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They Just Don't Get It: Some Thoughts on Why Americans Misunderstand Politics

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Abstract

Once constitutional foundations were in place politics and government were seen as secondary activities, more or less frozen in place, in the United States. Rights were not contractual but fixed birthrights except insofar as racial differences shaped the American dialogue. The result is a dialogue that emphasizes future dangers future debts and the sacredness of the past but has difficulty addressing existent and persistent problems. Accordingly, whether Americans can therefore understand the value of the polity or of partisanship is therefore unclear.

Keywords

Political Theory, Constitutional Theory, Antipolitics, United States of America

Notes

Professor Jaffe presented a prior version of “Some Thoughts on Why Americans Misunderstand Politics” on 13 October 1995 at the IAS Department of Political Science.

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This paper speculates about misunderstandings the writer regards as characteristic of American political thought and attitudes. It leans extensively on my book, *Healing The Body Politic: Rediscovering Political Power* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1993) as well as a soon-to-be published article, “Our Own Invisible Hand: Antipolitics As An American Given” (in Andreas Schedler, ed., *The End of Politics? Explorations in Modern Antipolitics* [London and NY: Macmillan and St. Martin’s, 1996]).

We need not reiterate what we already know – that the Founding Fathers created a system magnificently appropriate for a handful of quasi-independent entities strung out along the eastern seaboard of the new United States. What we must consider is why the system appears to be stumbling, why so many doubts about the future are expressed, why Americans, still convinced that theirs is the greatest and most powerful nation on earth, appear to be worried that their fall is imminent. Perhaps analysis will also reveal why present-day American politicians speak as if they wish to do away with governance, politics, and politicians, that is, themselves. Are they serious? If so, the political system must be ill and it follows that the illness must have an etiology.

1. An Overview of “Politics”

To understand this etiology we should ask what we mean by “politics.” At the moment American answers are of a piece. Here are some examples. Asked about apparent peculiarities in his office’s procedures for selecting candidates for vacancies on the Supreme Court, President Clinton abruptly terminated a press conference declaring that he could not “disabuse” reporters of the habit of turning substantive questions into discussions of the political process. (Washington Post, June 15, 1993). In other words, the nation’s chief politician resents being asked a political question about a clearly political decision. More recently, a member of the United States Senate’s current majority replied when asked whether a recent Congressional decision to add seven billion dollars to the military’s budget request for next year was anything other than politics, “we keep ‘politics’ out of military budgets.” (“Mac Neil-Lehrer Report,” Public Broadcasting System, 6 September 1995). In short, the President and others in government, including the Congress, keep saying “whatever we do, let’s keep ‘politics’ out of it.”

What does such talk, now filling the airwaves, newspapers and even fiction, mean? The answer is simple: “politics” is a dirty word. The politicians and political bureaucrats say “we’re not into politics.” And every survey indicates that the people agree; they don’t trust governments and are unhappy with the President and Congress. A widely-shared rejection of politics has been an ongoing fact of American life for a long time, relieved only by periods during which dispensations are given to a handful of admired leaders – a Teddy or Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, or Harry Truman. In the second half of this century, it has been hard to reelect a President. Only Eisenhower and Reagan served two terms. Others, Bush,

Carter, Ford, could not be reelected, and President Nixon resigned just in time to avoid impeachment and probable conviction.

Not only is hostility evident, indifference (underneath which rage often seethes) is endemic. Up until recently, despite polls indicating widespread contempt for politicians, incumbents usually won reelection to the American Congress (in the decade preceding the 1994 election, 98% of them). Nor do Americans think more highly, if they think at all, of state or local politicians. Politics is seen as tainted and many politicians, with the help of the media and in earlier days with the assistance of cartoonists and Mark Twain among others, supply them with enough ammunition to reinforce their negative feelings. Add some startling statistics to this picture: Americans do not participate in elections in significant numbers. Since 1900 there has been a 25% decline in voter participation in national elections; in 1992, a relatively active year because of the Perot candidacy, only 55.9% of eligible voters cast ballots; in the 1990 midterm election voter turnout was 33%. In the so-called revolution of 1994, the participation level was barely higher. There is an occasional exception: In 1991, when a neo-Nazi captured the Republican nomination for Governor in Louisiana, 80% of those eligible to vote, double the normal turnout, ended the threat. But generally speaking citizens simply vote “no” to all candidates by not participating. Aside from the cries of corruption and the expressions of dismay, we need to find out whether there are systemic or underlying reasons for this assortment of rejections.

Look at the Word “Politics”

Most contemporary talk about politics centers around one of its aspects, the exercise of control or influence, often simply referred to as “power.” The current buzzword “empowerment,” used in every context to refer to organizations’ members, citizens, employees, and workers, suggests both the expectation that everyone can be powerful, that is, be in control, and the possibility that the sense of powerlessness may be one of the more common facts of American life. Others have power or money which, it is said, amounts to the same thing, control. Why not me?

This way of looking at politics is not entirely illusory but is incomplete. Politics is far more complicated than mere control. In amplifying that I wish speak in a simple, perhaps overly simplified way, *of the many aspects of politics*.

I believe it easy to identify at least four aspects of politics, all related to but not identical with the control or power already referred to. Power, after all, stems from what Hannah Arendt called “plurality,” by which she meant in part that the human world is populated not by a universalized abstraction called “humanity” or, in our older way of talking, “mankind,” but by humans who have the intriguing antipodal characteristics of each being the same in that they are human and different in that they are unique. Add in self-awareness and consciousness, a fairly well developed brain, a capacity for language and communication and the possibilities grow

exponentially. Humans learn that they are mortal. Knowing they are mortal engenders the desire, noted some time ago by Thomas Hobbes, to protect and even extend their lives. That desire is complicated by the presence in the world of other humans, all similarly aware, all similarly self-concerned. *The first aspect* therefore has to do with humans' realization that each is trapped in his or her own skin as are others of their kind with whom they must somehow deal. Beyond that is the recognition that they share not only place or space and material things but also common concerns and a web of relationships that ties them together.¹

This "web" is not instinctual, is not implanted as in bees and ants as a particular, timeless, genetically-controlled functional structure. In humans it is a form of awareness, awareness of others and of self, and consequent action, deeds and discourse, resulting from ever-changing situations. In any event, humans do not simply follow nature or their natures. They intervene and create a world which intertwines action by "me" and "others." This connectedness is the source of what I label "the first aspect of politics" and reflects consciousness, awareness of one another, and recognition, however dim, that being human involves clusters as well as individuated particles, linked groupings as well as individuals.

The second aspect of politics seeks to establish an operational society by building a foundation, much as one necessarily builds a foundation in order to construct a house to live in. *The third* involves design of instruments of control and is that aspect of politics around which most contemporary studies of politics center. These instruments largely depend on rules of living together that empower agents to enforce, modify or change them. Umpiring and refereeing is perpetual: Fairness can never be fully or completely achieved; there will always be demands for change and opposition to it. These struggles and those over policy-making drive the political process and lead to the politicking which our political science appears to regard as the elemental if not singular activity associated with politics. The title of the celebrated book by Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What When and How*, sums up this view.

