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Publication Date
1993

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Second Revision
May, 1993

THE END OF AMERICAN POLITICS?*

Joel H. Silbey

As the United States approaches the twenty-first century, the nation's political discourse is awash in unremitting and despairing assertions of our political inadequacies, incoherence, unresponsiveness, drift, ineffectiveness, deterioration, and, even irreversible, terminal, decline. There is apparently something deeply amiss in the American political system. Hyperbolic accounts abound in daily newspapers of ongoing gridlock, sleaze, corruption, constant scandal, selfishness, popular resentments and frustrated lashing out, all adding up to unprecedented political futility. In addition, there is also a growing popular literature about the failures in our political condition and the discredited nature of our governing culture and institutions. A casual perusal in a book store produces such current titles as WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS; or AMERICA'S HOLLOW GOVERNMENT; or AMERICA: WHAT WENT WRONG? (1)

The authors of these books vigorously contend that our political system, beset by incapacitating stalemate, narrow parochial focus, increasing chaos, and widespread obsolescence,

no longer meets the challenges of a rapidly changing and highly charged arena of demands, interests, and repeated crises. It appears to have become dysfunctional, even pathological, largely inhabited by politicians (a word that has become a curse in many quarters), indifferent to anything but their own survival and prosperity.

Our leaders are at best manipulative and disingenuous, at worst corrupt and dangerous. The rest of us are in despair. Out of such persistent negativism has come in the political arena a decline of authority, a decline of legitimacy, a decline of belief and commitment, with consequent powerful anti-politician and and anti-political currents: Perotism, anti-incumbency and term limitation fervor, an increasing (and despairing) public obsession with inadequate people and decaying, indifferent institutions.

The expression of these concerns is not confined to the popular realm. Scholars such as James McGregor Burns and Walter Dean Burnham, among others, have, over a long period, effectively contributed a great deal of intellectual power to the notion of a major systemic illness besetting the United States--one that they believe is not readily curable. (2) Their analysis is more empirical and sophisticated than are the popular presentations and they offer cogent suggestions as to why our political condition has deteriorated as severely as it has, ranging from

the structural and institutional, to the ideological, sociological and historical. Clarity, coherence and consensus have been lost as our mechanisms of accomodation and change have atrophied, the deterioration in the power of traditional governing ideas is all but total, or we are caught in a post capitalist warp that our political institutions and ideas cannot handle, or the range of interests have grown beyond responsive capacity, or the demands for government goods exceeds our ability to meet them, and so on and on.

On several levels, then, a discourse of systemic political failure abounds, frequently descending into despair and cynicism. Such, however, is not limited to political observers but is clearly reflected in professional measurements of the public mood. Belief in the political system and the reputation of the nation's politicians have hit all time lows in public opinion polls. As a recent AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE report, RENEWING CONGRESS, put it, "a healthy skepticism among citizens toward Congress has degenerated into corrosive cynicism." (3) That attitude goes far beyond Congress in its reach, power and depth of resentment exhibited. And such attitudes are not the temporary expression of disappointment to be expected in the normal toing and froing inherent in divisive policy battles. Rather, the current negativism is a reflection of a long range loss of faith in, and commitment to, political institutions in the United States (and in other democratic cultures as well).

The case seems clear cut. People no longer have confidence in their political leaders, their political institutions, their political process. As Robert Putnam sums up in his recent book, MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK:

> "Ironically, the philosophic ascendency of liberal democracy is accompanied by growing discontent with its practical operations. From Moscow to East St. Louis, from Mexico City to Cairo, despair about public institutions deepens. As American democratic institutions begin their third century, a sense is abroad in the land that our national experiment in self-government is faltering. (4)

A number of different reasons are offered to explain the political fix that the United States is in. Some of these focus on human incompetence and leadership failure, others on the inadequacies of the institutions and processes of politics as they have evolved in the late twentieth century, still others on persistent structural limitations endemic in our system which have at last come home to roost, not only inside the Beltway, but elsewhere in the political nation as well.

One can divide the ideas offered into at least three different categories:

1. INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL, reflecting the popular mood, that is, our personal discontents stem directly from the

selfishness, corruption and/or inadequacy of political leaders with their never-ending electoral fears, short-term and self-perpetuating notions of success, and their consequent refusal to engage in any policy activities, no matter how much in the national interest, which threaten their continuation in office. As an angry correspondent in the WALL STREET JOURNAL put it, cogently and not untypically, "if there is a primary cause for our situation it must lie in the corrupt failure of our political leadership." (5)

Out of this belief has come the current attack on incumbency and the wide-spread popularity of the term limits movement. Our problems, it is suggested, would be solved by new and better people prepared to just say no to temptation, selfishness and parochialism.

