

Moral danger: the pursuit of power

MORAL CHOICES
COURSES BY NEWSPAPER

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By ROBERT W. TUCKER

Is there any relation between morality and politics? Or is politics the realm of the amoral—or worse, immoral—action?

These questions are asked with no less persistence, and provoke no less disagreement, today than in the past. They are not easily answered, but they will not go away.

The moral problem in politics responds to the distinctive nature of politics. Its central preoccupation with power; politics is set off from other spheres of human activity. The exercise of power over others—whether it is sought only as an indispensable means toward the achievement of some distant goal or as an end in itself—is the characteristic and distinguishing feature of politics.

MOREOVER, THE instruments by which the power of government is exercised are not limited as is the "politics" of any number of private organizations.

When it is aimed at controlling the state, politics seeks to command an institution that asserts the right to exercise a monopoly of coercion—above all, physical coercion—over society.

It is the means characteristic of the pursuit of power that raises the moral issue at its most fundamental level. The primary function of morality in politics may be defined as the acceptance of restraints on the modes of group conflict in societies where, because of a scarcity of goods (wealth, power, status, etc.), men cannot fulfill all of their desires.

Thus, one definition of morality in politics deals primarily not in terms of the ends men seek (however noble or base) but in terms of the restraints they observe in seeking those ends.

ADMITTEDLY, THIS manner of looking at the moral dimension in politics cannot be reconciled with the revolutionary for whom the ends of politics are everything, or very nearly so. It is at the polar extreme from the view expressed in Lenin's dictum: "Morality is a function of the struggle of the proletariat."

It is instead articulated by James Madison in "The Federalist Papers" (No. 51):

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

The first purpose of civil society is not to improve men but to restrain them, and not least of all to restrain the governors themselves.

IF THIS VIEW appears to many as too narrow, it is because we commonly overlook the relative novelty of a "politics of restraint."

It is, after all, only since the late 17th century that Western societies began to observe that most elementary of restraints in politics, the forbearance from killing or physically mistreating those who have lost out in the struggle for power.

Throughout much of the world today, this restraint, the beginning of constitutionalism, is not yet observed with any regularity. Even in Western societies, it was fully consolidated only quite recently.

American history affords notorious examples of groups—the Indians and the blacks—excluded in practice from a "politics of restraint" when daring to oppose, however peacefully, a status quo they found unbearable.

Examine ambitions experts tell women

Women with ambitions to climb the ladder of professional careers should pause during the climb to make sure they're enjoying themselves. If they don't like the climb, they probably won't like it when they reach the top.

The career advice was given at a conference for women in engineering at Michigan State University by Arminia J. Harness, national president of the Society of Women Engineers, and a former aeronautical engineer with the U.S. Air Force. She now is manager of laboratory planning with a division of Westinghouse in Richland, Wash.

"Women haven't gained the right to be mediocre," added Dr. Patricia Carrigan, chairman of the MSU board of trustees, who welcomed the participants. She is an executive administrator for employee relations at the General Motors Assembly Division in Warren.

She said women are under much less scrutiny than are men, and they may perform better and faster if they don't prove themselves as professionals. Dr. Carrigan said women have been late entrants in the career

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Once the moral restraints of constitutionalism are accepted, the relation between morality and politics varies greatly in modern societies. The American concern over morality in its domestic political life has always been something of a puzzle to Europeans. But this preoccupation has been with us from the beginning.

The Puritan impact on the early development of American political institutions was a heavy one, and the American Revolution was, as the late political scientist Clinton Rossiter has written, "preached from the pulpit." From Cotton Mather to Ralph Nader, moralists have played a continuing and major role in American political history.

WHAT HAVE BEEN the sources of evil that moralists have characteristically sought to root out of American society?

Clearly, the most visible and flagrant of all forms of corruption has been the use of public office for private gain. Venality remains today the chief sin in the eyes of many and is commonly so recognized by politicians.

During the Watergate crisis, former President Nixon thought it was sufficient to turn back his accusers by insisting that he was not "a crook" and that "nothing was stolen"—statements which the release of his tax returns tended to cast doubt upon. In equating political immorality with venality, Nixon was in tune with a view widely shared by Americans.

AT THE SAME time, there has been another and more profound view that, while not ignoring the use of public office for private gain, identifies immorality in politics primarily with the unlawful aggrandizement of power.

It is the latter concept that fueled the crusades against the trusts and the railroads in the 19th century and that underlies the contemporary attack upon corporate and governmental power by public interest groups.

The identification of corruption as the abuse of power was also at the heart of the case brought against Richard Nixon in the 1974 House impeachment proceedings.

Watergate illustrated, therefore, two quite different forms of corruption in politics.

One—personal gain—is the more readily recognized by the public, and it is the one that codes of ethics adopted for public officials commonly aim to eradicate.

The other—aggrandizement of power—is less easily comprehended, as the 1974 impeachment proceedings demonstrated. Yet it is the aggrandizement of power that many political theorists have seen as the supreme danger to a free society.

WE REMARKED earlier that Europeans have commonly seen Americans as a nation of moralists in politics. There is another side to the American character, though, and it is marked by suspicion of dogooders in the political arena.

The roots of this suspicion may be traced in part to the prevailing American view of politics, which is clearly pragmatic. In part it may also be traced to the conviction that politics is a special realm, a "lower calling" that attracts only the "second best."

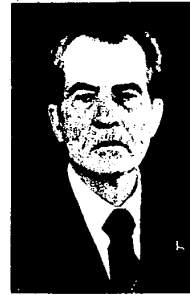
While this view is altering today, its force is far from spent, and it has not

been eliminated by public acceptance of the need to improve the moral level of political life.

But we remain today, as in the past, quite ambivalent about the proper role of morality in politics. A passion to infuse politics with moral purity is coupled with a certain skepticism about the appropriateness of linking these separate spheres of life.

As Americans painfully discovered in the case of Prohibition, efforts to promote morality through governmental action have the effect of debasing rather than purifying the political process.

Moreover, in their voting behavior, Americans have always evidenced a certain fondness for pragmatists as



The administrations of (from left) Ulysses S. Grant, Warren G. Harding and Richard M. Nixon at aggrandizement of power that aroused the moral indignation of the American people. were marked by corruption, scandals and attempts

political leaders. Given their idealistic tradition, Americans still tend to respond positively to a political leader who summons them to embark on a great crusade.

Politics is, after all, still something

of a morality play in the United States. But the people are only likely to follow such a leader with their votes if—like Franklin D. Roosevelt or Dwight D. Eisenhower—the crusader is perceived as having practical skill and judgment.

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