

ECONOMICS, IDEOLOGY AND AMERICAN POLITICS¹

The ideal, my friend, is the lifebuoy. Let's say one is taking a swim, floundering around, trying as hard as possible not to sink. One might try to swim in a safe direction despite contrary currents; the essential thing is to use a classic stroke according to recognized swimming principles...Some eccentrics who try to swim faster in order to get there, come what may, splash all over everybody and always end by drowning, involving I don't know how many other poor souls who might have been able to continue splashing around tranquilly enough—in the soup. (Jean Anouilh)

To the casual observer and professional analyst, to the intellectual both here and abroad, American politics have frequently appeared as an amalgam of confusion, frustration and irrationality. The political parties have seemed devoid of cohesion and

¹ This article is adapted from a lecture presented to the Seminar of the Fondation Européenne de la Culture in Copenhagen, October 14, 1960.

unity, and innocent of a coherent political philosophy. Long ago, for example, Lord Bryce observed that our major parties have nothing to say on vital issues; that "neither party has any clean-cut principles, any distinctive tenets. Both have traditions. Both claim to have tendencies. Both have certainly war cries, organizations, interests enlisted in their support. But those interests are, in the main, the interests of getting, or keeping, the patronage of the government. Distinctive tenets and policies, points of political doctrine and points of political practice, have all but vanished. They have not been thrown away, but they have been stripped away by Time and the progress of events, fulfilling some policies, blotting out others. All has been lost except office or the hope of it."²

Half a century later, Harold Laski echoed these sentiments. "No one seriously supposes," he wrote, "that either the Republicans or the Democrats have a clear and coherent political philosophy. Their platforms, as formulated at the presidential conventions, are little more than a *cri de cœur* of quite temporary significance, in which the attack upon their opponents is far more genuine than their promises of measures which will accompany their victory." When promises are evaluated in terms of performance, he felt, "it is difficult to argue that a presidential election in America is, with all its excitement, very different from a choice by the voters between the two wings of a single conservative party. The emphasis may differ at times; but that is the reality of the choice."³

In our own day, a distinguished journalist and editor voices similar concern. While he admits the need for areas of compromise in a political system, James Wechsler decries the tendency to make compromise almost an end in itself. The result, he says, "is not 'compromise' but stalemate, not the achievement of the possible but the enthronement of the status quo, not moderation but immobility, not the clear delineation of public issues but a spreading sense that there are no longer any important public

² James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1917 (New Edition), volume II, p. 21.

³ Harold J. Laski, *The American Democracy*, New York, The Viking Press, 1948, pp. 129, 130.

questions on which men may reasonably be asked to give more than equivocal answers." Looking at the American scene, he concludes that "There is no shortage of great themes for political combat, but rather a loss of nerve among most of our political warriors. It is time for a new beginning."⁴

There is more than a germ of truth in these generalizations. American political parties are not and never have been the ideal parties of Burke's imagination. They do not conform to the classical pattern adumbrated in political science texts. They are not composed of monolithic elements, dedicated to the same principles of government and united to put these principles into effect through legislation and administration. Instead, they are a conglomeration of diverse interests—brokers of conflicting pressures—mediators between divergent economic, social, religious, and philosophical tendencies. They are non-revolutionary, non-ideological, non-theoretical, non-Utopian, non-systematic. Their objectives are limited and their methods pragmatic. They are committed to gradualism, meliorism, and experimentalism. They have endowed American politics with characteristics which the political theorist finds frustrating and disturbing—difficult to understand and even more difficult to admire.

Most puzzling, perhaps, especially to Europeans, is the relative un-importance of radical thought and action in American politics. Never did there develop a viable Socialist party, patterned after the British or Australian model. Marxism, either as an economic doctrine or a political movement, never attracted more than a pitiful band of extremists.⁵ The major parties, despite their differences on particular issues at particular times, seldom divided along simple economic class lines. The underdogs in American society never successfully launched a militant, class-conscious movement to capture political power and thus promote

⁴ James A. Wechsler, "The Liberal Retreat and the Need for Political Realignment," *The Progressive*, May 1960, p. 20.

⁵ According to Supreme Court, Justice William O. Douglas, for example, the American Communists "are miserable merchants of unwanted ideas; their wares remain unsold." They are "the best known, the most beset, and the least thriving of any fifth column in history." Dissenting opinion in *Dennis versus United States*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951).

their economic self-interest. Paradoxically enough, the most advanced industrial nation in the world also has the politically most docile "proletariat."

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The first, and most obvious, explanation lies in the very structure of the American government—a federal system, based on a written constitution, with a strict separation of powers between the national and state governments, and a tri-partite division of responsibility between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The system reflects a deep-seated fear of the omnipotent state. It represents an effort to design a governmental structure which "would check interest with interest, class with class, faction with faction, and one branch of government with another in a harmonious system of mutual frustration."⁶ With its premium on decentralized power, it tends to promote sectionalism, division of authority, and conflict—a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It is so concerned with safeguards against political absolutism, so intent on providing a complex system of checks and balances, that it almost precludes the operation of government as a unified and positive force. And this, as Henry Steele Commager observes, was precisely the intent of the Founding Fathers. They "not only made it difficult for government to invade fields denied to it, but they made it difficult for government to operate at all. They created a system where deadlock would be the normal character of the American government..."⁷

In this framework, the political parties are the only instrument for overcoming deadlock and harmonizing the relations between distinct and independent governmental units. Though unable to cope with the constitutional checks imposed by the judiciary, the parties can at least coordinate the operations of

⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1951, p. 9.

