

“The Divine Science”: Political Engineering in American Culture*

AUSTIN RANNEY

The University of Wisconsin, Madison

Like my seventy-one predecessors, I hold the presidency of the American Political Science Association for one year. My term ends on September 5th, it is not renewable, I cannot be impeached, and my duties are largely ceremonial—for example, addressing such learned convocations as this. That being the case, I am especially sensitive to the fact that, by Act of Congress, the nation's official celebration of its two-hundredth birthday began on March 1st of this year.

Since the creation of the United States of America was, above all, a *political* act, it seems to me that we political scientists have a special obligation to celebrate the Bicentennium. *But how?* For guidance on this question, I turned to *Webster's Unabridged* to see just what a “celebration” is. As in previous safaris into that work, I found several meanings, and there is some question about which is most suitable for political scientists. One meaning is: “to honor by conducting religious, commemorative, or other solemn ceremonies or by refraining from ordinary business.” Not bad—especially if it means refraining from grading blue-books or serving on committees; but would our institutions continue to pay our salaries if we engaged in that kind of celebration? Another meaning is: “to demonstrate grateful and happy satisfaction [in a past event] by engaging in festivities, indulgence, merry-making, or other similar deviations from accustomed routine.” That is more like it; yet I doubt that all political scientists would go along with the part about “grateful and happy satisfaction” in the past event. Even more promising is a third meaning: “to observe the occasion of an achievement, reunion, anniversary, or other notable occasion with gaiety [by engaging] in hilarious festivities, usually including drinking.” Now *that* is not merely beguiling; it is empirically descriptive. But could we get our institutions to reimburse our expenses for celebrating in *that* manner, however traditional it may be for our profession?

So in the end I conclude we must settle for a fourth kind of celebration: “to portray [an event]

in a way to contribute to public awareness [and] edification. . . .”¹ I want to suggest in this paper that one way we can contribute to such a commemoration is to portray the creation of the American polity as history's first great political experiment and massive effort at political engineering. And by “political engineering” I mean the application of empirically derived general principles of individual and institutional behavior to fashion institutions intended to solve practical political problems.

Let me begin by explaining why that portrait, while certainly not the only one possible, is both accurate and useful.

The American Polity as an Experiment

Before the 1770s, with a few minor exceptions, no political system had ever been deliberately created at a single point in time to maximize certain general principles. All systems had “emerged” in the mists of history; they had evolved and changed; some had grown, others had declined, and some had died or been swallowed up. Consequently, all the people eager to *change* their systems—and there were many such before the 1770s—were constrained by multitudes of givens and enjoyed only small areas of freedom for maneuver.

But the visionaries who established “the first new nation”² in 1776 felt no such constraints. Anyone who reads their public broadsides and private letters cannot help being struck by how vivid was their sense of facing a *tabula rasa*, of having complete freedom to sweep away all the errors and injustices of the past and fashion *de novo* a truly just and enduring order. For example, in January, 1776, John Adams wrote to George Wythe:

You and I . . . have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government, more than of air, soil, or climate, for themselves or their children! When, before the present epocha, had three

* Many of the ideas presented here were generated in talks with various colleagues at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences during 1974–75. In addition, I am grateful to Joseph A. Ranney III for reading the manuscript and making many welcome contributions. All share much of the credit but none of the blame for its final version.

¹ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1965), p. 359.

² This is, of course, the felicitous title of Seymour Martin Lipset's study of the creation of the American nation: *The First New Nation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books edition, 1967).

millions of people full power and a fair opportunity to form and establish the wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive?³

And the Reverend John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey and teacher of James Madison, declared:

All the governments we have read of in former ages were settled by caprice or accident, by the influence of prevailing parties or particular persons, or prescribed by a conqueror. Important improvements indeed have been forced upon some constitutions by the spirit of daring men, supported by successful insurrections. But to see government in large and populous countries settled from its foundation by deliberate counsel, and directed immediately to the public good of the present and future generations . . . is certainly altogether new.⁴

How, then, did the nation's founders use this new and exhilarating freedom? If I am correct, they used it to create a new polity and thereby launched the world's first large-scale political experiment. Let me briefly list the reasons why I characterize the situation in these terms.