The fourth aspect is tied to all the others but is most closely related to what I spoke of as initial awareness of the problems of plurality and mutuality. In the book, I called this "support," and it too is fluid because the instruments that operate as the third aspect of power are

¹ Talk of this kind requires explication. For an indication of what I am referring to see Hannah Arendt, *Men In Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. at pp. 24–25: "The world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse.... The things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us... become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows." See also Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958): "Even the most 'objective' intercourse, the physical, worldly in-between [,] along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origins exclusively to men acting and speaking directly to one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible.... But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the 'web' of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality." (182–83)

constantly in turmoil; meanwhile, flaws in foundation-building, the second aspect, make people pull out of the system or literally push them out – a racist decision by the American Supreme Court in 1857 declaring that black Americans were in effect non-members of the constitutional system is an example. Meanwhile, the first aspect, recognition of being connected to one another, is constantly in danger of being forgotten, since it precedes any formal institutions or agreements or contracts or any of the paraphernalia we associate with political life.

My view is that without appreciation of an array such as I have mentioned (which is neither definitive nor final), it is not possible to do business, own property, or walk the streets – indeed one cannot have streets without “politics” – *and it does not matter whether the street-builders, garbage collectors, or water suppliers are regarded as governmental or non-governmental. They represent an agreement to operate together, to empower an agency to do something for all members, an agreement rooted in recognition that somehow “coming together” (Hannah Arendt’s phrase) is empowerment’s necessary preliminary. Whatever you call the empowered agency, it reflects recognition of a common concern and need. And that is true whether connectedness or mutuality is ontologically rooted in existence or prudentially rooted in self-preservation.*

2. American Indifference to the Initiation of Politics and Foundation-Building

As I’ve indicated, Americans seem obsessed with the third aspect of politics, the actual political process, the deal-making, brokering, negotiating, called here “politicking,” that resembles the operations of the business community. I will return to that theme by attempting to isolate some of the origins of that obsession, but for the moment simply suggest that Americans appear to believe that “coming together” or “initiating” the polity is an ancient ritual of discovery – perhaps akin to the discovery (by the quasi-human, quasi-baboons portrayed in the Stanley Kubrick film 2001) that skeletal bones make wonderful skull crushers. In contemporary America, deal-making represents a civilized substitution for skull-smashing. One brokers for a water supply and then retains it, much as one town in Connecticut established control over the water supply of a major valley in the State and now asserts its sovereignty against the claims of thirsty citizens of neighboring communities. It is this dealing or wheeler-dealing, Americans have been taught, that makes up the bulk of politics. And since deals, although they often create much-envied millionaires, appear to require a bit of skullduggery, they have an aura or scent of something underhanded. In American political life that lingering scent is not entirely imaginary since groups and individuals, elite and non-elite, have successfully pressured at every level of governance for favors and special treatment. Furthermore, their modus operandi engenders the fear that pervades economic activity, namely, that since there is just so much to go around, those who get special treatment are robbing everyone else. In other words, in this imagery politics is almost exclusively self-interested deal-

making, “politicking.” At the moment, Americans are angry about some of the deals that have been struck involving welfare benefits, medicare and social security, and programs to help minorities, but the nation’s record includes a lengthy list of deals for railroad-builders, farmers, manufacturers, owners of sports franchises, and on and on.

Furthermore, Americans, encouraged by the legal profession and by political and other social scientists, are wed to the notion that the Constitution of 1787 is a political foundation for all time. That notion, of course, would have broken down had it not been for the development of judicial review, an art form developed in the United States as nowhere else, that permits Supreme Court justices again and again to reinvent the Constitution they claim to be preserving. The point is that in the United States foundation-building is left to individuals given life tenure who, for the most part, have virtual liberty to put in and take out meanings they interpolate from the Constitution’s text.² In other words, foundation-building is seen as a completed task subject only to alterations that occur with the acquiescence of appointed judicial construers.

It is my contention, accordingly, that thanks to a combination of misreadings of the character of politics – unwillingness to come to grips with mutuality, a disinclination to reexamine foundations, and difficulty in understanding the nature of “support” – Americans see politics as a limited arena of conflict consisting of disputes over the rules and efforts to win advantages. And that is what they get, primarily economic disputes. Be it cattle ranchers in the West, welfare recipients, taxpayers, or foresters the battle is similar – get something from or prevent regulation by government. And a similar struggle goes on among the States. Some receive more money from the federal government than their people pay into the federal treasury. Legislation that affects the flow of money into the States, accordingly, produces a tug of war among them over the question “who will be advantaged?” Designed to limit and restrain government, the American system has evolved over time. Its outstanding feature is elaborate

² Few Americans, for example, even those who take courses in political science or constitutional law know about the infamous Slaughterhouse Cases [16 Wallace 36] of 1873. Here the Court interpreted the Constitution’s 14th amendment ratified a few years earlier. One clause declares that “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States.” Like much of the Constitution the clause is opaque but the phrase “privileges and immunities” must refer to something. The Amendment, passed at the end of the Civil War, represents an effort to make certain that American Blacks, now freed and citizens, could not be deprived of whatever rights citizenship entails. Choosing a case that had nothing to do with freed slaves or the customary considerations of the Bill of Rights but dealt instead with the granting of a monopoly over the slaughterhouse business to a single firm in the State of Louisiana, the Court, in a five to four opinion that has never been overturned, insisted that there was a sharp distinction between federal and state citizenship, that only so-called federal citizenship was protected by the amendment, and that such “federal citizenship” did not include as a right and privilege freedom of speech, press, religion, or doing business. Those seeking protection of the privileges and immunities mentioned in the Amendment, accordingly, would have to seek them from the States, an unlikely source in the American south of 1873. With a single blow, using a totally irrelevant issue, the Court killed off, apparently permanently, any possible meaning for that clause. Indeed, the Civil Rights revolution of the past fifty years has been built on another phrase from the same 14th amendment, although the “privileges and immunities” clause still glares out at the reader who is hard put not to conclude that it appears to mean that States may not deny rights to citizens of the United States.

and continuous politicking that in too many instances converts public affairs into little more than a trough at which those with the longest snouts not only gorge themselves but also, on returning from their feeding frenzy, shout their disapproval of others doing the same. Politics as an arrangement that protects the general interest is all but absent; substituted is a politicking in which benefits and deals are approved by recipients – and the largest corporate interests over the years have in many ways outdone those usually the target of budget cutters, welfare recipients and the elderly – while the commonweal is more honored in rhetoric than conduct. Politicking is so incessant, so ubiquitous, that it obscures the presence of its antecedent, the mutuality that makes feasible or doable all other activities. In the process, connectedness has been shunted aside.