⁷ Henry Steele Commager, *Majority Rule and Minority Rights*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1943, p. 7; quoted in D. W. Brogan, *Politics in America*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1954, p. 91.

the President, the Senate, and the House of Representatives, each with its own inalienable powers. But, as D. W. Brogan rightly points out, the parties can perform this function only at the expense of their role as “unified,” “consistent,” and “responsible” organizations. Frequently, they can perform their difficult task only by resolving “not to let the best be the enemy of the good or even of the barely tolerable.”⁸ Circumscribed by the framework in which they must operate, the parties have little alternative to becoming brokers for diverse and conflicting interests—shifting coalitions of economic, sectional, racial, and religious groups tenuously held together by compromise and moderation.

It is not insignificant that American political history is littered with the corpses of parties which have tried to stand for something “meaningful,” and resisted the logic of compromise inherent in our governmental framework. For the most part, such parties never had much chance of national success, and generally withered within an election or two after their birth. The Anti-Masonic party, the Free Soil Party, the Know-Nothing party; the Greenback, Prohibition, and Populist parties; and the Progressives of 1912, 1924, and 1948, are all silent testimonial to the impossibility of organizing political activity around a single issue or a narrow base of interests. Horace Greeley, the great anti-slavery crusader, recognized the weakness of any party which lacks the support of a coalition of interests. “I want to succeed this time,” he said ruefully in 1860, “yet I know the country is not Anti-Slavery. It will only swallow a little Anti-Slavery in a great deal of sweetening. An Anti-Slavery man *per se* cannot be elected, but a Tariff, River-and-Harbor, Pacific Railroad, Free-Homestead man, *may* succeed although he is Anti-Slavery...I mean to have as good a candidate as the majority will elect. And, if the People are to rule, I think that is the way.”⁹

The point is well taken. In the United States, it seems, a third party can do little more than modify and leaven the

⁸ Brogan, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁹ Quoted in Brogan, *op. cit.*, p. 53. For a definitive and fascinating study of American third-party movements since the Civil War, see Russell B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1951.

programs of its major rivals. It can force the major parties "to take account of issues they were seeking to evade,"¹⁰ but it has no real chance of achieving power in its own right. The fatal weakness of a third party—aside from the procedural obstacles built into the election laws of 50 different states—is its incompatibility with the pluralism of American society. Its cohesiveness and ideological consistency are the very cause of its undoing. If it appeals to a particular economic group or class, it is courting almost certain defeat, because "no distinguishable group, no segment of the population possessing common economic interests, is big enough to be, or has prospect of becoming, the 'majority' in our complex society."¹¹ It is a fact of American political life that social, ethnic, and sectional interests cut across economic group lines, and often make for strange political bedfellows. Under the circumstances, a single-issue, single-interest party is beaten almost from the start.

This points up at least two consequences of the federalist-pluralist syndrome. First, there is a tendency for economic conflicts to be diverted from the political arena to the market place. Since no one economic bloc is likely to capture control of a tri-partite government, the political game hardly seems worth the effort—especially if the market offers more attractive alternatives. That is why the American worker (at least since the 1880's) generally sought higher wages and better conditions through collective bargaining rather than militant political action. He pursued his economic goals, not through a class-conscious labor party, but through a pragmatic, jobconscious trade unionism—dedicated to making each day "a better day than the one that had gone before." The businessman, especially during the 19th century, had no time to dabble in politics. He was tempted far more by the unrivalled opportunities of a burgeoning industrialism. The farmer, particularly before the Civil War, was more intrigued with free land in the West than the prospect of controlling a weak and negative state. In a po-

¹⁰ Laski, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹¹ Dewey Anderson and Percy E. Davidson, *Ballots and the Democratic Class Struggle*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1943, pp. 255-57; quoted in Brogan, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

litical system honeycombed with checks and balances; in a system where government is cast in the role of "neutral" and "arbiter"—enforcing the ground rules, but not participating in the decision making process—political control seems too costly to attain and too unremunerative to be worth the investment.

The second consequence of federalism and pluralism is to "internalize" economic conflicts—to make them a matter of intra-party rather than inter-party competition. Any group, intent on using political means for economic ends, is almost compelled to join with other groups, economic and non-economic, if it hopes to succeed politically. Working within a major party, it has to exert organized pressure—to bargain, trade, and compromise with other groups in a context of orderly "log-rolling." It has to accept the philosophy that "half a loaf is better than none." If it commands a sizable bloc of votes or impressive financial resources, it can play off one party against another and, perhaps, obtain special concessions and commitments. But, above all, it must recognize the importance of "team play;" it must submit to the give-and-take of political compromise.