First, the new nation's political institutions were deliberately created at particular identifiable points in time—e.g., 1776, 1783, and 1787. Second, the new institutions' forms were the products of highly self-conscious efforts to apply to particular situations principles held to be universally valid. And third, those principles were derived largely from observations of and reflections upon historical and contemporary *experience*.

Yet the nascent American polity was not unique in any of these respects. Over a century earlier Oliver Cromwell's Puritans replaced the ancient political order they had smashed at Naseby and Marston Moor with England's first and only effort at a written Constitution. Their Instrument of Government was also promulgated at a single point in time (1653); and it too was based upon a series of universal principles, those which had won general acceptance in the parliamentary

³ In Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston, 1856), Vol. IV, p. 200.

⁴ Quoted in Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), pp. 414–415. The mood persisted: David Ramsay, a historian writing in 1789, said of the Revolution: "In no age before, and in no other country, did man ever possess an election of the kind of government under which he would choose to live. The constituent parts of the ancient free governments were thrown together by accident. The freedom of modern European governments was, for the most part, obtained by the concessions of liberality of monarchs or military leaders. In America alone, reason and liberty concurred in the formation of constitutions," *History of the American Revolution* (1789), I, 356, quoted in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), fn. 39, p. 273.

army's debates of the 1640s.⁵ But not only did that Constitution survive for only seven years; its Article XII institutionalized a principle entirely foreign to the ideas and institutions cherished by the men of Philadelphia in 1776 and 1787: ". . . the persons elected shall not have power to alter the government as it is hereby settled. . . ." ⁶

The designers of the American polity had much in common with Cromwell and his Ironsides, but in at least three respects they went much further and thereby gave the world a kind of political system it had not seen before. First, they did not regard the success or failure of their new institutions as matters to be deduced from First Principles or reaffirmed by declarations of faith; rather they were matters to be continually considered and reconsidered in the light of *experience*. Second, they both wished and expected that the institutions and their underlying principles would be changed if subsequent experience so indicated. And third, they built into their constitutions and charters orderly procedures for making whatever changes experience might require.

Thus the new American system was truly an experiment where Cromwell's Commonwealth was not. To be sure, if judged by the canons of twentieth-century social science, which require for an experiment the prior specification of all relevant variables, the exact matching of experimental and control groups, and the careful isolation of cause-effect relationships from all others, it was neither well designed nor complete. But even by those demanding (and seldom fulfilled) standards, the new polity was nevertheless experimental in spirit as no other had ever been: future generations of *people*, not divine forces, were to be its judges; change, not petrification, was its expectation; and, above all, a political *science* provided its intellectual foundations.

The Political Science and Engineering of America's Designers

The Designers' Belief in "Political Science." To begin with, anyone who reads widely in the writings of the Republic's designers will be impressed, as I was, by how often and approvingly they spoke of "the science of politics." John Adams did more than any other to popularize the term. In 1774, for example, he wrote in his first pamphlet on politics: ". . . as the divine science of politics is

⁵ The document's origins and political theory are described in C. H. Firth, *Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Puritans in England* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902); and Perez Zagorin, *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

⁶ The Instrument of Government (1653), Article XII, in C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, eds., *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660* (London: H. M.'s Stationery Office, 1911), II, 813–822.

the science of social happiness, and the blessings of society depend entirely on the constitutions of government . . . there can be no employment more agreeable to a benevolent mind than a research after the best."⁷ Moreover, the phrase meant to him very much what we mean by it; for he identified its basic goal and main procedures thus: ". . . aim at an exact knowledge of the nature, end, and means of government; compare the different forms of it with each other, and each of them with their effects on public and private happiness."⁸ And he added a remark about the divine science that only some of us will approve but all will recognize. In 1774 he wrote to James Warren: "You and I have too many cares and occupations, and therefore we must recommend it to Mrs. Warren, and her friend Mrs. Adams, to teach our sons the divine science of politics; and to be frank, I suspect they understand it better than we do."⁹