3. Long-Term Sources of American Misunderstandings of Politics

Space and Opportunity

The presence of “unoccupied” and potentially productive land provided a built-in safety valve for Americans up until the twentieth century. Jefferson and others had made much of the endless opportunity for each man to have land for himself and his family. The metaphor of open space was perceived as a literal description of America. Initially society was – putting aside native Americans and slaves – less class-ridden than Europe, and opportunities to rise seemed unlimited. As the frontier closed, the myth was transformed: openness itself was substituted for open space as the outstanding characteristic of the nation. Opportunity knew no boundaries: the yellow-brick road leads upward. Politics and governance were subsidiary activities which had proven their inadequacy by failing to settle the slavery issue through normal, peaceful political dialogue. Only after the emergence of late nineteenth century capitalism, which threatened to overwhelm the State governments and produced repeated bouts of depression, the arrival of an ever-increasing tide of immigrants from Europe, and the later movement of African-Americans from the South to the North did government assume greater responsibilities. But activated governments did not relieve doubts about political solutions. The long period of governmental expansion and regulation increasingly appears to be an interlude or intermission from the more or less normal character of the American system in which, so it is believed, the marketplace rules and best operates unhindered by, although it may be subsidized by, governments.

The Marketplace as Substitute for Polity

Robert Heilbroner, the political economist, in essays published in 1989 and 1993, gives voice to the prevailing American view that what is consequential in the contemporary world is the

economy.³ I'm not interested in summarizing or reviewing either but the flavor as well as the assumptions that drive Heilbroner's current views seem to me to be an intellectualized version of the prevailing American outlook.

He maintains that from the most primitive to the most highly developed society – “highly developed” is standard code talk for the United States or the West – there is usually “a single source of authority” respecting political and economic decisions, a “seamless cloak of authority [that] extends over the entire social structure.”⁴ But our time is different: “Under capitalism this cloak is torn in two, and the realm of activities having to do with material life is removed from the reach of political authority.”⁵ In the later work he does mention a society without an economic system even though the isolated and relatively comfortable people he refers to fish, exchange goods, and see to it that everyone eats. He adds this thought: “If we say there is no obvious economics... we mean that there is no distinct body of knowledge required to understand their economic life.”⁶ This is the scholar's bias: only what can be described systematically is real.

He also speaks of a “coordinating mechanism” at each stage of human development: tradition controls primitive societies; command and coercion, which he labels “management,” dominates a later time; and the market coordinates the third, latest stage. In the first two stages, politics and economics are intertwined, but eventually they are separated by the market, indeed “each person in a market system will do exactly as he or she pleases.”⁷ The market is not a thing; nobody runs it; it is a description of behavior.⁸ Explaining the dynamics is, of course, problematic: The primitive stage seems to preclude all change since tradition governs; its evolution into a command society is puzzling, but that I suppose is a quibble. Similarly, the current “triumph of capitalism” may turn out to be anarchistic since behavior is atomized and governed by the laws of the marketplace, that is, self-interest. Professor Heilbroner also ignores changes that may not be explicable in other than economic terms: the discovery of monotheism, invention of the telescope, initial assessment of the blood's circulation pattern and the nature of “blood pressure” (he tends to ignore both science and religion). Nor is it clear what politics does except “command” in the middle stage and therefore act as primary change agent whereas in the fully-developed capitalist stage market behavior and in particular a universal class of businessmen presumably command.

There are so many excellent and insightful observations in these pieces that it is almost unfair to challenge them, and I have no particular interest in debating Heilbroner, who in any case is

³ Robert Heilbroner, “The Triumph of Capitalism,” *New Yorker*, January 23, 1989, 98–109; *Twentieth Century Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993)

⁴ Heilbroner, *New Yorker*, 102

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *Twentieth Century Capitalism*, 24

⁷ *ibid.*, 30

⁸ *ibid.*, 31

not present to defend himself. What is intriguing however, is the idea that authority may be torn in two. The notion that emerges from these essays is that authority really consists of widely-held beliefs or principles or objects of veneration that everyone accepts as central or general rules that take on the character of natural laws. Authority is a doctrine embodied in each stage of society by certain classes of people, an expression of an ideological commitment internal to a society and thus as alterable as society. This notion runs counter to the usual view which implies the existence of something that stands outside of, possibly above, the ongoing activities of the society. Authority entails the notion of some more or less fixed director or guidance system that regulates, shapes, or limits behavior, severed, distanced, and certainly distinguishable from the activity it directs.

Heilbroner's view places authority within society. It is the end product of what has been authorized by the ongoing practices of the society. It derives from but does not precede, either logically or chronologically, everyday human activity. It therefore is entirely fluid and draws its strength from everyday acceptance. To speak in an old fashioned way: In this imagery the author becomes the creature of rather than director or creator of what he or she has authored. For American society this means that what we venerate is exclusively the byproduct of how we operate. Thus a term that has always implied fixity or permanence is made totally relativistic.

Heilbroner presumes that governance always follows the character of society, in particular the economy. This sounds akin to but is not the Aristotelian view that governance is necessarily related to the constitution or class structure and cultural experience of a people. In Aristotle true rulership is exercised in the general interest of all citizen/members. Here the rules themselves are given by, indeed are equivalent to, societal activity. They accord with the needs and interests of the class or group that in Heilbroner's term "embodies" the system, in this instance, businessmen. Inevitably, the primary motto is the marketplace's injunction: serve thyself, follow self-interest. Politics becomes mere superstructure, a reflex of prevailing interests or elites and as a domestic force exists largely to repress deviations from current accepted practice and indoctrinate the citizenry into "true" belief. Governance, consistent with American convictions from revolutionary times to the present, withers away, that is, largely surrenders its traditional authority to the commands of the market place and its dominant class. If authoritative decisions are embodied in economic behaviors, above all the business class, what indeed is the function or purpose of politics? My answer would be that it is a totally unnecessary excrescence; the political half of the "cloak torn in two" can safely be disposed of except, presumably, for repressive internal purposes and for fending off external dangers. The business of America is indeed, as Calvin Coolidge had said, "business." The marketplace, in short, replaces polity.

The American Notion of Rights 1: Sources and Current Attitudes

Much time in the United States is spent talking about “rights.” These days it is not uncommon to speak of children’s rights, present and in the future, the rights of fetuses and, of course, often in juxtaposition, the rights of pregnant women “over” their bodies. “Rights talk,” of course, is not new. The most celebrated of early American documents, the Declaration of Independence (1776), declares “self-evident” the proposition that all men are “endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights” and the first ten amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights (1791), famously adds to rights found in the original document an assortment that includes freedom of speech, assembly, religion, “the right to keep and bear Arms” (currently in contest because the phraseology is not as clear as it might be), to “be secure” against “unreasonable searches and seizures,” to be protected against deprivation of “life, liberty, or property, without due process of law,” and so on. This elaborate list has grown over time so that we now talk of the rights of labor to organize, the right to privacy (nowhere specified but presumably entailed by other phrases), and even the rights of students.

