and, for a long period in our history, racial and sexual inequality.

Thus, the intrusion <sup>of the academics</sup> of pure theory or speculative wisdom into politics is liable to have an unsettling, inflammatory effect. No actual social order is perfect. Speculative inquiries necessarily bring to light the imperfect character of the established order. This is one of the proper functions of an educational institution, but not of American politics. In the political arena <sup>such Socratic questioning</sup> they are liable to raise discontent, fanaticism, and even violence.

Some noted politicians have come out of the classroom into the political arena—Woodrow Wilson, Gene McCarthy, George McGovern, and Hubert Humphrey, among others. If one had to group them, certainly the first three would be



considered <sup>by some as</sup> idealists and might be considered political failures in terms of acceptability of their positions by the electorate today. Specifically, George McGovern raised volatile issues that were acceptable to an elite in the primary, but upsetting to the masses in the general election. Will history render a verdict on McGovern that he was a wise and courageous statesman; or that he was a failed moral idealist whose imprudence destroyed his own effectiveness?

Robert McGovern -- good  
public policy  
reflects wisdom  
or modified  
by Consent!

The moral idealist wants change. Society resists change. Therefore, the requirements of wisdom must be diluted or qualified. Wisdom must be reconciled with consent of the voters and political life requires a fundamental compromise between folly and wisdom. Somehow the well-disposed politician who possesses at least some of the wisdom of the philosopher must find a way to accommodate his volatile and shocking solutions to the myths and injustices which society tolerates as a matter of course, even cherishes as sacred. The "politically good" therefore, as contrasted with the "absolutely good," is that which removes a vast mass of evil but not all of it and without shocking a vast mass of prejudice. This

might be a definition of the good politician.

## Ethics of Office Holding

What about the ethics of office holders? Why is it that so many public officials whom we trust seem to end up with skeletons in their closets? Some of these skeletons, of course, reflect personal dishonesty on the part of officials. Some, however, reflect the inescapable necessity of doing something that appears objectively immoral but subjectively <sup>may not be</sup> ~~the lesser of two evils~~. The same act when committed by an <sup>ordinance</sup> ~~individual~~ might well be characterized as unethical but to a public official might ~~not~~ be <sup>appropriate</sup>.

Most of us would regard lying as unethical. What if a public official does it? Presidents do it all the time. Ronald Reagan is a prime <sup>example</sup> ~~exception~~. Sometimes it may not be wrong. President Eisenhower was an honorable statesman. Yet, he publicly lied about the U-2 affair on the eve of a summit with Russia on reducing the threat of nuclear holocaust. Unethical? <sup>spying</sup> Did he believe that to admit the U-2 <sup>create</sup> ~~make~~ flight would <sup>create</sup> an impossible domestic problem for the Russian premier and the talks would collapse? Does the responsible politician at any level of government have to do some things that objectively speaking may seem unethical

in order to accomplish a greater good and protect ~~this~~ public? Even on lessor matters than survival of humanity? Most elected officials find there is an ethics of action which is more compelling than the urge to balance with precision the ethical niceties involved in pressing public issues. As one scholar-politician has written: there are times when the good of the community demands firmness and decision at the expense of marginal injustice. Those who make justice the sole criterion of the good society may inflict more damage on the common weal than those who are presumed to be calloused or cavalier in their decision-making.

Example: what would you do as a mayor if a councilman with a swing vote on a vital low income housing project is arrested for speeding the day before the supreme voting test comes before the council on the housing proposal? He argues to the Mayor that he was not speeding and wants the ticket quashed. You have never been inclined to kill tickets for anyone. Will you refuse him if you judge the result to be loss of the housing project and continued miserable living for elderly people sleeping in third floor garrets? Does the common good justify accepting this marginal injustice? Some would say,



marginal injustice? Some would say, "yes."

This case illustrates why scarcely any politician who has been in office very long does not have skeletons in his closet. To get things done some risks have to be taken; some flirting with injustice has to be tolerated. But when the political opponent locates the skeleton, neither the conditions under which the skeleton was created nor the deadlines and imponderables on which decisions have to be made are around to contradict the political critic, <sup>who</sup> ~~who~~ can examine the issue without the constraints that faced the original decision-maker.

The politician does not operate in a vacuum, free of constraints and with plenty of leisure to examine the ethical implications such as the classroom prof enjoys. Not only does he face the moral ambiguities present in almost all public decision-making but he faces deadlines constantly and with inadequate information. Speed is the enemy of deliberation but speed or dispatch in decision making is frequently a necessity in maintaining the morale of an organization or city or state. The retrospective judgment made by political opponents later on, however, who are

seeking the position of the incumbent have the advantage of hindsight and are generally free of constraints except, of course, the constraints of ambition.

Every public office holder faces unclear and cloudy moral choices. Should friends be reported if they are mostly good? Is a half-truth a worse enemy of truth than a falsehood. Should a man be condemned if one knows the penalty is not proportionate to the offense. Honesty and dishonesty, virtue and venality are seldom seen at opposite poles. And politicians rarely see their own venality as clearly as it is seen by grand juries or newspaper editors or young people. Honesty and dishonesty are seldom unambiguous, except in the classroom where the uncomfortable and messy circumstances that worry the politician can be disposed of in arriving at unambiguous and self-righteous conclusions.

Absolute justice assumes omniscience and total disinterestedness. However, human beings run government, not angels. Bailey comments that: Men can transcend personal interest sporadically. But the real art of public service calls for harnessing private and personal interest to the public good. A total victory ought not to result for either. This

may be the maximum in an imperfect society that one can hope for.

So much for understanding the dilemmas that face politicians. It is frequently difficult to condemn what appears to be weaseling or dishonesty on their part for one has to understand the conditions under which the decision is made. If Rousseau consigned the philosopher to isolation in society it might be because unlike Aristotle he did not understand that philosophers might develop prudence and use the art of the possible to put their points across. Everyone has to decide for themselves whether candidates for public office are well motivated and are trying to weave their way through the booby traps of prejudice or whether they are consciously trying to aggravate the prejudice to their own advantage. There is a difference! I happen to believe that the principal task of the politician is to educate people out of their prejudice and constantly try to substitute reason for feeling. But the cultural values of a nation have to be high enough and the nation sensitive enough to a concept of "public good" for this to succeed. Demagogues can practice their craft only if they have a vulnerable electorate to listen to them.



The good politician, then, becomes not one who crusades with high ideals and goes down fighting for a lost cause, but one who skillfully maneuvers amidst the myths and prejudices of his constituents and accomplishes partial good, while tolerating marginal or sometimes even substantial injustices about which he can currently do little.

This requires not only a vision of the absolutely just situation but an acute and thorough knowledge of the context within which he must pursue his objectives and <sup>of</sup> the people whom he must <sup>influence</sup> convince. The end product may well be one which is imperfect but possible.

I cannot help but recall the warning of H. G. Wells on his ninetieth birthday when he said: "Society is in a race between education and catastrophe." If this is true, a widening gulf between the philosophers and the mass of the electorate, or between the public and its best educational institutions, is something that both the politicians and the educators have somehow to close up.

For to the degree that the Constitutional <sup>and restraining</sup> constraints <sup>which</sup> the Founding fathers erected to strain out the worst of public passion are eroding, the Universities become more important as a rational element in society. To the extent that this element is exorcised as radical or elitest, society loses the ability to constrain its own passionate nature and the door is opened for demagogues.