The implications are clear. Since both major parties are an amalgam of diverse pressure groups; since both represent an accomodation of conflicting interests—they must, of necessity, become conglomerate organizations, lacking ideological consistency and programatic coherence. Moreover, since both parties must offer a product that is saleable in the political market place, inter-party differences tend to be narrowed and to become blurred. There is the same tendency for minimum product differentiation which economists have observed in the automobile market. Product differences are played up and exaggerated in noisy advertising campaigns, but the real differences are held to a minimum. The risk of losing a significant segment of the clientele is too great to allow for major discrepancies. Finally, when one producer does innovate, the others must quickly follow suit. The gap must be closed by imitation and adaptation. No living organism—be it an automobile firm or a political party—can afford to be left behind in the competitive race by continuing to offer wares for which there is no longer an effective demand. As game theory tells us, mini-max may be the key to survival.



Another set of factors explaining the moderation, compromise, and lack of class-consciousness in American politics is rooted in the tradition of individualism, the belief in vertical mobility, and the acceptance of a pragmatic *Weltanschauung*. In colonial America, individualism meant—in the negative sense—a distrust of government. To the early settlers, the state was an instrument of privilege, a creator of monopolies, an oppressor of individual liberties. As Europeans, many had suffered religious persecution administered by intolerant governments; as colonists, they experienced the discriminations and restrictions of a mercantile regime; as free men they found it easy to believe, with Jefferson, that the government which governs least governs best.

On the positive side, individualism meant a belief in the worth and self-sufficiency of the individual. It was expressed in Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard" tradition of self-help and personal endeavor—"the Canal Boy to President, Log Cabin to White House, Bobbin Boy to Steel King myth" which even now has an almost "unshakable grip on the American imagination." It was expressed in the tales of Horatio Alger, the self-made man who rose "from rags to riches by pluck, not luck." It was articulated in the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance which made every man responsible for his own salvation. Individualism was nothing more than a Yankee-Calvinist-Enlightenment belief that the individual must take charge of his own moral, political, and economic well-being.¹²

This syndrome of individualist beliefs was reinforced by a faith in vertical mobility—the feeling that a man could rise on the economic ladder through his own efforts, the conviction that "the world is up for grabs." The American, as Harold Laski conceded, "is rarely interested in his past because he is so certain that his future will bear no relation to it. The tradition that he has inherited is that of a dynamic civilization in which he is assured that whatever was yesterday, it will be different again tomorrow. He assumes as part of his inheritance that he will have

¹² Russell B. Nye, "Marx, the Nineties, and the American Myth," *Mercurio* (Rome), 1961. See also Irvin G. Wylie, *The Self-Made Man in America*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1954.

the right continually to go forward. He does not accept the postulates of a society where, as in the Europe from which he largely came, birth or inherited wealth may make all the difference to the hopes he may venture to form."¹³ The American may be poor; he does not expect to remain poor. He may be unemployed; he expects to find a job in the near future. He may be a half-literate immigrant; he expects that his children will some day attend the university. If Napoleon's soldier believed that he carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack, so the American schoolboy believes that he has as good a chance as anyone else to become president of the United States or (preferably) president of General Motors.

This faith (or myth, if you prefer) has shown a remarkable survival value. Despite our concern over increasing social stratification and the shrinkage of opportunities, despite the organizational revolution of the 20th century and the progressive collectivization of economic activity, the individualist credo has retained a pervasive hold on the American mind. The notion is still widespread that professional skill, hard work, and constant efforts at self-improvement are at least as significant as family origin, political "pull," or the "old school tie" in landing a good job. Though we constantly joke about it, Americans implicitly assume that the hierarchical ordering of individuals somehow reflects merit based on performance—that anybody has a chance to rise if "he works at it hard enough." And, in large measure, experience has validated that belief. Given the spectacular growth of industry, the phenomenal dynamism of the American economy, and a historic shortage of labor, the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian ideal of the self-made man able to rise in accordance with his ability is more than a cultural illusion. In business, especially, it is true that "management is a profession or vocation which many people, including workers and union leaders, aspire to enter" rather than "a class into which only the select few ever have access." Vertical mobility, therefore, is sufficiently part of a common experience to make it a viable economic tradition.¹⁴

¹³ Laski, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁴ The European and American attitudes toward vertical mobility are com-

Whatever its objective validity, however, this optimistic belief continues to have a pervasive influence on politics. It serves to immunize the American mind against an incipient class consciousness, and makes the economic underdog reluctant to embrace the ideology of class conflict. It makes him loath to identify with programs aimed at overthrowing the system in which he feels he has a stake. If some day, he (or his children) will own property, why attack property as an institution? If he can expect to improve his share of the national income, why change the machinery for its distribution? As long as economic opportunity is more fact than fiction; as long as classes are not rigid castes; as long as membership in the economic élite is based on performance, not status—why tamper with the institutional framework? Why follow Marx rather than Darwin, Laski rather than Franklin?¹⁵

One final factor is noteworthy, viz. the traditional American preference for the immediate and practical over the Utopian and theoretical. Beginning with the Revolutionary War which itself was “a massive piece of *ad hoc* improvisation for operative ends,”¹⁶ successful political movements have followed a pragmatic and empirical course—rejecting absolutes in favor of concrete solutions which would work in particular situations. The American approach, writes Father Bruckberger, a French Dominican retracing the path of Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville, is unique in “its absolute, its unconditional, its stubborn preference for men, for concrete men of flesh and blood, as against any political system whatever, no matter how theoretically perfect.”¹⁷ It refuses

pared in Walter Adams and John A. Garraty, *Is the World our Campus?* East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1960, pp. 144-145.