But whether these documents are the source of rights is not easy to answer, and I am hesitant to jump into a kettle that boils with so many ably-argued views, most of which I certainly will never get around to reading in their entirety. Rather, I have to invoke my own right, the right to synthesize, and, accordingly, suggest that there are two basic themes in the dialogue.

Rights, some argue, are biological and historical.⁹ They are biological in that they are said to relate to mere personhood (this indeed is the question that bedevils the current hot button issue, abortion). To be born is to have rights, to which the current dispute appends a struggle over whether “personhood” can be claimed for a fetus and, if so, at what point – the moment of conception, some weeks later, two trimesters into pregnancy, and so on. In short, rights are in reality “birthrights,” which means that in addition to being biological they are historical, connected to the past and therefore an inheritance. My identity is presumably set simultaneously by biology and history in that I inherit the past. This kind of thinking is implied by the Declaration’s assertion, presuming we don’t treat the document as mere propaganda, that we are endowed with rights by a Creator who presumably initiated or authored the entire human enterprise.

A second view holds that naturalistic presumptions about rights are less meaningful. Rights can be listed ad infinitum without signifying anything in particular unless an agreement brings them to life, undergirds them, makes them operational. When Jefferson (and his co-writers of the Declaration) claimed that “all men” were endowed with rights by their creator he ignored women and the numerous slaves present in what was to become the United States – Jefferson was himself an “owner” of humans who in the euphemism were in “involuntary servitude.” The

⁹ See Sheldon Wolin, “Contract and Birthright,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 2, May, 1986, 179–193.

only way around that problem is to presume that the slaves were less or other than human, and indeed there is that implication in Jefferson's early Notes on the State of Virginia. The embarrassing provision of the Constitution that apportions States' seats in the House of Representatives is similar: Slaves, who by that time could neither vote nor were represented, are counted as three-fifths of a person, obviously not a biological possibility. Therefore the inheritance or birthright arguments, despite reiterations of "natural law" echoing John Locke (the right to be protected from loss of life, liberty, and property without due process of law) do not seem applicable.

If rights are not inherited then they must be initiated by agreements, contracts, or compacts. This presumes an equality among a contract's initiators – putting aside compacts to which God is said to be a party – that takes different forms. If the compact establishes a political system, the signatories or consentees are equal enough to join together in the agreement; in trade transactions each has something to exchange; signatories to a compact or bill that spells out rights have equal standing, whether or not that further presupposes they are naturally equal (they can always be naturally equal in that they are accepted as human) or simply regarded as being equivalent in situation.

Surrender is implicit in the contract or compact idea. Either the right to enforce is given up as in the Lockean contract or the right itself is handed over to a sovereign as in the Hobbesian version. Too much has been made of the differences between the two philosophers because, as Sheldon Wolin suggests, contract theory depends on an absence of historicity. Inheritance is of limited consequence: Despite his apparent backward glances – they are actually logical rather than chronological – Hobbes is forced into the present, for example, the indubitable conclusion in his system that law is essentially what the Sovereign declares it to be, which is a way of saying, despite his talk about nature and nature's law, that present enforcement is as determinate as the original surrender of rights. And Locke, it seems to me, agrees, since his commonwealth depends on more or less continuous consent or support. Built into his system is the ever present threat of withdrawal by the participants if the magistrate exceeds his warrant. That is why Locke, despite his conservative tone, endorses revolution. The mirror image of revolution, what prevents the compact from dissolving, is consent, and what makes for consent is support or satisfaction.

How does all this relate to the "natural rights" to which Americans are prone to appeal? Natural rights theory argues that rights originate in the Garden of Eden. They are birthrights authored and given by God or nature, as David Ritchie's classic text puts it, to the "sons of Adam."¹⁰ The theory was a weapon to resist authorities wherever they got in the way – in Churches or in distant governments in the case of the American colonists. Protestants recaptured the Bible from the Roman Church; protesters snatched rulership from distant English overseers. As

¹⁰ David Ritchie, *Natural Rights*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1894; 5th impression, 1952)

Ritchie points out, natural rights theory is in service to anyone who resists any authority. The theory has weaknesses, of course. It assumes that all humans are reasonable enough to recognize what nature has given; and the term “natural” is overripe with possibilities – it may refer to nature itself or the deity, be a statement of “ought to be,” or be derived from scientific observation.

The early Americans, facile in their political talk and capacity to say things that couldn't be taken literally or in the case of the Constitution to phrase in such a way that clarification would have to wait upon concrete examples, appear to accept both contracts and birthrights. Their constitution writing testifies to a conviction that governance and rulership is derived from compacts. But they added the possibly inconsistent idea that the act of putting together a compact is always guided by nature, by her laws, or her God. The result is a loosely constructed notion of “individual” natural rights, although there was unease because of the presence of slaves and the Indians, a people for whom the Founding Fathers expressed considerable admiration even as they wiped them out. In the American view every person (the word “person” provides an opening for exceptions and later would be enlarged to include corporations, well before Indians achieved citizenship) is born with natural rights as a birthright. Human nature is an element in that birthright, and because human nature is not entirely trustworthy, compacts, contracts, and, of course, constitutions must be constructed.

This emphasis on nature, nature's rights, and naturalness evolved into a suspicion that one ought not tinker with inherited social and political structures or patterns. Instead, energy should be concentrated on personal success and growth. The system's deficiencies are best overcome not by altering it but by improving personal life, enhancing it through religion, economic success (signified by material well-being), and, in our time, through entertainments, recreational opportunities and, when melancholy or the sense of emptiness sets in, by an assortment of therapies, remediations, and exercise programs that build up self-esteem and ensure “happiness.” If one can make do with or be happy in one's personal existence, thus mixing stoicism with epicureanism, the weaknesses, failings, disillusionments of public or political life or of everyday business activity are reduced. Pursuing happiness becomes largely an individual or “inner” phenomenon that makes remote the world's tedious tribulations.

The American tendency to treat rights as more or less frozen birthrights shows up in ongoing political discussions, for example, the current obsession with the national debt and budgeting. My assessment of this talk can best be stated in a very personal way. Not too many years ago many of us thought of ourselves as part of a community. This meant we shared a particular physical space with others and minimally joined with them to pay taxes to meet joint responsibilities: educate youngsters, even if we had none; maintain road systems, even if we never used a number of them; develop and repair water and waste disposal systems, even those beyond whose reach we lived. The notion that our personal needs disconnected us from fellow citizens or narrowed our range of responsibilities as taxpayers was unthinkable. As

members of a community we were obligated to share the cost of its maintenance. Rights may have been inherited but responsibilities were contractual and ongoing.