As Bernard Crick has correctly, though disappointingly, pointed out, both the label "political science" and the ideas it represented were embraced by most of the new polity's designers. The times, Crick suggests, demanded it: "In a young Federation of States, where many were fully conscious of how much its tenuous national unity depended upon deliberate political arrangements, it would not have been unexpected to see such a study at once spring forth, like a new Pallas Athene from the brow of Zeus, adult and fully armed."¹⁰

Most of the designers not only believed that a science of politics was possible and desirable; they were convinced that it had developed so much in their time that it had become the most reliable source of basic principles for engineering the new political institutions. Thus, Hamilton wrote in the *Ninth Federalist* paper:

If it had been found impracticable to have devised models of a more perfect structure, the enlightened friends to liberty would have been obliged to abandon the cause of that species of government as indefensible. The science of politics, however, like most other sciences, has received great improvement. The efficacy of various principles is now well understood, which were either not known at all, or imperfectly known to the ancients. The regular distribution of power into distinct departments; the introduction of legislative balances and checks . . . are wholly new discoveries, or have made their principal progress towards perfection in modern times. They are means, and powerful means, by which the excellencies of republican government may be retained and its imperfections lessened or avoided.¹¹

⁷ *Works*, IV, 193.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, IX, 339.

¹⁰ Bernard Crick, *The American Science of Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), p. 4.

¹¹ *The Federalist Papers* (McLean ed.; New York: Mentor Books, 1961), pp. 72-73.

The other designers agreed with James Wilson's admonition that "the foundations of political truth have been laid but lately: the genuine science of government, to no human science inferior in importance, is indeed but in its infancy. . . ." ¹² But they also agreed with Hamilton's judgment that the new political science was a good deal better than any other foundation available for building the new institutions. As he put it in the *Thirty-First Federalist*:

Though it cannot be pretended that the principles of moral and political knowledge have, in general, the same degree of certainty as those of the mathematics, yet they have much better claims in this respect than, to judge from the conduct of men in particular situations, we should be disposed to allow them. The obscurity is much oftener in the passions and prejudices of the reasoner than in the subject.¹³

George Washington, indeed, regarded instruction in the science of government as the most important mission of the national university he asked Congress to establish in 1796. He told them: "The more homogeneous our citizens can be made in these particulars, the greater will be our prospect of permanent union; and a primary object of such an institution should be, the education of our youth in the science of government."¹⁴

Congress did not follow Washington's advice. In our own time, sad to say, university budgets and foundation grants do not reflect the wisdom of the Father of Our Country any better. But at least Washington and his colleagues left us a good statement of educational priorities we may yet follow!

Indeed, some of them founded a short-lived but intriguing organization that might well be called the first American political science association. It called itself the Society for Political Enquiries. It was founded in Philadelphia in February, 1787, and it was in many respects the true philosophical ancestor of associations like this one. Its Charter proclaimed its central purpose to be "mutual improvement in the knowledge of government, and . . . the advancement of political science."¹⁵ And it declared this purpose to be of the highest order, because "the moral character and happiness of mankind, are so interwoven with the operations of government, and the progress of the arts and

¹² Quoted in A. J. Beitzinger, *A History of American Political Thought* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), p. 233.

¹³ *The Federalist*, p. 194.

¹⁴ Address to Congress, December 7, 1796, quoted in Crick, *The American Science of Politics*, p. 3. For Washington's other declarations along similar lines, see Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951), p. 155.