More sophisticated observers find the all but obsessive concentration on the individual failure of politicians misleading. To them, the central problem rather, is the degeneration of America's political infrastructure--the complex web of possibilities, institutions, beliefs, and commitments, that make up a political nation and allow it to function effectively. In this view, inadequate leadership is a constant, these other elements are not--they have changed, for the worse, over time.

This explanatory focus is itself divided into two distinct

streams:

2A. INSTITUTIONAL, that is that the increasing bureaucratization of government institutions has limited their effectiveness and narrowed their focus and severely constrained their capabilities. Policy institutions have become cumbersome and weighted down to the point of extreme inertia. At the same time, the growth of the reach and intrusion of the media into government affairs with its confrontational approach, focusses popular attention on the sensational, negative, and corrupt, at the cost of considering the essential and critical. Nothing is ever as it seems, but, rather, the product of the most malevolent human instincts. The press repeatedly presents a "dark vision of the pointlessness of politics," a vision that impacts on, resonates with, and dominates, the public mood. (6) This analysis has led to attempts to reform Congress and the bureaucracy, usually by cutting its numbers, changing the way government conducts its day to day operations, and, in the case of the media, ruefully considering how to improve the knowledge and capacity of reporters to understand how government works and what its limits and capabilities are--usually by a year at the Kennedy School or the Russell Sage Foundation.

2B. CONSTITUTIONAL, that is, a line of analysis which focusses on the stalemating and dysfunctional aspects of our basic political framework: America's eighteenth century belief in, and establishment of a permanent institutionalization of, the

separation of powers, the emphasizing of fragmented power and the many areas of potent veto power that exists in our basic legitimizing definition of political life. (7)

New conditions have enhanced the divisiveness and fragmentation inherent in our constitutional arrangements. Since the 1960s we have moved into an era of well-organized interests, unlimited access to power, an inflexible entitlement mentality, and powerful, disruptive, demographic and economic changes and needs never contemplated by the Founding Fathers. The push and shove of policy making and governing has inevitably become beset by conditions beyond the capacity of our constitutional system, created in another time, to function at even a minimum level of effectiveness. Out of this analysis has come consideration of the line item veto as well as notions demanding far more sweeping changes in our basic constitutional structure.

Finally, and most critically, there is a school of thought that moves well beyond the personal, institutional, and constitutional, to suggest that there is a much larger matter at work here--that these microcosmic governing difficulties are only the surface manifestations of something much more deeply rooted, powerful, and more destructive--there is a long range macrocosmic decline in all of the elements that make up the American political nation--a decline that cannot be easily, if at all, reversed. Our problems are more fundamentally rooted in the

particular (and negative) nature of our historical evolution, the particular roads that we have taken, the way the political system has been affected by deeply entrenched and potent undermining tendencies in our history.

Given the long sweep of American growth and development, the technological explosion of the late twentieth century, and the internationalization of social and economic problems, there is now a system overload in the United States, with the possibility of renewal and refocus, even by shrewd constitutional manipulation, no longer possible. There is, to borrow a word from Paul Kennedy, political "overstretch" in the United States, that is, a condition that will not end, if it does at all, without fundamental shifts in political culture, thought, approach and institutions, changes we are probably incapable of achieving, especially since the main systemic trigger of such shifts in the past, political realignments, no longer regularly occur as they once did, or at least they do not do so with the critically necessaryy transformative power once associated with them. (8)

In sum, the infrastructure of political institutions, commitments, values, and will, which together make up the political nation and define its capacity, have all deteriorated below levels of effectiveness. And the mechanisms for their renewal no longer exist. As a result, there are no obvious remedies to our escalating condition of steep political decline.

Matters can only get worse. "It is now," Walter Dean Burnham suggests, "close to a universal belief among Americans that time is not on our side." (9). We have reached the end of American politics.

These explanatory categories are obviously not mutually exclusive, in fact they are often interconnected although each has a distinct center of gravity. Each of them can also be refined much further than is attempted here. The broad categories do clearly suggest the major point, however: that there is no lack of explanations for a perceived situation of some moment, even if such explanations have never been systematically examined or demonstrated, nor their relevance and interpretative power clearly assessed in rigorous fashion.