Today, attitudes seem changed. The view that each individual's responsibility extends only to what is his, hers, or a particular group's has gained ground probably in no small measure due to the emphasis on individual success and happiness. My claims, wishes, and rights are sacrosanct; others' are suspect. If the Federal Emergency Management Assistance program is clumsy or bureaucratic in ministering to my losses or Medicare and Medicaid too "generous" to others, I sing out. When the government comes to my aid, I am silent about taxpayers' costs, but readily protest "entitlements" I cannot claim. Americans increasingly, so it seems, classify the citizenry into those who deserve (me or us) and those who don't (others or them). We are intense about alleged rights but indifferent to responsibilities. Since the demands and claims are so extensive and attempts to make them birthrights so casual, each group, possibly each individual, looks with increasing suspicion on the claims of others.

This stimulates a ceaseless effort to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving, some of it quite odd. For example, the debate about welfare programs and entitlements rages on at every level of American society. Pundits, professors, and politicians issue solemn warnings about destroying the lives of future generations with our debts. If we don't reverse course, youngsters' futures, they say, will be bleak, and for us the American pilgrimage may terminate in a special corner of hell reserved for the irresponsible. It is as if many who are alive today, including impoverished, welfare-dependent children, have been judged undeserving while middle class youngsters and the yet-unborn are true innocents, and therefore deserving.

Stated so bluntly, this sounds nonsensical. Nonetheless, by pointing fingers at those allegedly responsible for debts and by providing a pulpit for those who promise a debt-free future, the message sounds reasonable and suggests an easy solution: We can continue our present life style with nary a pause even as we attempt to downsize the government and cut budgets in order to liquidate the debt that will be inherited by future generations, and that can be done by cutting off undeserving others.

Some say this is mean-spirited and I do not contest this assessment. But in the context of these remarks, it is simply a naive notion of what generations "owe" one another amplified by misunderstandings about the source of rights. Since Americans increasingly stress rights as birthrights and ignore their contractual component, understanding of the linkages between past, present, and future dims. No Galileo or Einstein is needed to observe that each generation helps shape the next generation's world and leaves a legacy of unattended-to problems and "deficits" as well as accomplishments and resolved issues. The World War II generation of Americans believed universal college education would be good for the country, and in effect established, with few limits, a right to partake of the higher learning. As a result, colleges, faculty, administrators and, of course, college-educated folk increased and multiplied and

expectations about the general educational level of the populace escalated. But new questions about the system later arose in an atmosphere that would have been entirely unfamiliar to those who earlier argued for universality. Similarly, our social security and welfare systems, whose current flaws are in part related to lack of foresight as well as thoughtless Congressional and Presidential budgetary decisions, look different in the light of changing circumstances.

Obviously, we inherit problems but also past generations' gifts, evidence of their productivity and willingness to build and maintain universities and libraries, establish an infrastructure, and preserve the artifacts and practices that make up what we call civilization. So, too, the blood spilled and treasure expended over the decades signify the past's contributions to the future. Past, present and future are bound together, never seamlessly but always multi-directionally. To speak of the future as if the only creditors were the young and yet-unborn confirms the conviction of observers from De Tocqueville to the present that Americans have neither sense of or interest in history nor awareness of what makes for civilization. The result at the moment is a futile and nonsensical clash between the generations. Inevitably, politicians appear who are eager to take advantage of animosities between the generations, as if such animosities required encouragement. They are using difficulties that cannot be confronted, let alone overcome, unless Americans develop a more sophisticated understanding of the ties that bind us to our predecessors as well as our progeny. Their talk of eliminating future debts, of obligations extinguished, is particularly vexing because it is incorrigible, that is, there is no way to amend or correct what they say. Surely they speak honestly of their intention, their hope to leave as their children's inheritance a public world free of financial obligations accrued in the past. But these promises' verifiability cannot be measured for years to come and they ensnare naive citizens who, hoping for a better life for their children, are easily persuaded by a rhetoric that attempts to shape the future without acknowledging the past's contributions to it. That is an unhappy byproduct, made worse by a loss of historical perspective, of deep-seated confusion over the character and origin of rights and responsibilities.

The American Notion of Rights 2: Romancing the Past

Americans treat their history as the source of givens never to be reexamined seriously and they have an image of their beginnings that can be summed up in the old Latin saying, "well begun is half done." The Founding provided a key to perfection, to the continuous unfolding of happiness and the New World's bounty. This romanticized view of the American past obstructs not only judgments about themselves but also about the conduct of others. Americans wonder why Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats persist in ethnic warfare; condemn the Japanese for refusing to apologize for their misdeeds during their fascistic imperial period; and express horror at the genocidal holocausts engineered by Cambodians and Germans. They should make these judgments. What is troubling, however, is the relative complacency at ongoing domestic racism and religious and ethnic intolerance and ignorance of the vicious record

respecting the all-but-exterminated Indians.¹¹ Americans appear to have little grasp of the means used to enlarge the boundaries of the United States or the consequent infliction of pain and suffering on others. This historical blindness makes all but impossible the clarification of rights or a clear-headed dialogue about the present value of the inherited federal system.

Two current, ostensibly serious discussions of the relation between past and present are typical distractions. The first of these is the doctrine of “original intent,” which resurfaced in a speech given by then Attorney General Edwin Meese on October 12, 1985, and claims that the intent or intentions of the framers of the Constitution ought to be the touchstone for all Supreme Court opinions. The hue and cry that followed and which will reemerge if the current Supreme Court continues its remodeling of the document, brought to Meese's side a number of eminences, among them, Chief Justice Rehnquist and Judge Robert Bork, whose failure to win a seat on the Court created yet another American myth, namely, that before his failed nomination political considerations never affected the choice of justices for that august body. On the other side, to cite a single example, is the eminent Straussian political theorist, Harry Jaffe (no relative).

What does it mean to say that interpretations ought to follow the “original intent” of the founders? First, advocates believe there is a way of discovering what the intent of each of the framers was in respect to any passage under inspection. Second, the phrase “original intent” when applied to the convention at which the Constitution was written means that despite the participants' disagreements and often vague compromises, there is a single meaning that synthesizes their views. Third, that construed or reconstructed view buttressed by a similar assessment of ratification struggles in the States, can be applied to topics and substantive questions undreamed-of at the time the Constitution was written, in other words, almost every currently dominant feature of American life. That might pose a difficulty, but Judge Bork has the solution. He believes, or in 1993 said he believed, that if the Constitution is silent then no judgment can come from the Courts until the people speak. Thus “abortion is a question for debate by the American people and elected officials, not by the Supreme Court,” though he argues strenuously in the same piece for prohibitions that prevent majority opinion from interceding in “certain areas” of life. He does not, however, specify those areas.¹²

To dismiss this argument as silly is tempting; but it is not a novelty. Throughout American history there have been efforts to refer to the original intentions of the Founding Fathers. However, largely through the foresight of the quintessential Founding Father, James Madison, the philosopher of the Constitution, who later served as President and earlier had kept notes on the debates, we have been spared ongoing seances about the intentions of the departed. Madison commented that “the debates and incidental decisions of the Convention can have no

¹¹ See Kenneth C. Davis, “Ethnic Cleansing Didn't Start in Bosnia,” *New York Times*, Section 4: Sunday Week in Review, September 3, 1995.