¹⁵ Quoted in Beitzinger, *A History of American Political Thought*, p. 232.

sciences is so dependent on the nature of our political institutions, that it is essential to the advancement of civilized society to give ample discussion to these topics."¹⁶

We can mark how much our discipline has grown by observing that the Society for Political Enquiries had forty-two members, compared with the twelve thousand individuals who now belong to the APSA. We can also see, with some pain perhaps, what has happened to the quality of the discipline's *leaders* by noting that the President of that association was Benjamin Franklin. And we can learn a lesson—though I am less confident of this—from the fact that the Society did not last very long nor do very much. Nothing I have read *completely* explains its early demise, but one of Franklin's biographers gives us a clue in his comment that "although the society had forty-two members, the meetings were only sparsely attended, since one of their number monopolized the proceedings with his incessant talking [although] Franklin said but little after a subject was broached."¹⁷ He does not identify the incessant talker—a type which still injects an element of hell into our divine science—but the only other two Society members he names are James Wilson and Thomas Paine. We may all form our own hypotheses.

But then as now, the science is more important than the scientists. Accordingly, I turn now to a description of the origins and main characteristics of the designers' political science and engineering.

The Origins of the Designers' Science of Politics.

1. *In Western Europe and England.* Despite Professor Crick's expectations, the designers' approach to politics did not "spring forth" instantaneously, "adult and fully armed." It emerged from a philosophical milieu which had developed in Western culture for three centuries. The epistemological and political consequences of the waning of the middle ages have been exhaustively analyzed by many great scholars, including Hui-zinga, Allen, Gierke, Lovejoy, McIlwain, and Sabine; and their accounts are far too complex to be discussed in any detail here. For my purposes, however, I have found particularly useful W. H. Greenleaf's brilliant work, *Order, Empiricism and Politics*,¹⁸ and the next few paragraphs are heavily indebted to his analysis.

¹⁶ Quoted in Paul W. Conner, *Poor Richard's Politicks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 106–107.

¹⁷ Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin, Philosopher & Man* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1965), p. 390.

¹⁸ W. H. Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism and Politics: Two Traditions of English Political Thought, 1500–1700* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

In political thought as in all other aspects of intellectual life, the medieval world was a world of authority and order based on divine revelation interpreted and expounded by the clergy of the universal church as the only source of truth. This world was shattered both by the Reformation, with its repudiation of the authoritative Church and clergy, and by the discoveries of the rapidly developing natural sciences, particularly astronomy and physics. Out of the debris emerged what Greenleaf identifies as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' three competing ways of viewing politics.

The first, he says, was the *theory of order*. It was expounded by such varied theorists as James I, Richard Hooker, Edward Forset, and Sir Robert Filmer. It rested upon revelation and metaphysics, and it sought truth mainly by the method of "argument by correspondence" or "analogy." In politics its devotees generally supported claims of divine right and royal prerogative.

This outlook was challenged in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by what Greenleaf calls the *theory of empiricism*. This new way of looking at things was first advanced by Francis Bacon and later by James Harrington, Sir William Temple, and Sir William Petty. It was based on the inductive analysis of facts observed from both history and the experience of contemporary governments. Its adherents were highly skeptical that valid or useful truth could be discovered by *any* form of purely deductive reasoning. And in politics they generally supported the ideas of "balanced government" and "limited monarchies."

As one of their principal tools the English empiricists developed "statistics" in the original meaning of the word. The point is worth noting briefly. The empiricists sought to foster what they called "statists"—that is, men who had had wide personal experience in and knowledge of political affairs and had, as a result, gained skill in their management. So the "statists" developed "statistics"—which, in its original seventeenth-century usage, meant simply "an empirical, comparative approach to the study of politics without any necessary or exclusive numerical emphasis."¹⁹ As William Kruskal points out, "This activity gradually centered on numerical tables of economic, demographic, and political facts, and thus 'statistics' came to mean the assembly and analysis of numerical tables."²⁰ But up to the mid-nineteenth century it continued to mean *any* systematic collection of facts about governments.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

²⁰ In David L. Sills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company and the Free Press, 1968), XV, 209.