¹⁵ The former leader of the American Communist Party complained that it was extremely difficult to “free the minds of the workers from the many Jeffersonian, bourgeois, agrarian illusions which persisted with particular stubbornness among them.” William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party*, New York, International Publishers, 1952, p. 25.

¹⁶ Nye, “Marx, the Nineties, and the American Myth,” *cit.*

¹⁷ R. L. Bruckberger, *Image of America*, New York, Viking Press, 1959, p. 73.

to sacrifice man to ideological abstractions and recognizes "that in human affairs the all-or-nothing is always a false solution."

This pragmatic attitude is reflected most dramatically, perhaps, in the American labor movement which has shown little affinity for doctrine and ideology, and has generally built its programs "upon facts and not theories." As far back as 1883, when asked by a Congressional Committee about trade union objectives, Adolf Strasser, a leader in the movement, replied: "We have no ultimate ends. We are going on from day to day. We are fighting only for immediate objects—objects that can be realized in a few years...We are all practical men."¹⁸ Asked the same question in 1914, Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor, explained that the movement "works along the lines of least resistance and endeavors to accomplish the best results in improving the conditions of the working people, men, women, and children, today and tomorrow, and each day making it a better day than the one that had gone before..."

Like virtually all American labor leaders, Gompers felt that Socialism had little to offer. "The intelligent, common-sense workmen," he said, "prefer to deal with the problems of today, the problems with which they are bound to contend if they want to advance, rather than to deal with a picture and a dream which have never had, and I am sure never will have, any reality in the actual affairs of humanity..."¹⁹ True to the pragmatic tradition, Gompers rejected the socialist blue print as too theoretical, too impractical, and too long-range. He categorically refused to lead the trade union movement to a political Armageddon. While he favored the idea of labor in politics—if this were restricted to "rewarding our friends and punishing our enemies"—he steadfastly refused to be pressured into a new political party which would give expression to a doctrinal trade unionism. To Gom-

¹⁸ Reprinted in E. Wight Bakke and Clark Kerr, *Unions, Management and the Public*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948, pp. 31-32. For a classic account of America's emphasis on "job-conscious" as opposed to "class-conscious" unionism, see Selig Perlman, *History of Trade Unionism in the United States*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1923.

¹⁹ Reprinted in Bakke and Kerr, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

pers, who understood the American system and felt the American mood, it was one thing to enter politics as a pragmatic opportunist; it was quite another to form an ideological, class-conscious workers' party.

This pragmatic attitude was by no means confined to trade unionism. It characterized virtually every American reform movement. To be sure, there were some progressives and radicals who took refuge in theoretical consistency, "making orthodoxy more important than results, and thereby contributing more than ever to the detachment from reality from which they already suffered;" but the vast majority remained in the pragmatic fold, unperturbed by doctrinal inconsistency and jealous of their right to select the useful parts of "mutually exclusive systems."²⁰ Typically, the American reformer, like Americans generally, had a faith in facts, in discoveries based on observation and experience. He distrusted Utopian models springing from the mind of arm-chair theorists. His object was to reform, not transform the world—to make better what is not altogether bad rather than to start from scratch. And, strangely enough, this approach has produced results. So far, at least, it has worked.

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It has been said that, according to the laws of aerodynamics, the bumble bee should not be able to fly. Yet it flies. It has been argued that the American political system is an anatomical and physiological monstrosity which cannot possibly work. Yet it works. "How," the student of politics may ask, "can there be progress without a theory to point the way?" "How can there be reform without a *tabula rasa*?" "How can there be meaningful competition between parties with remarkably similar ideologies?" "How can issues be articulated in an atmosphere of political compromise, moderation, and harmony?" Yet, as the record indicates, there can be progress without theory, reform without a *tabula rasa*, and political conflict without ideology. And the New Deal is a dramatic case in point.

Almost from the beginning, the New Deal was beset by

²⁰ Nye, "Marx, the Nineties, and the American Myth", *cit.*

dogma and doctrine, both on the Left and the Right. The extremists denied the possibility of following a middle way between complete socialization, on the one hand, and a laissez-faire economy, on the other. With the fiercest intransigence, they rejected the notion of a middle way—a “mixed economy.” While the radicals equated the maintenance of capitalism with betrayal and fascism, the reactionaries warned that there is really no “half-way between Wall Street and Moscow.”