At the same time, there are a number of observers, particularly in the scholarly community, who suggest that things are not quite as dark and decayed as suggested, that careful examination of some parts of the American political process suggest that there are more capabilities and effectiveness in the system than is usually allowed, that, in fact, more business is being done than the doom sayers suggest. There are intimations in the divided government literature, for example, that effective adjustments are constantly being made in our fragmented political process so that a great deal of policy-making and government

legitimizing muddling through, at least, occurs. Similarly, there are scholars who caution against too facile rush to judgement on this matter, that what is at issue is not decline as much as the results of a massive widening out of access to government in a complex world, a democratic widening out that has naturally led to an increase in cumbersomeness and messiness, but not dysfunction. (10)

Some of this optimism is based on empirical examination of how well the United States has operated under its long reign of divided government with a range of adjustments to institutions and activity constantly being made. Other of it seems to be committed to a cyclical notion of politics, everything, both ups and downs, effectiveness and inadequacy, comes around in some sort of regularized spasmotic waves. There have been, and continue to be, in our political development, alternating rhythms and cycles--either behavioral realignments or Arthur Schlesinger's notion of a repeteated thirty six year liberalism-conservatism cycle--which suggest a process somehow inherent in our system of repeated invigoration and adjustment with no underlying trend line.(11) And, in the aftermath of the presidential election of 1992, there was a clear brightening of popular mood and commitment to get things done as revealed in opinion polls, government corridors, and, to some extent, the media as well.

But such optimistic appraisal is actually quite rare in the 1990s. Most observers continue to see real problems in our current condition and frame their outlook by borrowing from the new President's response to reports of an economic upswing right after his election. To be sure, they suggest, while the short term political situation seems better, the underlying trends are not as positive, the critical dysfunctional matters have not changed at all. And the subsequent history of the Clinton Administration through its first hundred days seemed to bear out much about this perspective. There has been clear signs of a declinist dialectic at play: initial policy vigor and action, then resistance, then retreat with some suggestion that matters will sag into the expected gridlock state. In popular assessments, the president begins a free fall, and the nation's political institutions are again seen as unresponsive and dysfunctional. (12)

The repetition of such tendencies cannot be readily dismissed by analysts, I suggest. There is a major problem in our political nation, a deeply rooted one, and no temporary brightening in mood or condition changes that fact. And that persistent malaise "raises the question," Seymour Martin Lipset concludes, "as to whether democracies are governable." (13).

Is the United States "governable"? While there appears to be something quite seriously deteriorative in our political

condition, a deterioration that has accelerated in the past twenty years, it remains a remarkably amorphous and unexplored phenomenon, in details, analysis and understanding. The scholarship about it is certainly not comprehensive. At best, it remains scattered, undeveloped and unfocussed--and, as suggested, not always convincing whatever the popular consensus. Certainly, questions remain unanswered that go right to the core of the present state of our political condition and its future prospects. The essential first one of these is, have we, in fact, reached a moment of political degeneration powerful enough to raise questions about our future capabilities? Is our political system in terminal decline? If so, what do we mean by that and how do we measure it? What are its causes? What explains the degeneration that has occurred?

Or, to repeat, are the diagnoses exaggerated? Does the system work better than the public view allows, than the declinist literature and some scholars suggest? Is it possible to construct an understanding of the extent, nature of, and reasons for, the phenomenon of political effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) and changes in their level? Few "are confident," Putnam sums up, "that they know what makes governments work well," or badly, or if appearences of decline are more than a problem of communications, media excess and unrealistic expectations. (14) It is time that some

systematic effort to consider these matters beyond the conventional wisdom and horatory expression was undertaken.

To bring this to a point, the exemplary efforts of such think tanks as the Russell Sage Foundation (among others), to develop better understanding of "some of the country's most pressing social and economic concerns" would be very usefully augmented by a similar attempt to explore systematically, another such pressing concern: the claim of the apparent inability of the American political system any longer to address its responsibilities in any effective or sustained way. (15)

To do so, the following large questions suggest themselves as starting points for a controlled research project empirically investigating the current state and capabilities of the American political system and the causes for any decline in its abilities:

1. How effective is the American political process? We can pursue a number of concrete case studies of specific policy areas focussing on the present and what happens as an energetic administration begins to push specific and contentious policy proposals that the American people, Congress, and various interest groups will react to and presumably try to shape to meet their particular needs. What happens to specific policy

proposals as they enter the political nation? Will the result of such initiatives be stalemate and gridlock or some sort of accomodation and accomplishment to a particular level of effectiveness? How does their fate in the present compare to similar situations at other times? The point here is not to focus on outcomes alone but to try to examine and measure the policy process and its capabilities as it unfolds and establish means of comparing how processes work and what outcomes are in relation to other moments in our history.

Five specific issue areas suggest themselves as useful case studies for the elucidation of detail and subsequent analysis: welfare reform, economic reform, health reform, military reform, and a challenge to values held (such as in the abortion and education matters).