²¹ M. G. Kendall in Sills, XV, 224.

The empirical persuasion persisted through the eighteenth century and beyond, and those of its later adherents best known to the designers of the American Republic included Blackstone, Hume, Bolingbroke, Vico—and, above all, Montesquieu. It is the direct ancestor of the American science of politics, and one important element, though by no means the only one, in the ideology of the American revolution.

It was accompanied, and in some respects superseded, by a third way of looking at politics—that which Greenleaf calls the *theory of radical rationalism*. This approach was most prominent in the *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*. It moved away from the empiricists' sole reliance on the analysis of experience for the reasons most succinctly stated by Hobbes: "... the records [of experience], seeing they are of things done only, sometimes justly, sometimes unjustly, you can never by them know what right they had, but only what right they pretended."²² Hobbes adds that from history, only "examples of fact" can be derived, and not "any argument of right."

Radical rationalism relied mainly on deducing descriptive and prescriptive truths, not from divine revelation, but from First Principles, especially the Law of Nature. Historical and contemporary experience were considered not the sole source of truth but merely a quarry from which illustrations could be mined to clarify and lend persuasive force to the truths deduced by Right Reason from First Principles.

2. *The Ideas of the American Revolutionists*. It would be highly misleading to portray the men who made the Revolution of 1776 as single-minded disciples of empiricism or of radical rationalism. Most scholars agree with Gordon Wood's view that they drew their ideas from a *mélange* of sources. They both drew conclusions and bolstered their polemics from the empiricism of Bacon, Hume, Montesquieu, as well as the radical rationalism of Locke and Rousseau, and even the Puritan theology of Jonathan Edwards. Wood sums it up thus:

However imprecise, confused, and eclectic the colonist's gleanings from history and quotations from philosophers may seem to us, they represented to eighteenth-century Americans the experience and reason of the Western world. To most of the Revolutionaries there was no sense of incompatibility in their blending of history, rationalism, and scripture; all were mutually reinforcing ways of arriving at precepts about human and social behavior, ways of discovering those fundamentals "applicable to every Sort of Government, and not contrary to the common Understanding of Mankind." The coherence and significance of the Americans'

incredible jumble of references from every conceivable time and place come ultimately from the overriding purpose to which these references were put—the understanding of what John Adams called "the divine science of politics."²³

All very true; and Bernard Bailyn calls our attention to another significant characteristic of the Revolutionary pamphlets and broadsides:

"... for all their variety they have in common one distinctive characteristic: they are, to an unusual degree, *explanatory*. They reveal not merely positions taken but the reasons why positions were taken; they reveal motive and understanding: the assumptions, beliefs, and ideas—the articulated world view—that lay behind the manifest events of the time."²⁴

When at last the Revolutionary authors and their readers broke free from the dominion and institutions of England, a new need—and a new mood—arose in the land. The need was to construct new institutions to replace the old, and it was accomplished by the new state constitutions written and rewritten from 1775 on, by the Articles of Confederation, and, above all, by the new Federal Constitution written in 1787 and promulgated in 1789. While these needs were being faced and met, the nation's mood shifted more and more from the headiness of radical rationalism to the sobriety of empiricism.²⁵

Out of this confluence of Western intellectual heritage, revolutionary zeal, and pressing institutional necessities arose the new American political science and the institutional engineering based on it. That "divine science" and its application to the era's problems not only created the new polity. It also launched a faith in political and social engineering that has persisted ever since as one of the main elements in American political culture and one of the prime forces in American political behavior. I shall conclude this paper by assessing the problems and promise of this faith for our own time. But it seems to me we can understand it best by first examining its original version. I shall therefore now outline what seem to me to be the principal characteristics of the "divine science of politics" as preached and practiced in the 1770s and 1780s.

²³ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 7–8. For other expressions of this view, see Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, *passim*.; Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic*, *passim*.; Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, chap. VI; and Randolph Adams, *Political Ideas of the American Revolution* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1922), *passim*.