¹² *New York Times*, Op-Ed Page, June 23, 1993.

authoritative character,” and he refused to publish his notes until after the death of each of its members. Since he was the last to die (at age 85) they were not made available until 1840, almost a half-century after the convention. Why did he not release them sooner? Why did Congress wait until 1818 to release the convention’s journal? Well, Congress’s motives and intentions remain a mystery. But Madison believed that understanding the past’s intentions could be unraveled by studying not the proposed Constitution but the ratification arguments, an unlikely eventuality even after extensive historical research. In any event, Madison did not believe intent or intentions could be discovered either from the document’s text or his notes.¹³ Debates may be harmless exercises in scholasticism. In this instance, however, they open the way to yet another era of judicial policy-making, since the proponents of so-called judicial restraint now sitting on the high court appear to have a greater inclination to overrule Congress, the President, and past Supreme Court decisions than most of their predecessors. The danger of the Court taking over the country, however, is not particularly serious. More importantly, this type of argumentation reinforces the belief that the Founders had it right and that all we have to do is go back and consult them to find out how to handle contemporary problems. It also reinforces romantic dreams about the good old days. Longing for an allegedly purer past in the United States creates a dreamworld, a haze, under cover of which the nation’s energies are discharged not to deal with ongoing problems but to hark back and ostensibly restore a better time. In sum, and to reiterate, the argument over original intent exposes the persistence of the belief that a foundation, once put in place, should never be modified, that it is unaffected by present conditions.

A second constitutional argument, over “states’ rights” that is, over the meaning and character of federalism, has surfaced often in United States history. The doctrine rests on the view that the Constitution is a compact of States who as contractees only delegated authority to the federal government. What has not been delegated is therefore retained by them – to use words that sound like the yet-to-be clarified Tenth Amendment, the last of the Bill of Rights, which reads: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” In other words, what was not given is retained. But that simple summary masks difficulties: Congress is elsewhere given specific powers that turn out to be flexible thanks to phrases like “necessary and proper” and “commerce among the states,” both of which produced interpretations that stretched federal power. Furthermore, the Tenth Amendment fails to provide an operational means for the people to express themselves leaving only the power to amend the document, a power that these days leads to trivial, and possibly foolhardy, amendments such as the current effort to forbid desecration of the flag. In fact, probably as a result of the changing character of State legislatures after the Revolution, the Constitution reveals little enthusiasm for direct popular

¹³ See Leonard W. Levy, *Original Intent and the Framers’ Constitution* (NY: MacMillan, 1988) and Harry V. Jaffe et al, *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution: A Disputed Question* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1994). In the latter see particularly: Harry V. Jaffe, “What Were The ‘Original Intentions’ of the Framers of the Constitution of the United States?” 13–54.

votes, since it establishes an elaborate system of indirect representation and indirect election of Senators and Presidents. Add to this the words of the two leading founding documents. The Declaration of Independence closes by referring to “Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress Assembled.” Independence, if the words have any import, was achieved not by individual colonies that became sovereign States but by the “united States of America, in General Congress Assembled.” And the famous Preamble to the Constitution declares flatly that “We the People of the United States... in order to form a more perfect Union... do ordain and establish this *Constitution* of the United States of America.” If words so carefully chosen can be said to mean anything, the writers of these documents regarded the Union as a single sovereign entity established by the people of united colonies who had declared themselves independent. It is no surprise that a note from Madison addressed to his countrymen expressing his hope that the Union would be perpetual was found among his papers. To him and his fellow drafters it must have been axiomatic that the States as separate entities could in no way maintain their independence from England nor survive the hazards of dealing with European powers lusting for overseas expansion.

States rights has not been a doctrine based either on principle or a verifiable and incontestable historical fact, but a means to question statutes or decisions one group or another regards unfavorably. Jefferson used the argument before he was President to resist the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts. The New England States used it to argue against the acquisition of Louisiana which they correctly saw as diluting their relative strength in the national government. Calhoun used it to justify repudiation of the natural rights and equality arguments embedded in the Declaration of Independence. Post Civil War Democrats favored the doctrine but Republicans, usually in control of the national government, disagreed. The parties' positions reversed with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the consequent enlargement of the federal government. In the present antipolitical climate, states' rights arguments have been reinvented. Counties in the Western part of the country have been attempting to nullify decisions of federal agencies and courts echoing the assertion that the Union is entirely a creature of delegated powers any of which the people can withdraw or nullify at any time. In this new version “states' rights” has evolved into the peoples' right to resist selectively any government. This is a reading, curious or not, of the Tenth Amendment.

Now why such an argument at this time when the United States, the Union, may well be the most powerful nation on earth? Why is this nullifying and antipolitical mood so visible in the West, the region of the nation entirely a creation of the Union's expansionist policies? The answer is that the political process is deservedly under attack throughout the country because of ineptness, corruption, indifference and more than occasional arrogance. The legitimacy of politics itself is being questioned consistent with an American antipolitical tradition but also in reaction to aggregated weaknesses in present political operations: inequities in the taxing system; oddities in trials and the usages of juries; questions about the activities of national and local police units; dismay over street crime and the widespread, debilitating deterioration of

urban life; continuing racial division; doubts about the management and quality of the school system and universities; and the unchecked intrusion of moneyed groups into legislative and executive arenas. These problems are untouched by discussions about flag desecration, unwed mothers, and interpretations of the Founding Fathers' intentions.

4. Reeducating Americans Politically

Can a “Political Imperative” Make Sense to Americans?

In *Healing the Body Politic's* words I speak of a “political imperative” specifically, “that each individual act as if the general interest is identical to his or her special interest,” an imperative that would drive each individual to act in such a way “that he or she could and would live contentedly and safely if every other person were to adopt or choose the same [course of] action.”¹⁴ I cite that formulation, however naive, because when realizable, it justifies political life; an operating ‘political imperative’ would establish beyond argument political authority as the primary, incontestable protector of the general interest of the society.

But does such an imperative have any currency now in the United States? The evidence is mixed. People behave in many situations as if they know that the rules of the game apply to them; that by following them they contribute to order in the community and their own well-being. But others (in the streets as well as the board rooms of corporations; among the police and in high political offices) do not so behave. Their refusal to act as if rules apply to them – through violence or lawlessness, whether allegedly justified by circumstance or the result of opportunities to benefit from self-determined exceptions to the rules – has to give us pause.

In sum, the signals are mixed. Although people appear to know how they ought to conduct themselves, they often choose to do otherwise. I contend that an improved understanding of the full meaning of politics, of their mutual obligation to one another, would help them, stiffen their backs or warn them away from such temptations. How can that be managed?

A few modest proposals follow. They are based on the belief that we have the means and medium at hand to reconnect people using the classroom as well as electronic technology. And we should understand the message of the ‘political imperative,’ namely, that the forces that atomize society and disconnect people need to be overcome. Whether this message can be driven home is another matter entirely.

