

Morality, Politics, and Plunder

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A GOOD MANY YEARS in various phases of politics have led me to conclude that there is no such thing as political morality, if by this is meant some distinctive code of standards against which political decisions and conduct may be consistently measured. There is no such code now, and I don't believe that there ever has been. The concept of special moral rules for politicians, however, is one widely accepted, and provides a convenient excuse in justifying activity which everyone knows is really wrong but which expediency appears to validate.

If there is no separate standard of political morality, then "right" and "wrong" are no different in a political context than they are in any other. The idea of "Well, that's politics for you," is simply a cop-out for discriminating good from bad conduct. However, such a cop-out has grown to be considered normal in and around our various governmental activities, encouraged by the conclusion that good politics must be pragmatic. Viewing politics as "the art of the possible" has led to a departure from principle and sound thinking as well as sound conduct, and, in my opinion, sound politics. Citizens tend to look on prominent governmental and community figures as moral as well as political leaders. When such citizens fail to discriminate between

principle and pragmatism, their leaders tend to do likewise, and the resulting moral confusion feeds on itself as it is reflected back and forth. In the final analysis, what is accepted as a distinctive political morality is merely the total impact of the personal moralities of some, or all, of the very large number of people who affect political decisions as that personal morality adjusts to the parameters of "public service."

Obviously, the specific contributions of some politicians to this perceived "political morality" are more important than others. Outrageous or notorious breaches of generally accepted public standards by a few can brand a particular administration as corrupt regardless of the performance of the balance of its members. Nixon's White House is thought of now almost entirely in terms of Watergate. Actually, the Nixon years' morality was very little different from that of previous administrations, and Watergate, *et al.* was in fact a logical result of the convenience of pretending that there are different moral rules for politicians than there are for everyone else.

If this problem of political morality is to be realistically examined, much less corrected, we have got to get rid of the idea that there was something fundamentally unusual about the 1972 presidential elec-

tion. It was unusual only to the extent of its incredible ineptness. The root moral failure of American politics goes much deeper and cannot be corrected by campaign spending laws and investigations of intelligence agencies. It is my contention that this moral failure derives from the extent to which government has permeated every nook and cranny of our society, and that it cannot be corrected by jiggering around with peripheral symptoms. Nothing short of a fundamental change in the attitudes and functions of governmental institutions will put "political morality" in tune with the traditional moral sentiments of the nation.

Why I believe this to be so derives from an examination of the more or less distinctive forces involved in political decisions and the roles played by one such force in particular. In the final analysis, it is what the individuals who make up those forces express morally by their actions that is viewed as political morality. The forces are not discrete nor mutually exclusive. They represent central tendencies whose boundaries merge into one another and overlap. Individuals frequently play different roles in more than one group at the same time.

The first force is composed of the people at large who other than voting on occasion and reacting to political stimuli, participate no further directly in the process. Their morality is defined entirely by their nonpolitical life and as such is the practicing standard against which political morality should be judged. If they condone hanky-panky on the part of their politicians, it is in the mistaken belief that politics must be "dirty" in order to work. Thus, their moral standards and more particularly their perception of politics can be an important consideration in what politicians can get away with.

The second force is made up of the political amateurs. These are the real substance of political parties and movements. They work in politics from habit and conviction, often mistaken to the extent that their actions do not support their aims;

they expect no tangible reward and generally get none. Their amateur status does not necessarily mean that they are not politically astute or experienced. They are usually directed by professionals who frequently have quite different objectives. The morality of the second force is very similar to that of the first, although to a greater extent they tend to emulate and apologize for what they consider to be the necessity of a distinctive political morality.

These are the people who give credence to the conclusion that "the government should do for the people only those things they can't or won't do for themselves," as pernicious a concept as has ever been popularized. Another cliché of the second force is that "if we don't do it (whatever social program is currently in political vogue) locally (at the town, county, or state level) then the federal government will do it," thereby subscribing to the inevitability of political history and paving the way for the implementation of every crackpot scheme the mind of man can conceive.

The third force consists of those who, although they do not hold office, concentrate great influence and attention on those who do. Their incomes derive to a large extent from business done with, or controlled by, government and are affected substantially by the nature of legislation or regulation. They are businessmen, educators, lawyers, builders, labor leaders, important actors in all the many businesses and professions affected by government decisions. Their financial interests in what government says and does are great enough so that they can afford to concentrate substantial resources on candidates, appointments, legislation, budgets, tax policy, etc. They hire lobbyists, make substantial campaign contributions, and dispense favors to office holders from whom they expect various special considerations.