2. If, in fact, the political process is more than temporarily distracted and is, rather, terminally dysfunctional, how can this be demonstrated--what indicators suggest such? Do adequate variables exist or can they be constructed for analytic purposes? And, if so, and decline and dysfunctionalism is our lot, can we determine, most critically, what are the causes of our discontents and inadequacies? A similar range of studies,

connected to the first group, would be developed in order to explore that very critical theme.

Within this category two levels of analysis suggest themselves:

A) is the system dysfunctional due to particular and identifiable short term and/or correctable reasons? And,

B) have conditions, on the other hand, moved decisively beyond the temporary and short term? If they have done so, then when did such decline begin? While focussing on causes rooted in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, offer some analytic promise, a number of scholars have strongly argued that there are much deeper roots to the decline than those that have sprouted in the last two decades. (16) If they are correct, then a whole range of considerations about the future present themselves if there is to be any hope of shift in direction toward functional political effectiveness.

In this category, extended chronological analyses---that is, historically focussed background examinations of long term tendencies in our political system would be most useful in helping to understand current realities. Such areas of concern as voter satisfaction and involvment, institutional and other

mechanisms of accomodation and policy structuring, the nature of political leadership and its values, and the engines driving change and transformation, all suggest themselves as critical to furthering the kind of comprehensive ordering and understanding of our political world that this remarks hope to stimulate. (17)

NOTES

* This essay was originally written as the keynote for a conference on the American Political Process held at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on April 28, 1993.

1. E. J. Dionne, WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS (New York, 1991); Mark L. Goldstein, AMERICA'S HOLLOW GOVERNMENT: HOW WASHINGTON HAS FAILED THE AMERICAN PEOPLE (Homewood, Ill., 1992); Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, AMERICA: WHAT WENT WRONG (Kansas City, 1992).

2. James McGregor Burns, TRHE DEADLOCK OF DEMOCRACY; FOUR PARTY POLITICS IN AMERICA (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), and many subsequent works; Walter Dean Burnham, THE CURRENT CRISIS IN AMERICAN POLITICS (New York, 1982), and his many articles since.

3. The American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, RENEWING CONGRESS: A FIRST REPORT, (Washington, 1992), p. 3

4. Robert Putnam, MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK: CIVIC TRADITION IN MODERN ITALY (Princeton, 1993), p.3.

5. WALL STREET JOURNAL, March 31, 1993, p. A15

6. Katherine Boo, "The New Writer's Bloc," WASHINGTON MONTHLY, 24 (November, 1992), p. 37.

7. James Sundquist, CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT (Washington, 1992).

8. Paul Kennedy, THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GREAT POWERS;

ECONOMIC CHANGE AND MILITARY CONFLICT FROM 1500 TO 2000 (New York, 1987).

9. Walter Dean Burnham, "The Politics of Repudiation--1992: Edging Toward Upheaval," THE AMERICAN PROSPECT, 3 (Winter, 1993), 33. See, also, Byron Shafer, et. al., THE END OF REALIGNMENT?: INTERPRETING AMERICAN ELECTORAL ERAS (Madison, Wisc., 1991).

10. David Mayhew, DIVIDED WE GOVERN; PARTY CONTROL, LAWMAKING AND INVESTIGATIONS, 1946-1990 (New Haven, 1991). For an amusing and insightful defense of one of the most maligned of American political institutions, see, Nelson W. Polsby, "Does Congress Work?" BULLETIN OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES, 46 (May, 1993), pps. 30-45.

11. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., THE IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY (Boston, 1989).

12. The media assessments of President Clinton's first hundred days in office further underscored the apparent declinist situation. His positive ratings were the lowest recorded since such assessments began almost forty years ago. But that was not his faulIt alone? It was pointed out that people were grading lower in 1993 than they had done in earlier surveys. At the same time, Mr. Clinton's ratings were no worse than that of other American political institutions. In short, the ratings reveal a clear, general picture of attitudinal decline across time. See INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, April 30, 1993, p. 1.

13. Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Significance of the 1992

Election," PS: POLITICAL SCIENCE AND POLITICS, 26 (March, 1993), p. 16.

14. Putnam, MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK, p. 3.

15. The quotation is from the Russell Sage Foundation's 1993 announcement of the results of its visiting fellowship competition.

16. See Burnham, CRISIS OF AMERICAN POLITICS and Joel H. Silbey, THE AMERICAN POLITICAL NATION, 1838-1893 (Stanford, Cal.), chapter 13, "After The Fall."

17. It should be noted that several such efforts are already under way. See, for example, R. Kent Weaver and Bert A. Rockman, (eds.), DO INSTITUTIONS MATTER; GOVERNMENT CAPABILITIES IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD (Washington, 1993); and the report of the workshop, "What's Wrong With American Political Institutions?," held at the Institute of Government Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, July, 1991, under the sponsorship of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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