To begin with use can be made of a distinction Robert Heilbroner notes when he refers to the “two authorities” that exist in the United States, “one,” he says, “built on the verticality of

¹⁴ Erwin A. Jaffe, *Healing The Body Politic: Rediscovering Political Power* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1993), 211.

wealth, the other on the horizontality of democracy.”¹⁵ Economic institutions, however much they are democratized, are organized, as least in capitalist societies, on the basis of wealth and control of the instruments of wealth. They are primarily vertical even though they are tied to a horizontal force, society-wide demands. Political institutions, as I believe Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke might have agreed, operate horizontally. They speak, ideally, for the well-being of all rather than the selfish interests of a handful; they testify to the equal standing we label “citizenship.” In purpose and (ideally) in practice they cut across the entire society in an effort to represent the commonweal.

Economics, in contrast, implies hierarchies – proprietors, owners or managers, elements that when linked together are more narrow and focused, more “vertical” because aimed at one unit’s profitability rather than the good of all. The economic order deals in exchanges among units with largely self-interested concerns; politics’ concern is with maintenance of the public interest and establishment of the rules and order necessary to all human relations including the execution of exchanges. There is, of course, “horizontality” in primarily vertical structures and “verticality” in horizontal organizations: If the well-being of Lockheed or the Chrysler corporation, two businesses making products and seeking profits, is deemed a matter of public interest, that is a “horizontally” formulated conclusion about society’s general concerns; but the corporations themselves necessarily operate on the basis of what Heilbroner called verticality. Modern democratic political entities, when they take up the cause of vertical economic interests, ostensibly do so on the basis of horizontality; vertical economic organizations’ search for products may be politically subsidized because not only profit but on occasion the public interest is served by their discovery or development. To paraphrase one writer who sums up the distinction neatly: our (political) ideals are horizontal, our (economic) aspirations are vertical.

Even if we could establish the clearest of separations between horizontal and vertical organizations, thus persuading everyone that the distinction clarifies the singular nature of authority, there are other factors that contribute to American indifference to politics and require reexamination; in some instances they have generated myths whose persistence is damaging.

The westward movement of Americans across the continent is one of the epic migrations in human history. So too was the massive movement of some forty million Europeans to the United States between the end of the Civil War and 1910. Even after the apparent closing of the frontier, migration continued and upward mobility remained a fundamental dynamic in the American ideological set. When immigration restrictions were adopted in the 1920s, the movement of African-Americans from South to North speeded up; by the end of the Second World War they constituted an increasingly significant percentage of the Northern urban population. The emergence and dominance of the automobile generated further movement –

¹⁵ Heilbroner, “The Triumph of Capitalism,” pp. 107–108.

this time into suburbs. This rekindled traditional American anti-urban sentiments, helped submerge growing tensions between the races by walling them off from one another, and redefined “success,” at least for whites, as out-of-city home ownership.

This move to the suburbs has been as significant as the earlier westward migration. A road-building frenzy accompanied by abandonment of public transport changed the “life style” of the entire society. The shopping mall replaced the inner city “downtown” area, and an extraordinary number of cities suffered deterioration, decayed appearance and an almost-vanished sense of safety, from which they have yet to recover, leaving them and the nation at large a legacy of unattended-to social problems, not merely the all-too-visible wear and tear but increasingly indelible signs of what is often labeled a two-class society. That term oversimplifies the problem – many of the non-impooverished, non-homeless, working people of America are now called the “working poor,” a phrase that would have astonished the Founding Fathers. The truth appears to be that not only the “have-nots” but also some so-called “haves” (among the middle classes) include many whose economic well-being has been brought to a virtual standstill. The growing number of truly wealthy Americans is still a small percentage of the population. So the class portrait of America includes the totally impooverished, a large number of working poor, a struggling middle class, an upper middle class that has pulled away from the pack and is most concerned to stay that way, and a growing number of truly wealthy Americans. These stratifications have stressed out much of the society – the difficulty is well illustrated by the United States’ inability to devise a universal health care system available for the general population – and produced a virtual national nervous breakdown. In response, since politics is neither understood nor appreciated, Americans in ever-increasing numbers turn “inward” in the hope that relief can be achieved by concentration on the self.

In sum, one of the problems apparent in attempting to reeducate Americans is to initiate a public dialogue respecting the degree to which commonweal and context remain misunderstood. Some personal troubles are indeed entirely “personal.” But many are rooted in society’s unsettling, problem-spawning issues. The emphasis on movement and present concern with inner peace implies that the human world is largely “in” or “of” nature, that what we are dealing with is “natural” rather than humanly-constructed and therefore can primarily be resolved individually. Americans have to be reminded that theirs is an overdeveloped, urbanized, industrialized society and the consequences of that condition need reassessment. The current dialogue, marked by politicking between environmental and anti-environmental groups, cannot adequately face up to the situation.

A fresh look at heterogeneity is also needed. Americans were convinced of the nation’s capacity to absorb immigrants and aliens. But the current heavy concentrations of emigres from Spanish-speaking lands, Asian immigrants eager to succeed in the New World, and large percentage of still-alienated African-Americans are often treated as if they are non-Americans. Their presence is a source of tension. Americans need to reexamine the history of the nation’s

cultural pluralism, assess its benefits and inadequacies, and realistically assess multiculturalism. The contemporary American cultural metaphor may turn out to be neither the melting pot in which everyone is completely assimilated nor the orchestra, in which different instrumental voices blend together in joint performance. But that requires political dialogue not assertion and fear-mongering.

Other matters require rethinking. The freeing up of capitalist ambitions in the 1980s has indeed brought about undreamed of prosperity at some levels of the society, the value of which ought not to be underestimated. But the nation now suffers from a rampant commercialization that has crept into every phase of life substituting so-called economic values for all others. Even elementary schools are inundated with television channels that inculcate the messages of hucksters. Some reigning-in, prompted by a dialogue that establishes the meaning and value of the public interest, may bring about a rethinking of the proper limits of commercialism.

In sum, I suggest that since recent developments emphasize that Americans are particles disconnected from one another, driven entirely by self-generated urges and feelings, most of them growing out of individual emotional “states” and economic ambitions, they are necessarily unresponsive to and uninterested in the significant presence of others. If this trend continues or grows, political failings cannot be resolved. Americans will be unable to discuss together possible modification of the federal system as part of an effort to restore the sense of community. They will be ill-equipped to consider that the foundations of the political system, now over two centuries old, may have to be refurbished and rebuilt. Such discussions are possible only as part of a larger dialogue about contemporary society’s potential to connect people, to make real the ‘political imperative,’ and thereby reestablish consensus about ‘coming together.’

