Political Virtue and the Choice of a Public Life

by

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Once, in a Harvard lecture course on 15th and 16th century Japanese history attended by four hundred students, our Australian professor said of some anecdote concerning Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the dynasty of Shoguns that ruled Japan for the best part of three centuries, that "the following will not be of interest to those of you who do not wish to become senators -- those two of you are excused from paying attention." My Harvard class of 1989 has produced two participants in a very different sort of Federal institution, since two of my classmates went to jail in the early '90's for stealing merger briefs from Cravath (where one of them worked as a paralegal) and trading on them. The class has, as yet, produced no Federal senators, though its US citizen members have been constitutionally eligible to run in only a handful of elections. The Harvard class of 1989 has produced at least four political science PhDs and an Oxford DPhil in international relations (and Professor Sabl can, as I recall, be claimed by the class of 1990). Whether we political scientists should be regarded as proud or humble graduates of an institution that aspires or pretends to aspire to educate the American elite is a question I shall leave for your reflection.

In any case, the following remarks will be of interest only to those of you who wish to be teachers of senators and presidents, or who are concerned with the problem of teaching students to wish to be senators and presidents. In the best regime, Aristotle tells us, the best man and the best citizen are one and the same. That is to say, the understanding inculcated by the best political order of how a person ought to wish to live up to his or her responsibilities as a member of the community is in fact the correct account of how a person ought to wish to live his or her life.

The Aristotelian formulation, that only in the best regime is the best life that of the best citizen, leads the empirical political scientist immediately to two kinds of questions about the

American regime. First, what is it to be the best American citizen, and are there one or many ways that we Americans regard as equally worthy? Second, would someone who can choose how to live his or her life choose to live it as a political life within American institutions?

The first type of question comprehends questions about America. Such questions are addressed by my fellow panelists Andrew Sabl in Ruling Passions and Jeffrey Tulis in The Rhetorical Presidency, in my opinion the two best books about the American regime to be published in the last forty years.[1] The second type of question comprehends questions about ethics simply, and as such will be of interest to serious men and women as long as the American experience is still lived or can be recalled through historical inquiry.

For one who would educate senators, the fact of pluralism in America, the fact that not everyone lives the life of senator or the nearest imitation their resources and talents can muster, is not the issue. The fact that there are many different roles in American society does not distinguish it from societies which are not pluralistic. A traditional lamaistic society is not pluralistic merely because not everyone is or can aspire to be a lama. The hard question is whether there are a number of ways of living, within our society, none of which is clearly inferior as a choice to any other life for someone who is in a position to choose among them. Our quick answer is that such a plurality of lives indeed is present for us, or rather for our students, for the young man or woman who is in a position to choose how to live.

One among the lives available must be the life of political activity, or, to give Professor Sabl's thesis its due, some among the lives available to choice must be the lives of political activity, since Professor Sabl argues that there are distinct roles or offices within the American regime. Professor Sabl discusses the legislator, the moral activist, and the organizer, and shows that each of these roles has distinct ways of being lived well or badly.

Professor Sabl's method assumes that political activity is available as a choice, but it cannot show that it is worthy of choice. Professor Sabl's analysis shows merely that certain key roles within the American system can be lived well or lived badly: he has not shown that someone who can choose how to live ought to choose how to live one of these key roles. Douglass Adair, writing in the middle of the previous century, states that: "From 1787 to the present, it has been the pride of Americans that their republican system invites every talented man in the United States to dream of occupying this supreme office with its noble opportunities for patriotic service and glory."[2] Adair is saying that not only is the presidency an object of aspiration for "every talented man", but that it is an inviting object of aspiration: it is an office to which a native born American citizen ought to aspire.

What Adair could cite as common opinion is for Glen Thurow, at the century's end, doubtful:

> When Wilson said that Lincoln made it possible to believe in America, he meant that Lincoln showed that those of the best character could be fostered by, attracted to, and admired by the American democracy. If the excellences of such persons can be both acknowledged and given their due in public speech, then such persons can be said to be embraced by the ruling opinion of a country and can feel a kinship with the political order. But if their virtues can appear in public speech only in a distorted or weakened manner, then they are part of the political order in an attenuated way or not at all …. What cannot be acknowledged in public does not fully belong to the regime.[3]

Are "the virtues" still demanded by public office in 2003 America? If so, do Americans value those who strive for the actualization of those virtues?