Ogden Mills, Secretary of the Treasury in the Hoover Administration, expressed the conservative sentiment: “We can have a free country or a socialistic one. We cannot have both. Our economic system cannot be half free and half socialistic... There is no middle ground between governing and being governed, between absolute sovereignty and liberty, between tyranny and freedom.” Said President Hoover: “Even partial regimentation cannot be made to work and still maintain live democratic institutions.”²¹ Specific New Deal measures were attacked as violations of the conventional dogma—the eternal verities of classical economics, the letter and spirit of the Constitution. Public Works? This could lead only to increased expenditures, unbalanced budgets, a growing national debt and, eventually, to financial disaster. Like an individual, the nation must always live within its means. Social Security? Such interference with individual freedom would undermine personal initiative, weaken the nation’s moral fiber, and make everyone a slave to the state. Minimum Wage Legislation? Such obstruction of natural and automatic market forces would result in unemployment—displacing workers whose marginal productivity did not equal the stipulated minimum wage. Public Housing? This was a private and local matter in which federal intervention is prohibited by the Constitution. If there is a demand for housing, private enterprise will fill the need. And so on, *ad infinitum*. According to the conservative catechism, a free society had no obligation to combat depressions or to provide for the welfare of its citizens.

²¹ Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “Sources of the New Deal,” *Columbia University Forum*, Fall 1959, p. 8. Whatever one may think of Professor Schlesinger’s major thesis—that there would very likely have been some sort of New Deal in the Thirties even without the Depression—this is an excellent vignette on the temper of an era.

The radicals on the Left were equally doctrinaire and dogmatic. While their policy conclusions were naturally quite different, they shared with the conservatives the “either/or” assessment of the New Deal experiment. Putting the case with the starkest simplicity, *The New Republic* stated: “Either the nation must put up with the confusions and miseries of an essentially unregulated capitalism, or it must prepare to supersede capitalism with socialism. *There is no longer a feasible middle ground.*”²² And when Roosevelt refused to accept this Hobson’s choice, he was roundly criticized for lacking doctrine and direction. The New Deal, cried Norman Thomas in a radio address, was certainly not socialism. Far from it. “Roosevelt had not carried out the Socialist platform—except on a stretcher.” Listing each of the New Deal reforms in turn, Thomas observed that the banking system was rehabilitated and then turned back to the bankers. Holding company legislation provided—not for nationalization but for dissolution of the far-flung utility empires. Social security was nothing but a weak imitation of a real program. The NRA was little more than a scheme of industry self-regulation, designed to maintain private profits. The AAA was but a capitalist scheme to subsidize scarcity in agriculture. The TVA was merely an adventure in state capitalism, and the CCC an experiment with forced labor. None of the New Deal measures, with the possible exception of TVA, could be construed as a step toward the socialization of the means of production.²³

Roosevelt, the pragmatist *par excellence*, was not perturbed by these attacks. Stubbornly he stuck to his course of rational experiment of trial and error. When businessmen chanted the “account-book liturgy,” he told them that “a balanced budget isn’t putting people to work. I will balance the budget as soon as I take care of the unemployed.” When they complained that the New Deal violated the principles of free enterprise, he reminded them of the depression—noting that the country was “faced with a condition and not a theory.” Always he ended with the plea:

²² Quoted *ibid.*, p. 11.

²³ James McGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1956, p. 242.

"I wish you would give me a solution."²⁴ When the radicals pictured him as the "gay reformer" lacking doctrine and direction; when Heywood Brown branded him as "Labor's Public Enemy no. 1," Roosevelt could only stand on his Oglethorpe University address: "The country needs...bold, persistent experimentation," he had said. "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."²⁵

Roosevelt, an eminently "practical" man, refused to be entrapped by rigid ideology. He had no master plan for saving the country. A "tinkerer" and "gadget" man, his foremost interest was to find immediate solutions for specific and pressing problems. "What excited Roosevelt," writes one of his biographers, "was not grand economic and political theory but concrete achievements that people could touch and see and use."²⁶ To the extent that Roosevelt had a political philosophy (in the ideological sense), it was summed up in this statement during the 1932 campaign: "Say that civilization is a tree which, as it grows, continually produces rot and dead wood. The radical says: 'Cut it down.' The conservative says: 'Don't touch it.' The liberal compromises: 'Let's prune, so that we lose neither the old trunk nor the new branches.'²⁷ And Roosevelt chose the "liberal" way. Intent on "avoiding alike the revolution of radicalism and the revolution of conservatism," he constantly repeated the Macaulay dictum that to reform was to preserve.

No one, perhaps, understood the significance of the New Deal's pragmatic, non-ideological approach better than John Maynard Keynes, himself a critic of absolutes. In an open letter, he commended Roosevelt for seeking "to mend the evils of our condition by reasoned experiment within the framework of the

²⁴ Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 245, 246.

²⁵ Address at Oglethorpe University, May 22, 1932; reprinted in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, New York, Random House, 1938, volume I, p. 646.

²⁶ Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 245, 246.