The third force has a major stake in how much government spends, on what, and with whom. Because the individual member's connections are indirect, they are not usually thought of as part of the political

apparatus but are much more closely identified with their regular vocations, community leadership, philanthropy, and the like. They influence government decisions as individuals as well as through their businesses and a variety of trade and professional associations such as AMA, AFL-CIO, NEA, NAM. Civil servants and professional bureaucrats are members of this group. This is an important and frequently overlooked political force. They rather like it that way.

The fourth force is the office holders, elected and appointed. The composition of this group changes constantly but with startlingly consistent results. Even marked changes in the membership philosophy bring about only minor changes in performance. In the last few years, for instance, the individual members of the Federal Communications Commission have changed from commissioners with a consistently liberal to those with a consistently conservative philosophy. Very little substantive change in Commission performance has accompanied this change in personnel. Office holders are the politicians actually making the decisions of the government. As individuals they come from all of the other political forces but mostly from the third. They reach office generally as persons of high personal integrity, intelligent, sincere, and frequently dedicated. They are also largely inexperienced in the ways of government service. Much attention is paid to them by the third force.

The fifth force is the professional politicians. They make their living directly from politics, may have a small third and/or fourth force interest. They are specialists, seldom hold power themselves, and are more interested in manipulation than in glory. Mayor Daly of Chicago is one of the few such who is well known to the public. Most are all but anonymous even in their own communities. These fellows usually bear the brunt of popular disdain when "politics" is considered a dirty word. Faults in their conduct are more apt to be condemned than similar or worse faults in

other political forces. Professional politicians usually have rather limited ambitions. Very few die rich and, although many manage a comfortable income, theirs is a risky profession. You will find them in positions of party leadership such as members of the National Committee, state chairman, county chairman of urban counties and the like. Despite popular fiction, they have very little responsibility for the state of morality in politics.

These five political forces contribute to the concept of a distinct political morality in various ways and to various degrees. Without letting them off the hook completely, I have not found the root causes of low political morals in the first or second. Their most important contribution, as was mentioned above, is too high a degree of tolerance and perhaps gullibility. Nor do the professional politicians earn a large share of the blame. Theirs is a pragmatic calling, and, for better or worse, they take conditions as they find them and simply take advantage of weaknesses in principle revealed by others. Office holders, the fourth force, have a somewhat different responsibility. They are not part of the civil service pressure group and have no fundamental need to play the bureaucratic game. And yet most of them behave quite differently in their public careers than they did in private life. Office holders, like everyone else, have their own individual moral standards. However, these standards are dramatically affected by the looseness of the moral constraints that they find in their environment as government officials. Circumstances of their position tend to move their actions close to the limits of what they believe they can get away with, primarily in their abuse of power. And the power that they have at their disposal is immense, while the guide posts of principled conduct are very difficult to discern.

In my own community there is a politico-legal flap on now concerning the alleged "sale" of liquor licenses. In all the give and take on the subject no one has bothered to define how liquor licenses could be award-

ed on the merits of the applications. Many government decisions involve just such capricious judgments. Someone is going to get a license; does it go to a friend or to an enemy? Governments spend an immense amount of money and distribute many favors. What are the principles on which the beneficiaries of the spending are selected? It is on just such questions as these that the morality of office holders is constantly tested.

In other ways, the new office holder finds himself in quite a different world than that with which he has been familiar. With few exceptions, he is beholden to someone or some group for his appointment or election. In very few instances has he acquired his position on merit as that word is understood in private life. He wants to keep his job and please those who selected him. In so doing, he finds himself with strange new responsibilities together with both very attractive temptations and unusual and serious threats to his well-being.

The government official by the nature of his position acquires immediate status as an expert, and in an area which he usually knows very little about. The initial press conference or public speech seems to require policy statements about subjects that may be very complicated and require a great deal of study for mastery. The nature of his status inhibits him from telling the truth by saying "I really don't know." He is being paid a fat salary to know or at least sound like he does. He wants the public to feel it is getting its money's worth. He wants to appear the expert and may come to believe he is. He makes commitments which are impracticable and then tries to keep them.