Perhaps something I observed wearing another hat as an Israeli political scientist will make the point clearer. I remember in the winter of 2000 hearing the Israeli popular singer Shlomo Artzi, on his Friday afternoon radio show, meditate on the fact that neither he nor any of his friends wanted to be prime minister of the country. Moreover, Mr. Artzi and his friends generally agreed that merely to want to be prime minister was a sign of mental illness. Israel is not America: the Israeli regime faces different and perhaps less desirable external circumstances. Israel also has different political roles or offices from those that Professors Sabl and Tulis have described. There is no equivalent in a parliamentary system to our president and senators, nor does a comprehensive (and unitary) welfare state make room for Alinskyite neighborhood organizations.

Professor Sabl's book is especially important because it illuminates the hypothetical character of the form of political inquiry in which he engages. He thereby illuminates the distinction between the hypothetical inquiry into the best ways of being an American public figure, and the absolute, or unhypothetical inquiry into whether one ought to be an American public figure. Now, in thinking about politics as a way of life we need to consider that not everyone in it goes into it because they are in a position to choose how to live. Most of us, and most of our students, have to find some way of making a living, and some find politics to be the easiest or the only way open to them of making a living.[4]

Others, it has been claimed, choose political life out of some kind of political bug: as Harry McPherson wrote, reflecting on his "education" as an aide to Senator and subsequently President Lyndon Johnson, "there will always be a species of the human animal that can find satisfaction only in the heat and glare of elective office."[5]

This "political bug" seems to be some kind of political insanity. Alexandre Kojève argues that one may attend to political duties simply out of satisfaction in a job well done.[6] Yet this satisfaction sounds like description of psychological obsession in the same way that many writers describe their urge to write as a psychological obsession. One may say that on this view we don't have to worry about why our students should go into politics, since we can only depend on the continued production of such sports of nature for the maintenance of our political regime. This does not mean that we should valorize those drawn obsessively to public life as types or encouraging the healthy to emulate the sick: Professor Sabl quotes Harold Lasswell's pronouncement, that "everyone is born a politician, and most of us outgrow it" (117).

Our relation to this political obsession can be analyzed in terms of an old joke. An elderly man suffers from the delusion that he is a chicken. The man's nephew shelters and feeds his uncle, but shields him from the attentions of psychiatrists. When called to account for this seeming delinquency, the nephew replies "Sure I know my uncle has a problem. But what can I do? We need the eggs." Even if the politically obsessed are socially useful, it would be exploitative and dishonest to attempt to inculcate this obsession in young, impressionable minds.

In the last forty years American politics has changed radically as a field of choice of lives. Once to be a professional politician meant to be a master in the ways of favor and patronage, while contesting control of elective office with amateur politicians. These amateurs, are, in the clearest case, men and a few women who lived for politics rather than from politics. As Edith Wharton reminds us at the end of <u>The Age of Innocence</u>, the ideal type of amateur politician is Theodore Roosevelt. Today to be a professional politician is to be an expert at the formulation and communication of positions: to know how, and when, to posture or take a position. Alan Ehrenhalt describes the changes in the talents of the typical legislator thus:

> The talent that counted most in Colorado politics in the 1950's was the talent to influence decisions in small private groups. Those who displayed it in their communities more often than not had the opportunity to display it in the legislature, if they so chose. Today these abilities still influence legislative decisions. But they do not, in very many cases, determine who serves. The makeup of the legislature is determined much more by … canvassing door-to-door, organizing caucuses, putting together a persuasive piece of direct mail. They are the talents of an open political system, not a small private circle.[7]

Today's successful "amateur" politician relates to the professionals he works with the way the owner of a baseball team relates to his or her hired talent. Owning a baseball team is not a career but a possessing, and our students do not need to ask themselves whether they want to be owners of baseball teams any more than they need to ask themselves whether they wish to be newspaper owners or landlords of Sri Lankan tea estates. Whatever his virtues and vices, we cannot ask our students to model themselves after George W. Bush.

The transformation of American politics from patronage to ideology is one way that Machiavellian ideas have worked themselves out. In a closed political elite, political life is equivalent to life lived with friends and acquaintances; for public men, private life and public life are coextensive. The last well-studied example of someone who was brought up in this sort of closed political elite may have been Winston Churchill, who got a solid start in life thanks to his family connections and his mother's influence on her current and former admirers. Churchill reflects most seriously on the choice of a public life in his early novel Savrola, which I will discuss later.

Closed public life is open to two objections, both of them old and well-known stories in the tradition of political thought. First, the political elite may concern itself only with its own good, rather than that of those whom it rules. This is the charge of oligarchy, a charge made in the interest of the people. To borrow Michael Sandel's language, it is an objection that appeals to the good. Second, the political elite excludes those who are just as talented as its members. This is an objection that appeals to the right, since those who are talented but are nonetheless excluded are done an injustice. From the democratic perspective, the first objection is much more serious than the second.