²⁷ Quoted in Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

existing social system. "If you fail," said Keynes, "rational choice will be gravely prejudiced throughout the world, leaving orthodoxy and revolution to fight it out. But, if you succeed, new and bolder methods will be tried everywhere, and we may date the first chapter of a new economic era from your accession to office."²⁸

Roosevelt, of course, did succeed and the New Deal did signal the start of a "new economic era." Its triumph rested not only on the adoption of comprehensive economic reforms and a revolutionary change in the government's role in economic life. Most important was the solid political fact that, after the New Deal had run its course, no party—whatever its ideological preferences and whatever its "class" commitments—could afford to turn the clock back. Whereas, prior to 1932, an administration in power could still make a primitive choice between being Keynesian or non-Keynesian, for the "welfare state" or against it, thereafter that choice was no longer a realistic possibility. For, choosing the non-Keynesian, "anti-welfare-state" position became synonymous with political suicide, and Herbert Hoover was probably the last president who was willing and able "to exercise the choice in favor of suicide."²⁹ Since then, the Republican party has had to imitate and adapt in order to survive. It has been unable to afford the luxury of its pre-Roosevelt orthodoxy. Today, though Republican hearts may still thrill to the McKinley liturgy, though the Roosevelt image may still be a favorite hate symbol, the desire to hold office is stronger than the ideological drive for self-immolation. Whatever the die-hards may say in the privacy of board rooms and banking houses, the Grand Old Party's actions can no longer live up to its old dogmas. In deed, if not in words, both the "modern" and antediluvian wings of the party must admit—however grudgingly—that compromise on economic issues represents "common sense rather than...historical betrayal."³⁰

²⁸ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁹ John K. Galbraith, *Economics and the Art of Controversy*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1955, pp. 100-01.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

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Two illustrations, both cited by John Kenneth Galbraith, should suffice to make the point. In the field of fiscal policy, the traditional Republican faith was in "automaticity"—a belief in the inherent regenerative powers of a free enterprise system. Prosperity and depression, so the argument went, are normal concomitants of economic activity. Just as nature has its own rhythm; just as seasons come and go; just as tides rise and fall, so a succession of good and bad times is inevitable. If depression strikes, the only thing to do is to let the disease run its course—to give the blood enough time to expel the impurities. As long as the basic organism is healthy, the free movement of prices, wages, and interest rates, the unfettered decisions of business men and the unobstructed mobility of labor, will soon restore a state of equilibrium. No attempt at outside manipulation, no effort at artificial respiration, can hasten recovery or improve the level of economic welfare.

This was an integral part of Republican campaign oratory—at least until eight years ago. "Until then," as Galbraith observes, "it was possible for many to suggest and for some to suppose that the notion of economic management was an evil invention of the Democratic party or that it was a mask for the power aspirations of political meddlers."³¹ But this is no longer the case. When, in the face of the 1954 recession, Mr. Eisenhower agreed that government has a responsibility to maintain economic stability, the debate over "automaticity" was abruptly terminated. The government, he conceded, "must be prepared to take preventive as well as remedial action" to cope with new situations. "Government must use its vast power to help maintain employment and purchasing power as well as to maintain reasonably stable prices." This, he added, "is not a start-and-stop responsibility, but a continuous one," and he promised to use all weapons at his disposal to deal with a developing crisis—including credit controls, debt management, budget flexibility, agricultural price supports, tax policy, and public works expenditures.³² Thus, the

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³² *Economic Report of the President*, January 28, 1954, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954.

need for periodic government intervention was settled as a serious political issue. While controversy may continue as to the methods, vigor, and timing of such intervention, the fundamental New Deal principle of contra-cyclical fiscal policy can no longer be contested. The noise of battle may linger, but the battle itself seems to be over.³³

The same is true of the controversy over the "welfare" state. Here, too, there is a wide gulf between political oratory and political action, between words and deeds. As late as 1952, the Republican presidential nominee could still invoke the traditional invective against creeping socialism, New Deal paternalism, and Fair Deal statism. Candidate Eisenhower, speaking at Boise, Idaho, could warn that statism had reached the point where the "government does everything but come in and wash the dishes for the housewife."³⁴ Lampooning a government pamphlet on the art of dishwashing, he could condemn the excessive zeal of bureaucratic meddlers. But, after eight years in office, President Eisenhower could no longer speak with sarcastic indignation. He could not point to the repeal of a single important welfare measure, nor even the discontinuance of the infamous pamphlet. The latter, it seems, has been reprinted several times since he assumed office. Though he once implied that ultimate security could be had only in prison, the President has approved the increase of social security benefits, and the extension of coverage to an estimated 6,000,000 people. He has signed into law an increase in the minimum wage from 75 cents to \$1.00 per hour, and has proposed an additional boost of 15 cents. (The Democrats have demanded no more than a 25-cent hourly increase.) Even on

³³ The principle at issue was formally written into law in the Employment Act of 1946: "The Congress hereby declares that it is the continuing policy and responsibility of the Federal Government to use all practicable means...to coordinate and utilize all its plans, functions, and resources for the purpose of creating and maintaining, in a manner calculated to foster and promote free competitive enterprise and the general welfare, conditions under which there will be afforded useful employment opportunities, including self-employment, for those able, willing, and seeking to work, and to promote *maximum* employment, production, and purchasing power." Public Law 304, 79th Congress, 2d Session, 1946; emphasis added.