Further, the people with whom a public official deals make him very conscious of his exalted status. He is called by a title if it is at all fitting, Chairman, Congressman, Commissioner, Deputy, Mr. Administrator, his mail is addressed to "Honorable" so and so. He has classy offices that are decorated to his taste, highly paid personal secretaries and assistants. His technical and

administrative staff is sycophantic. He may have a limousine and chauffeur, air flight privileges; he is invited to the White House or Governor's Mansion. It is all heady stuff. Before long he finds it hard to believe that he is not someone who is really pretty special.

It has been said that it is better to govern than be governed, and all the evidence I have seen bears this out. The office holder's new friends are very important people—the heads of the industries with which his agency deals, other officials, well-known public personages, lobbyists with almost unlimited expense accounts. Beer guzzlers become experts on French wine, and the chap who used to have a chile dog for lunch in fifteen minutes, spends two hours with his important visitors at Sans Souci. It is easy to forget that other life and all those ordinary people who are paying the freight. They just drift out of consciousness.

Thus, and for many similar reasons, the private principles, the morality of the office holder come under siege. He gets further and further away from the people and experience which formed his former moral position. His standards change, his requirements change, his attitude changes, almost a new individual is formed. Far from being fanciful this metamorphosis is so common, particularly in Washington, D. C., that it has been recognized as a definite syndrome. The condition is known as "Statesmans' Disease." Statesman's Disease tends to release the office holder from the personal standards he observed in civilian life. As his moral fiber relaxes, he becomes more aware of the apparent lack of constraints placed on his conduct while he is in office. He learns how his peers operate and what appears to be a generally acceptable behavior pattern. He begins to believe that political morals really are different. He thinks that he is expected to predicate his actions on these differences; they are the standards by which his conduct will be judged.

The office holder is caught in a crossfire which puts his own personal principles to

a severe test, but it is not clear to him that they are being tested, the pressure is so gradual. He is in fact expected to observe different standards. Unless his personal life is ordered by strict principles, he will fail the test. And, if he doesn't fail, he won't be one of the boys; he risks unpopularity and political isolation. Once the connection with his own principles is broken, the limits to abuse of power become those imposed by the morality of the office holder's environment. And this is not very high. The ultimate measure is the morality of the country at large. But this does not seem to be the case. The road signs are down, and pragmatism seems to be the order of the day.

In such an environment, the office holder measures the moral requirements of his conduct in marketplace terms. He operates to optimize his satisfaction in the exercise of power at a minimum risk to his well-being. The risk, however, of a particularly satisfying course of action may not be readily apparent at the time a decision is required. This is the more apt to be the case when the moral demands placed on him are themselves elastic and ill defined.

A free lunch is not considered to be a breach of ethics but a vicuna coat is. Free travel for one person may be acceptable conduct but not for another. More confusing is that what is perfectly legitimate lagniappe at one time may be reprehensible at a different date. It is more difficult than you might imagine to differentiate between bugging a national enemy and a political enemy in such an environment. The chances of "getting away with it" become a major determining factor. After all isn't that the basic element of pragmatism; if it works, it must be O.K. Moral indignation aimed at government officials seems to be quite lumpy and between lumps there is a tendency to approach too closely to what George Washington Plunkitt described as the "penal tree" in the orchard of legitimate political fruit.

This fuzziness in the boundaries of propriety leads to excessive zeal in the pursuit

by the office holder of the satisfactions he covets. This may result in a level of political morality which is temporarily unacceptable to the community at large. Unfortunately such reactions are temporary and tend to particularize individuals and circumstances without having any permanent effect on the moral requirements for all. As a result, periods such as the one we have been experiencing after Watergate tend to produce no long run beneficial results.

A level of political morality that is unacceptable tends to be an unstable condition, but adjustment is not immediate. A sort of super-saturated condition may prevail for quite a time, tending to build toward more excess until some particular stimulus, frequently not exceptional in itself, produces a dramatic reaction, and, again temporarily, reestablishes a kind of moral equilibrium between the country as a whole and its political leadership. The reaction may be more harmful than the excess.

One of the interesting and, I believe, unusual characteristics of the Watergate situation is that moral opprobrium has extended beyond the office holders to some clearly in the category of pseudopoliticians, the third force described earlier, those who participate indirectly but importantly in the political process. This could be important if it focuses attention and moral reform on the category that feeds the engine and reaps the bulk of the material rewards of politics. However, even in the short time since President Nixon's resignation, the pressures in these areas are easing. They had no noticeable effect on the participation of the labor unions in the 1974 elections. At best, I am afraid that in the long run the changes in attitude will require only new techniques in circumvention.