Machiavelli taught us that there is a kind of potential in the people, in those who are not an elite and who do not aspire to be in the elite. This potential is a potential to be mobilized by a "new prince who makes everything new," he whom the older political language of the closed elite referred to as a demagogue. The life of such a "new prince" is a life in which public life, one's life as it is perceived by the mass that one works to mobilize, and private life, one's life as it is lived with one's aides, advisors, subordinates, friends, and lovers, are distinct. Here is the purest case of an American new prince, Lyndon Johnson, offering praise in Machiavellian terms to Everett Dirksen at a lunch in the Capitol at the end of the 1966 session of Congress:

> You have been fair with me, and you have been just with me. You have been good to me, but that is not very important to anybody, how you have been to me. You have tried to put the interest of the country first and to serve it.[8]

Why, though, would one choose to be a new prince, choose to live one's life as a shaper and director of public opinion and action? After all, one is thereby subordinating one's relations to those with whom one lives to success in impressing (or impressing upon) those with whom one does not live. Obviously our politics is populated by those who do live such lives-- but can the

choice to live the life of a Lyndon Johnson, say, be justified on reflection, or is it simply a certain pathology, if potentially, a socially useful pathology?

The problem is that the Machiavellian life is selfless: it involves the sacrifice of the goods of private life for the public good. Supposedly this sacrifice is compensated by fame. The head of state, Kojève writes,

> … will also want to extend his authority as far as possible within the State itself, by reducing to a minimum the number of those capable of only a servile obedience. In order to make it possible for him to be "satisfied" by their authentic "recognition," he will tend to "enfranchise" the slaves, "emancipate" the women, and reduce the authority of families over children by granting them their "majority" as soon as possible, to reduce the number of criminals and of the "unbalanced" of every variety, and to raise the "cultural" level (which clearly depends on the economic level) of all social classes to the highest degree possible.[9]

Johnson, the published volumes of Robert Caro's biography are sufficient to demonstrate, directed his whole life not merely to becoming president, but to becoming the greatest president of the greatest Republic in human history.[10] By instituting an egalitarian welfare state, Johnson aimed to realize equality and justice in America and thus to become a greater president than Lincoln or FDR. If we keep in mind Kojève's remark that "the head of state will be fully 'satisfied' only when his State encompasses the whole of mankind" (145), we can understand why the Vietnam War was as organic expression of Johnson's aspirations as the Great Society.

The judgment on which the leader's fame is based is primarily the "judgment of history." This fame is not a pleasure one can experience except in imagination, since one will not live to

hear the judgment of history, and so it is not clear why it is superior to imaginary pleasures. Moreover the judgment of history can produce fame only out of crises, which are the occasions for judgment. As Lincoln famously argued in the Lyceum address, one ambitious for fame will seek to foster or create crises in order to have an occasion for winning reputation. One who seeks fame, and the historians who award it, fail to weigh properly that political activity which consists in the avoidance of crises. Despite the efforts of Edmund Morris, Theodore Roosevelt will never receive the glory of having achieved the fruits of war without war vis-à-vis Germany in the 1902-03 clash over Venezuelan repayment of debts.[11] John F. Kennedy, conversely, will probably never lose the luster from his supposedly successful handling of the "Cuban missile crisis."

Fame to be satisfying must be permanent. The political community purports to be sempiternal: the commonwealth, as Cicero says, has unlike other living things no natural end. The new prince institutes a novus ordo seculorum, a new order of the ages that will forever perpetuate his fame. This motto is on one side of our dollar bill, and the head of George Washington, the greatest of the founders of our new order, is on the other side. Yet this order will be overwhelmed, in the end, if by no prior catastrophe than by the destruction of all life in the universe.[12] Winston Churchill raises this issue in his 1897 novel, Savrola, when he presents the reverie of the leading revolutionary in the imaginary republic of Laurania, the title character Savrola, as he gets up from his telescope through which he has been gazing to relax after an eventful day of speaking and conspiring:

> At last [Savrola] rose, his mind still far away from earth. [The dictator] Molara, [Savrola's revolutionary colleague] Moret, the party, all seemed misty and unreal; another world, a world more beautiful, a world of boundless possibilities

> enthralled his imagination. He thought of the future of Jupiter, of the incomprehensible periods of time that would elapse before the cooling process would render life possible on its surface, of the slow steady march of evolution, merciless, inexorable. How far would it carry them, the unborn inhabitants of an embryo world? Perhaps only to some vague distortion of the vital essence; perhaps further than he could dream of. All the problems would be solved, all the obstacles overcome; life would attain perfect development. And then fancy, overleaping space and time, carried the story to periods still more remote. The cooling process would continue; the perfect development of life would end in death; the whole solar system, the whole universe itself, would one day be cold and lifeless as a burned-out firework.[13]

When Savrola speaks of this meditation to Lucile, the beautiful wife of the Dictator, she asks him "To what purpose then are all our efforts?" "God knows," says Savrola, "but I can imagine that the drama would not be an uninteresting one to watch" (82-3).