³⁴ Quoted in Galbraith, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

the knotty question of medical care for the aged, President Eisenhower has claimed to differ with the opposition only on "methods," not on "goals." In short, the welfare state—despite disclaimers on the Right—is no longer an "either/or" issue in American politics. America, as Galbraith wryly suggests, is not a welfare state in principle, only in practice.

This readiness of the Right to foresake ideology—this opportunistic adjustment to economic reality—has had at least two related consequences. On the one hand, it was a factor in forestalling the cataclysmic upheavals prophesized in the Marxian dialectic; on the other, it contributed significantly to a deradicalization of the American Left. Familiar with the rapacious industrialism of the 19th century, Marx foresaw a continual concentration of income and wealth, an increase in proletarian misery, and a capitalist state unwilling to ameliorate the plight of the masses. He assumed, not altogether without justification that the ruling class would act as "a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie,"³⁵ and that it would resort to violence rather than surrender its prerogatives. Yet, in America (and some countries of Western Europe) this prophecy has not been borne out by events. The "economic royalists" have tried to retain their political influence, not through violence, but by meeting the exigencies of the political market place. They have tried to retain the basic framework of capitalism by accepting (however grudgingly) the principle of reform and by compromising with the economic demands of the masses. Despite their orthodox and doctrinaire predilections, they have swung to the Left and, in so doing, deradicalized the Left.³⁶

Of course, the outstanding example of the deradicalized Left is, as we have already suggested, the American trade union. Functioning pragmatically within the capitalist framework, it

³⁵ *The Communist Manifesto*. For an interesting comment on the class struggle and its relevance to America, see Marx's Letter to Weydemeyer, London, March 5, 1852.

³⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949; Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953; Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1960.

is as indigenous a part of the "establishment" as the corporation itself. And, to the extent that it has obtained for the rank-and-file such benefits as higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions; to the extent that it has been an instrument for assuring the worker of a fair share in the increased productivity of an affluent capitalism, the trade union has given the worker a stake in the system and prevented his alienation from it. The non-revolutionary mood of the American working class reflects, therefore, the simple fact that its members are generally satisfied with their lot and feel they can improve it by gradualist and peaceful means. They are not the wage slaves of the Marxian model—constantly ground down by subsistence wages and compelled to produce surplus value for their capitalist exploiters. In spite of notable exceptions, the *typical* American worker, at least today, is above all a complacent bourgeois. He lives in his own home—complete with central heating, refrigerator, cooking range, washing machine, and television. While the house is heavily mortgaged and the appliances purchased on the installment plan, the worker has a strong sense of ownership and the proud feeling that he, too, belongs to the propertied class. His chrome-laden automobile, his college-bred children, his participation in civic affairs are further symbols of his bourgeois status. So strong is his identification with the middle class that he does not find it either inconsistent or paradoxical to vote, occasionally at least, for the more conservative political party. In short, the worker of today does not conform to the stereotype of alienation. If anyone in America feels alienated, it is those intellectuals who regret that there are no more ideological worlds to conquer.

This deradicalization of the Left, like the moderation of extremism on the Right, was due largely to the success of the New Deal. It was the New Deal which demonstrated the feasibility of combatting depressions, promoting the redistribution of income, and enacting welfare legislation—without a *tabula rasa*, without an annihilation of the old order. By showing that a policy of reform was both workable and adequate, the New Deal underscored the virtues of gradualism and meliorism, and indicated that progress does not depend on a total transformation of the capitalist machinery. This blow against doctrinaire purism

was reinforced by a growing disillusionment with the "classless Utopia." After World War II, the American radical began to realize that the Soviet experiment had not resulted in the abolition of a class-based society—that the old ruling clique was simply replaced by, what Djilas calls, a "new class"³⁷ of managerial bureaucrats who control the workers, the peasants, the masses. As Schlesinger points out, "the Soviet experience has proved, if it has proved anything, that concentration of power creates classes whatever the system of ownership—classes under communism as well as under capitalism."³⁸ It has exposed the capacity of the single-party, all-powerful state for despotism and oppression. It has tended to bring the radical back into the historic tradition of liberalism—"to a belief in the integrity of the individual, in the limited state, in due process of law, in empiricism and gradualism."³⁹ The force of circumstance has shaken the radical's ancient dogmas, his faith in the transcendent beneficence of the "ideal" state. Respect for the facts has forced him to conclude that "man, being neither perfect morally nor perfect intellectually, cannot be trusted to use absolute power, public or private, with either virtue or wisdom."⁴⁰ Both the New Deal's success and a better understanding of totalitarianism have pushed the radical back toward the "vital center."

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Summarizing, then, it is not unfair to say (with Lord Bryce) that in American politics "all has been lost except office or the hope of it." It is possible to conclude (with Friedrich Engels) that Americans are "frightfully dense theoretically" and "almost wholly matter-of-fact" in their political thinking.⁴¹ But it is also,

³⁷ Milovan Djilas, *The New Class*, New York, Praeger, 1957.