Parasites, Partisans, and Politics

In ancient Greek, the word *parasitos* means “one who eats beside or at the table of another, a parasite, a toady.” The reference, apparently, was to one who flattered and amused his host in return for a free meal or to a helper who feasted with the priests after a sacrificial rite. The modern word means one who lives at the expense of another without making any useful contribution, a hanger-on and user who gives nothing back but lives off the largesse – willingly given or not – of another. People these days tend to describe politicians in exactly those terms. But we now know a great deal about parasites. Speaking biologically, we call “parasite” any organism that lives within another organism from which it derives sustenance without making any readily-apparent compensation. To survive, in other words, the parasite requires a host body: There is a symbiotic relationship between the two.

A parasite cannot be too successful. The parasite dies with the host. Similarly, humans, in some respects the planet's most voracious parasites, now realize that the earth, a host for which no substitute is likely, must be handled with care. If the earth dies, so will humans.

This suggests to me, with a bit of a stretch, something about another word, "citizenship." To be a citizen is to be a member of a community, to be part of something other than oneself and, in a manner of speaking, to draw sustenance from it, although of course citizens contribute to the commonweal. To be a citizen I require your presence and existence; to make this a meaningful relationship you must have equal standing with me precisely because we can only be citizens in the presence of others who are also citizens. When, on the contrary, our existence depends on slaves or refuses to consider others' well-being something happens to us: We lose our respect for humanity in general and begin to segment it into layers – those with, those without rights; those who are important, those who are not – and abandon our appreciation of others as cohorts or partners, whatever their place or task. To ignore, forget, or lose sight of the meaning of that kind of partnership – cohort in a community – is to prepare the way for disorder and violence rooted as much in the confusion and fears of masters as in the despair and rage of slaves.

I have bent the meaning of parasite to call attention to mutuality which, once grasped, puts us within reach of appreciating the importance of citizenship. For as citizen, I depend on you if I am to exist as neighbor, co-habiter of the planet, peaceful associate in polity; by the same token you depend on me. As citizens we are woven together into a healthy parasitism that rests on a defined and acknowledged equality; an equivalent membership exists irrespective of wealth or position. This is not brotherhood or sisterhood, words that suggest necessary or even natural linkages, it is citizenship or membership suggesting voluntary, chosen, selected, yet indubitable ties to one another. Only to the extent that membership is understood is it possible to understand what politics is supposed to be about.

Similarly, the word "partisan" deserves reexamination. Over time it has increasingly suggested someone so devoted to a cause or issue as to be willing to use violence on its behalf. Yet the word stems from the Latin *pars* meaning "part." To speak of a part is to speak of a sector which implies the existence of at least one other sector and of a whole.

I want to suggest that the word partisan (and for that matter the word "party") carries with it a similar meaning. To be a partisan, once there are rules of the game in operation, once there is a polity about whose public policies disputes arise, is to be tied to, connected to one's opponents, partisans of a different point of view. Notice I am not talking about partisans who hide out in mountains and launch assaults against a regime they hate, despise, and wish to destroy. I'm talking about partisanship within the context of an ongoing entity and therefore an ongoing dialogue.

The word “partisan” in the American context has taken on an increasingly negative meaning because of constant references to bipartisanship which at one time was constantly being called for in matters of foreign policy. All Americans, it was argued, had to support any and every foreign policy of the government because as we faced outward we had to appear as a unit or phalanx. Bipartisanship prevented rifts that might comfort the enemy. Obviously, bipartisanship weakened during incidents like the Vietnamese war which many Americans regarded as unjustifiable.

I submit that to be “partisan” in a negative or bad sense means to be in favor of X or Y out of any context of being connected to one’s opponents, that is, to be devoted to a cause while excluding the possibility that the game of life demands or fosters situation after situation where others, equally convinced that they are “right,” believe otherwise, favor other leaders, support other arrangements. With respect to that kind of partisanship, partisans are without doubt dangerous; they threaten to destroy ongoing relations among people.

But there is an entirely different sense in which the word “partisan” can be used. In the context of an ongoing democratic polity, an arrangement established in the best interests of all, partisanship becomes a desirable phenomenon. For this is a context in which people sitting on the other side of the stadium or on the other side of the aisle, as in the United States Congress, are as much bound to the game as I am, are as connected to the polity as I am, although they see its policies differently. They wish, as I do, that their side will “win.” But even when that doesn’t happen they remain bound together accepting the rules that govern the game as well as the game itself.

On the contrary, where there is nothing but invective, when partisanship bespeaks a total rejection of opponents’ right to a different view, then partisans are each other’s enemies, advocates of dangerous policies; they have to be crushed. What I earlier called “politicking,” which so dominates American politics and the concerns of our analysts, the political scientists, is partisanship in which elites and interest groups seek to convert the public realm into a servant of their particular interests without consideration for others’ well being. Then partisanship is indeed negative. Furthermore, it leads to lawlessness, to violence, and ultimately to claims that the rules only apply to me when I choose to play by them, which is tantamount to insisting that polity exists no more. Once you say “play by my rules or the game is off” then indeed the game has ended, and so it is in politics.

But even this negative form of partisanship is explicable and in some instances justifiable. There are people in the United States now – there probably always have been some – who advocate resistance, even terrorism. They claim that those making the rules do so in such a way as to ignore the daily pressures that most people face, and they see no way to get attention or responsiveness within the system. Thus the spectacle of grown men skulking around bushes in camouflage against the day when the politicians send the army after them,

the groups talking about blowing up buildings in order to “get” the federal government, and the dissent so vigorous as to frighten others into believing that these partisans are akin to those made famous during the Second World War. In the United States, much complaining is heard about the so-called Christian Right – and their leadership and favorite candidates are indeed from my perspective a disconcerting lot – but the source of their intensity and demands is the decline of healthy partisanship and the absence of a political dialogue that would incorporate their concerns over values. Instead, they feel compelled to resort to negative partisanship, a symptom of the tearing apart not merely of the ‘cloak of authority’ but also of the polity itself and the consequent abdication of politics in the highest meaning of the word.

To return full circle to something mentioned earlier. Garbage collectors or as we now call them sanitary engineers cannot pick up refuse only from those houses in the city occupied by those with whom they agree or to whom they are linked by narrow interest. That would be a form of out-of-hand politicking that distances members of the community from one another and turns the streets into a post civil version of Hobbes’s “natural condition of mankind.” Garbage collection, school maintenance, policing, a system of higher education, sewage disposal, the supply of water, care of the disadvantaged, the preservation of the nation’s natural wonders, defense of the nation, and so on, are matters that bond us together. They affect every member of the society and are at the heart of politics; they produce policies and dialogue that treat every individual as both subject and object, that is, as a member, a citizen, hopefully with equal standing. Until that is fully understood, then misunderstandings about politics, American or otherwise, will continue to unravel the connections or ties that bind us to our fellows until the “web” of relationships all but disappears. Should Americans allow that to come to pass, they will, in my view, painfully come to the realization that their long-term antipolitical attitudes, now coupled with a sustained and unrelenting effort to dismantle governance, will, if allowed to continue, deprive them of elemental civility. No one can say with any certainty what the price of that deprivation will be, but from this writer’s vantage point it appears to be dangerously high.