Savrola, the political man, imagines himself a spectator of the drama in which he acts. That imagined spectacle cannot supply the want of a real motive for the sacrifice of the goods of private life in the struggle for public fame. In Laurania the State Ball is the central institution, and to court a beautiful woman is a "constitutional duty" (see pp. 59-60, 79). Savrola aims to restore the old republican regime that, in its halcyon days before the chaos and civil war from which the dictator Molara saved the Lauranians, combined private and public good harmoniously.

Savrola does not disgrace the reputation of its author, the 1953 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet Churchill's gifts as a novelist are not sufficient to show the old regime

of Laurania restored amid the technological and social circumstances of modernity. Revolutionary terror and the puritan prejudices of Savrola's colleagues drive him into exile at the very moment of his victory over Molara. Savrola eventually returns from exile, to serve as president of the restored republic with Lucile as his consort, or so we are told in a two-paragraph epilogue, but it is his failure rather than his triumph that Churchill's novel depicts.

Churchill's inability to reconcile the lives of theory, of pleasure, and of political activity in a novel may or may not impeach his own choice to live a public life. After all, Churchill's private life was not sacrificed to the cares of office, nor to the prurient puritanism of public opinion. But Churchill's flourishing in his own choice of life can hardly be used to justify to our students seeking a public life within the institutions of the American democracy.

At this point all I can do is end with a puzzle: the question of the relation between public life and the personal happiness of those who would take a lead in it goes back at least to Plato's fictional account of a conversation between Socrates and the would-be politician Callicles. Perhaps Americans no longer avow, with the common opinion that Douglass Adair could cite a mere half-century ago, that our "republican system invites every talented man [or woman] in the United States to dream" of our regime's "noble opportunities for patriotic service and glory." It is our obligation as political scientists to develop a clear account of how this faith in the perfection of American institutions was instilled, and how it died.[14]

Notes

[1]Andrew Sabl, Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jeffrey K. Tulis, The Rhetorical Presidency (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[2]Douglass Adair, "A Note on Certain of Hamilton's Pseudonyms" in Fame and the Founding Fathers (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1998), p. 400.

[3]Glen Thurow, "Presidential Character" in Martin Medhurst, ed. Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1996), 17.

[4]The best treatment of this aspect of public life and its contemporary consequences is Alan Ehrenhalt, The United States of Ambition: Politicians, Power, and the Pursuit of Office (New York: Times Books and Random House, 1991). Ehrenhalt believed that living from politics was more appealing to those who supported more government, that is, liberal activists. He notoriously predicted that the Republican Party could never retake Congress because he underestimated the number and determination of professional conservative activists of whom Speaker Gingrich himself was an ideal type.

[5]Harry McPherson, A Political Education: A Washington Memoir (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 454.

[6]Alexandre Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom", in Leo Strauss, On Tyranny, revised and expanded edition (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. 140-41.

[7]Ehrenhalt, United States of Ambition, p. 207.

[8]Neil MacNeil, Dirksen: Portrait of a Public Man (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1970), p. 281.

[9]Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," pp. 145-46.

[10]Robert Caro, The Years of Lyndon Johnson (New York: Knopf, 1982-), vol. I. The Path to Power, vol. 2 Means of Ascent, vol. 3 Master of the Senate.

[11]Edmund Morris, Theodore Rex (New York: Random House 2001).

[12]Christopher Lynch made this point at a panel on Machiavelli at the 2003 Western Political Science Association.

[13]Winston S. Churchill, Savrola: A Tale of the Revolution in Laurania (New York: Random House, 1956; originally published London: Macmillan, 1900), p. 34; my attention was drawn to Savrola by L. P. Arnn, "Principles and Phrases: The Place of Rhetoric in the Statesmanship of Winston Churchill" in Rhetoric and American Statesmanship, ed. Glen E. Thurow and Jeffrey D. Wallin (Durham: Carolina Academic Press and the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1984).

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