Until recently the third force of our political society has gone unrecognized by most observers. Few people have cared who built the roads, airports, and schools; who carried the insurance, wrote the bonds, or sold the property; who litigated the cases, obtained the licenses, argued for the franchises; who supported tariffs, limited entry,

and received subsidies; who did the studies, provided the consultants, performed the research.

When individual office holders took fruit from the penal tree, were embarrassed by cumshaw, or over decorated their office, this third force of politics was rarely touched. They helped select the poor chaps' successors and carried on as usual. Because members of this group are important leaders of the nonpolitical world and, in fact, publicly and socially identified with it, they are among the most important elements in providing the moral examples which set the political standards of the office holders.

For about a century these standards have become progressively more relaxed and pragmatic in more or less direct proportion to the growth in government power and its interference in the working of the economy. There have been a few instances when the moral relationship has become unstable and has adjusted accordingly but, by and large, the limits have placed no real restrictions on the office holders' conduct. This is not the result of conscious effort on the part of the country, and certainly not because of any basic trust in the moral convictions of office holders. It has been the indirect result of the growing acceptance of two convictions:

1. That everyone can improve their standard of living through government at the expense of the real production of everyone else.

2. That the third force can use the coercive power of government to profit without real competition at the expense of the country as a whole and that this process is morally right. Plunder has been made respectable.

The second concept directs the attention of the third force away from the free marketplace and toward the government. Less and less do the desires of the consumer guide business decisions. Markets are generated by office holders; they become the real customers in that they decide what products will be sold and at what price.

The real market forces are progressively distorted, product quality and innovation

suffer; the real consumers become dissatisfied and eventually turn to the government to do something about their dissatisfactions. More and more people join the third force as the government becomes the source of custom to a greater and greater extent.

Whole industries have developed to sell their wares to the government. They not only supply government demands generated by legislation. They participate in the generation itself. According to Taxpayers Lobby, an Indiana organization to fight state tax increases in 1973, "pressure groups are pushing for a billion dollar tax increase—in the name of 'property tax relief.' They call for doubling the sales tax, doubling the income tax, tripling the corporate taxes, imposing the graduated income tax, raising a dozen or more excise taxes, even for putting taxes on taxes!" The culprits, according to Taxpayers Lobby, reads like a *Who's Who* of Indiana business, manufacturers, trade associations, unions, educational institutions. Inasmuch as the money for increased taxes must come from individual citizens, one can only assume that such organizations would rather do business with the state than with the individuals who earn the money.

Or, review the performance of the various participants in President Ford's 1974 economic conferences. Representatives of pressure groups, one after another, were in favor of government spending control as long as it was not exerted on that portion of the government with which they did business. Those sectors should have spending increased "in the public interest."

Beginning with business manipulations of special privilege, franchise rights, entry restrictions, tariffs, continuing with the labor unions, educational institutions, and the professions, the use of government by one group to plunder others has grown to coincide with Bastiat's nightmare in which each must plunder all, no longer to gain advantage but just to stay even. We have reached the point where the main purpose of plunder via the government for most of us is to try to make sure the plunder we re-

ceive as plunderers is no less than that which we must lose as plunderees.

Although we don't often think of our economic society that way, the truth of the observation is so evident that a single illustration of one of the most usual forms of plunder is all that should be needed. The whole idea of federal aid to state and local organizations has got to be one of the silliest notions of all time, and yet it has become an unquestioned institution. Just think—the citizens of all states send taxes to the federal government which, after removing a suitable amount for expenses, returns a substantial portion to the states to be spent in various local programs. The direct loss to the taxpayer is obvious. Losses to the states and their citizens collectively include the handling charge which comes off the top, the decisions as to what the money will be spent for, how much of what was collected from each state will be spent in that state, and with whom it will be spent.

This process illustrates one very important characteristic of legal plunder. It separates the pain of collecting the money from the pleasures distributed by spending it. Congress sets up the con game under the guise of some urgent "public need." One of the many Washington bureaus gets the credit for the generosity of spending the appropriation. Thus, one doesn't think of the Department of Transportation as the vast, expensive economic sinkhole it really is. D.O.T. becomes the bottomless cornucopia one goes to for the financing of every crackbrain uneconomic swindle from moving sidewalks to running railroads nobody wants to ride.