³⁸ *The Vital Center*, p. 150.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴¹ Quoted in Nye, "Marx, the Nineties, and the American Myth," *op. cit.*

and perhaps more important, to recognize that it is precisely this hope of office and this "matter-of-fact" political thinking which have helped the American system to meet the pragmatic test. The system has "worked"—despite the lack of ideology, despite the spirit of moderation, despite the inconsistency and incoherence of party platforms. The economic problems confronting American statecraft have been met with remarkable success, and the people have been satisfied with the performance. Content with the general functioning of the economic mechanism, they have been disinclined to inquire into its theoretical structure. Their general apathy, as Seymour Lipset points out, reflects the fact that "the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved: the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state; and the democratic left has recognized that an increase in over-all state power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions for economic problems." At least on the domestic front, economic problems have been resolved without a resort to ideological blueprints. And, projecting the past, it is probable that the democratic class struggle of the future will be "a fight without ideologies, without red flags, without May Day parades."⁴²

Significantly enough, this atmosphere of moderation is not confined to the United States. Already there are signs in many countries of Western Europe that old symbols and ancient stereotypes have lost their appeal. With increased prosperity, rising incomes, and greater educational opportunities, the socio-economic isolation of the West European proletariats has been reduced and with it, their class-conscious militancy. No wonder a Swedish editor, commenting on conditions in his own country, can say that "politics is now boring," and that the only remaining issues are "whether the metal workers should get a nickel more an hour, the price of milk should be raised, or old-age pensions extended."⁴³ No wonder that political leaders in Great Britain,

⁴² Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man*, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1960, pp. 406, 408.

⁴³ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 406.

according to one of their number, often have the job of persuading "their followers that the traditional policy is still being carried out, even when this is demonstrably not true."⁴⁴ No wonder that the West German Socialists have abandoned everything but a ritualistic adherence to their erstwhile orthodoxy, and that the British Labour Party has recently decided to dispense even with that transparent formality.⁴⁵ One set of events, viz. those emerging from the industrial revolution, produced the ideological controversies of the last century. A different set of events, viz. the reforms to cope with that revolution, are successfully liquidating these controversies. And, on balance, this process of adjustment and pacification cannot be condemned except by the intellectuals (the ideologues of the Left and Right) who no longer find politics exciting—who no longer have an outlet for their idealistic dedication and utopian dreams.

In offering these conclusions, I do not mean to endorse either smugness or complacency, blandness or vacuity. As a student of politics, I am aware that a constitutional democracy, burdened with checks and balances, weighted in favor of weak and negative government, cannot easily shoulder the burdens of the positive state. This, I know, requires the catalytic influence of a strong president—the leadership of a Lincoln, a Wilson, a Theodore Roosevelt, or a Franklin Roosevelt—a president who is more than what Bagehot would have called an "uncommon man of common opinions." As an economist, I am also aware

⁴⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 405-06. This is the statement of Richard H. Crossman, Member of Parliament.

⁴⁵ At the annual conference of the British Labour Party in 1960, the delegates voted overwhelmingly (4,304,000 to 2,226,000) to take a revolutionary stride to the "right." Turning their backs on traditional socialist dogma, the delegates decided instead to give priority to a type of "New Deal" welfare program. They declared that the party's aims are broader than state ownership of industry, and that the major concern at the moment ought to be the elimination of class privilege. Over the violent objections of fundamentalists on the "left," the party endorsed a platform designed to improve its chances at the next election. Opting for pragmatic compromise rather than ideological purity, the party apparently felt that half a loaf was better than none. (*The New York Times*, October 7, 1960). On the growth of political pragmatism in Japan, see Denis Warner, "Prosperity Unlimited," *New Republic*, December 5, 1960, p. 10.

that the economic millennium is by no means at hand—that America today is confronted by public squalor in the midst of private affluence, by depressed areas and a declining growth rate, by hungry children and an inadequate system of medical care. Like President Kennedy, I am concerned about “an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space.” At the same time, I cannot believe that the election of Mr. Nixon would have doomed the nation or forestalled, in any crucial or ultimate sense, the solution of these problems. To be sure, Mr. Nixon might not have faced up to these problems with the same speed, vigor, and conviction as Mr. Kennedy. But, whatever his personal views or doctrinaire preferences, he too would have had to respond to the compulsions of American pragmatism. He too would have had to submit to the logic of events, the force of circumstances.

One final word, lest I be accused of incorrigible optimism. In the area of international relations, which presents probably the greatest challenge of our time, I view the future with less than sanguine anticipation. This is precisely the field in which ideology is strongest and pragmatism least persuasive—in America as well as in Western Europe and behind the Iron Curtain. There may be experiential tests for judging the performance of the “welfare” state or the effectiveness of a government stabilization policy; but by what pragmatic yardstick does the electorate measure the importance of defending Quemoy and Matsu, establishing a technical assistance program, or undertaking unilateral disarmament? How does the electorate make a non-ideological choice between aggressive liberation and competitive co-existence, between disengagement and brinkmanship, between East-West trade and economic warfare? Here there is an almost irreprehensible tendency for ideology to hamstring thought—for shibboleths to stifle imagination. Yet, unless the political leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain can learn to substitute facts for beliefs, scientific experience for doctrinaire preconceptions, and pragmatic rationality for emotional rabble-rousing, it is doubtful whether the world can escape atomic annihilation.