
Etceteras . . .

Two Worlds: Politics and Everything Else

ROBERT HIGGS

I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Even after I had earned my Ph.D., my dad used to look at me with a twinkle in his eye and tell me, "Son, the trouble with you is you don't know nothing." And he was right in regard to my knowing worthwhile, practical things and having the skills and prowess to get things done. But I know stupid when I see it.

And I see it all around me all the time, especially in the news and the social media. This is a bit of a mystery because we live in a world flush with marvelous achievements by people working in the sciences, technology, and the practical arts and crafts, so that a day rarely passes without the announcement of some new discovery, invention, or achievement to expand the understanding and practical attainments of the human race.

The key consideration here is that stupidity manifests itself especially, to a painful, almost unbearable degree, in politics and anything closely tied to politics—which is to say anything having to do with government as we now know it. Political discourse itself is enough to make even a person of moderate intelligence run away screaming. So much ignorance is on display, so much viciousness, so much ill-disguised envy and malevolence, so many unscrupulous attempts to take what belongs to other people and give it to those who have no just right to it. The stupidity, therefore, is not only an inability to connect real causes and effects but also an inability to do what is obviously right and decent as opposed to what is predatory and criminal albeit legal.

Do these two worlds—politics and nonpolitics—attract different kinds of people? Or are people the same everywhere, but politics makes those who enter that world

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stupid and morally dense, whereas people engaged in science, technology, and the practical arts and crafts must demonstrate that they can get worthwhile results—and know they can’t bail themselves out with smooth talk if they fail, at least not for long?

Well, I’m an economist, so I understand that prevailing incentives and constraints structure people’s actions. If one enters a world in which violence, extortion, and fraud are the chief means of attaining one’s objectives, one learns how to sharpen those swords and use them to maximum effect. That’s the world of politics—dishonest at its very core, a blatant attempt to paint lipstick on the plundering pig, to declare indispensable an enormous mass of what could well be dispensed with because it amounts to nothing more than bullying one’s fellows.

Yet, even with the recognition of how different incentives and constraints foster different styles of discourse and conduct, it is hard to reject the hypothesis that as a rule people are not the same in the two worlds. If you are tough and aggressive, you have a better chance as a prize fighter than you would have if you are delicate and meek. It’s not by chance that so many slimy ne’er-do-wells rise to the top in politics. They are the kind of people who have a comparative advantage in operating a violent extortion racket. If they were inclined to live a life of kindness and personal assistance to those who deserve their help, they would avoid politics as if it were the plague and devote themselves instead to any of the countless callings in which honesty, diligence, and kindness have a payoff, at least on a local level, if not in “saving the world.” (Such colossal saving, of course, can never be realistically expected on a national or global level in any event, and those who promise to attain it—always with vast amounts of state power and shiploads of other people’s money—would in an intelligent world be recognized as charlatans.)

But in the world of politics and the professions it stains, we are deluged with wars to end all wars; with trade wars to achieve complete free trade; with socialist, fascist, and communist fantasies of a New World lying just beyond the political horizon. The connivers who promise these shining futures break plenty of eggs, as everyone knows, but the omelet never comes forth. And because politics is stupid, multitudes of people persist in the conviction that if only the right imposters or a better-formulated central plan were in place, all would be wonderful under systems and projects that have only piled corpses high in past implementations. In science, technology, and the practical arts, people learn from experience, and if their projects fail, they move on to something more promising. In the world of politics, however, people never learn, and they repeat the same species of mistakes in a perpetual cycle.

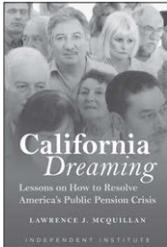
In reaction to the foregoing considerations, someone can always be expected to reply, “You can leave politics alone, but politics won’t leave you alone.” And there is some truth to this hackneyed observation. Its true implication, however, is not, as its advancers imagine, that we must soldier on in political struggles, like it or not, to protect whatever we can, lest we lose everything.

That promise, too, is vain. If we must devote ourselves to politics, if doing so is unavoidable, then we have simply conceded that we live in a world of irremediable

stupidity and brutality, a world in which scientists, technologists, and practical entrepreneurs, creators, and builders may be permitted to go about their work, but only in fetters and in the knowledge that whatever good thing they bring forth will be put, sooner or later, to an evil end as a result of politics.

On the eve of World War II, the poet W. H. Auden told us that we must love one another or die. We might also recognize—indeed, it is almost the same admonition—that we must find a way to escape from politics, from government as we now know it, or we will die. The systematic organization of hatreds—the very core of politics—cannot yield any other fruit.

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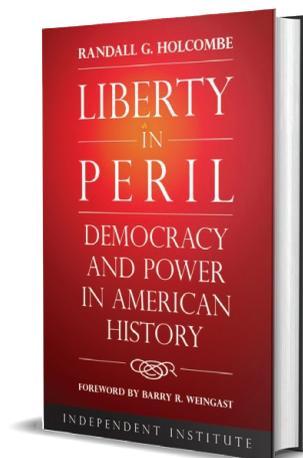
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