If this were a dictatorship we would be forced to submit to the procedure. But, in fact, this foolishness is the direct result of the decisions of our elected representatives in Congress, and the indirect result of the desires of the third force. Common sense would suggest that such a system would be opposed by all taxpayers and the citizens of many states, at least those that get back less than they pay. Common sense would demand, even if it were deemed proper that

richer states have a moral duty to subsidize poorer states, that this be done by making a direct transfer of what was decided to be the proper amount to the beneficiary state without the use of an expensive and arbitrary middleman. That might be common sense, but it isn't what happens.

Even though the individual taxpayers of the various states know that the sum of the parts rarely exceeds the whole, that this procedure is a con game with all odds in favor of the house, that under the most optimistic circumstances only a few states can benefit at the expense of the others and then only in an aggregate sense, they not only don't oppose this ridiculous procedure, they support it in the hope that somehow they will receive the benefit of more plunder than they give up. Not only that, they encourage and exhort their various office holders to get to the trough and "be sure that we get our share," no matter what the cost in decency, humiliation, and prestige surrendered to those who decide the distribution. And, all hands consider that this is pragmatic politics as well as good business.

There is much wrong with the concept of federal aid both in principle and in particular. But even if there weren't the very nature of these transactions is absurd. Yet it is accepted by almost everyone as being proper simply because the concept of plunder is so universally accepted. Don't believe for one minute that office holders are unaware that this is plunder, and that the moral restraints placed on their own political activity are established by people who accept the concept of plunder as the basic rule of the day. How can any group of plunderers pass judgment on the vehicle of their plunder as immoral? Office holders tend to think of it as being rather unfair when such judgments are made.

You will notice that, although the return to taxpayers in terms of value received is not a paying proposition in general, this is not true of those who do business with the federal government. The funds collected in taxes are spent by the agencies in a variety

of ways in which the third force is very interested. This is not the way the taxpayers would have spent their money, it is not even the way in which local governments would have spent the money, but it is a way in which the third force can have much influence. Thus, although the system of federal aid results in each plundering everyone else, the plunder is not equally divided. Some are a good deal more equal than others.

Through the acceptance of such concepts as federal aid, a whole host of plunder-oriented constituencies has grown up. There is indeed a military-industrial complex. There is also a welfare-industrial complex, a housing-industrial complex, an educational-industrial complex, an urban-industrial complex, a health-industrial complex and so on through the whole list, all under the guise of promoting the general welfare and providing public services. This is the source and the problem of political morality. Members of these complexes have a vested interest in plunder. They must enlist the active cooperation of the office holders in order to continue to plunder successfully.

In Conclusion

1. There is no "different" political morality. Right and wrong conduct has the same definition in politics as it has in the rest of our lives. It is, therefore, a mistake to excuse wrong conduct as pragmatic politics. In the proper sense of the word good politics can only result from good principles, and these are no more situational in public than they are in private life.

2. There are five general forces involved in the political process in this country. Three of these, consisting of voters, amateur politicians, professional politicians, are only tangentially involved in the current sorry state of our political conduct. To the extent that they excuse or encourage pragmatic politics and discourage political decisions based on principle they share in the blame for the situation. But these are minor

contributions. The real source of our condition lies with the third and fourth forces.

3. The third force cannot be reformed directly. They are like sheep killing dogs who have tasted blood and find that they like it. The only way to control the collective appetites of those who have a proprietary interest in big government is to reduce progressively the plunder that is available to them from government.

4. The fourth force, the office holders, is the group in which real progress can most effectively be made. In terms of cost effectiveness these people control what is available to the third force, there are relatively few of them, and the targets are easy to identify.

5. Office holders must be selected from among those who have personal principles strong and clear enough to withstand the ravages of Statesman's Disease. They must realize that good politics is *not* the art of the possible. Good politics is the art of maintaining correct and consistent principle which is much more difficult.

6. There clearly can be no consistent morality in our political system so long as that system is based on plunder, as it is now.

7. Sufficiently strong principled people can be selected as office holders only from the ranks of those who are loosely described as conservatives. Not all conservatives qualify, but I know of none who are not conservative who do qualify. Certain liberals have been helpful in identifying individual examples and networks of plunder, but they do not understand that plunder is the linchpin of their own philosophy.

8. The transition from a plunder-oriented political structure to one freedom-oriented, under the best of circumstances, will be slow, and, from a practical point of view, probably should be. Patience, understanding, and the judicious use of resources will be required. You have to be convinced that the game is worth the candle.*

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