²⁴ Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, p. vi.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 231.

²² Quoted in Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism and Politics*, pp. 274–275.

Characteristics of the "Divine Science of Politics."

1. *Empiricism.* The political science of the nation's designers was, in the first instance, fundamentally *empirical*. That is, it was rooted in the conviction that the truth of propositions about politics is best tested by checking them against carefully observed experience. This note is sounded repeatedly in the Federalist papers. In the Twentieth paper, for example, Madison declares, "Experience is the oracle of truth; and where its responses are unequivocal, they ought to be conclusive and sacred."²⁶ And in the Fifty-Second paper, Madison, after posing the difficult practical question of how frequently elections should be held, avows, "Let us consult experience, the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found."²⁷

But what if experience contradicts well-established maxims? Hamilton faced just such a situation in the Thirty-Fourth paper when he confronted the clash between the new federal principle of coordinate status between states and nation on the one hand and on the other the often-cited maxim of Bodin that sovereignty is indivisible. In such a situation, Hamilton said:

To argue upon abstract principles that this co-ordinate authority cannot exist would be to set up theory and suppositions against fact and reality. However proper such reasonings might be to show that a thing *ought not to exist*, they are wholly to be rejected when they are made use of to prove that it *does not exist* contrary to the evidence of the fact itself.²⁸

What kinds of experience provided their data? The answer is: any they could lay their hands on. For example, the discussions of the Articles of Confederation, the deliberations in the Constitutional Convention, and the ratification debates were all loaded with references to the experience of the Amphyctionic Council and Achaean League of classical Greece, the Roman republic and empire, the medieval German states, the constitutional history of England, and the more recent experiences of such confederations as Poland, Switzerland, and the United Netherlands. But the experience most often cited was that of the various states under their post-Revolutionary constitutions and the nation under the Articles of Confederation.²⁹

2. *Primitive Methods.* The analytic and syn-

thetic methods of the 1780s were pretty primitive by the severe standards insisted on by Blalock, Tufté, and the article referees of our contemporary political science journals. The technique most often used was what C. B. Macpherson calls "the indolent inductive."³⁰ That is, both in making up their own minds and in arguing with others, the men of the 1780s typically ruminated on what they remembered from their history and travel books, the works of the great philosophers, their own experience in state governments, the reported experience of others, the state of affairs under the Articles, and a good deal of plain introspection.³¹

We modern political scientists, peering down at them from our lofty perch built on multiple regression, path analysis, polynomial conjoint analysis, and the like, may be inclined to view our forebears' primitive methods condescendingly (after all, none of them had the benefits of a Yale Ph.D.). We might even deny their claim to be developing a true "science of politics." But then there are today many physicists, microbiologists, and—God save the mark—*economists* who are just as ready to dispute *our* claim to be called "scientists." Condescension can be a double-edged sword. And in any case, I believe we should say of the men of the 1780s what Macpherson said of Sir William Temple and the English empiricists: "It is the kind of questions [they asked] and the way [they believed] they are to be answered, rather than the very imperfect way [they answered] them, that place [them] among the 'political scientists.'"³²

3. *Eagerness for Engineering.* Political scientists during the past thirty years have done a good deal of agonizing over whether the discipline can or should devote much of its talent and energy to developing knowledge immediately useful for the solution of practical social problems. The nation's designers were free of such agonies. They had no doubt that the purpose of the divine science was to develop ever better institutions, and they were confident that the state of the art was already well advanced and capable of achieving that purpose far better than it could be achieved by any other means. Indeed, they were always eager to take the best possible immediate action rather than eschew all action until they could be sure that what they did would survive unchanged for all time.³³ That,

³⁰ C. B. Macpherson, "Sir William Temple, Political Scientist?", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 9 (February, 1943), 39–54, at p. 46.

³¹ For an account of how important introspection was to John Adams, see John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 16.

³² C. B. Macpherson, "Sir William Temple, Political Scientist?", p. 47.

³³ Cf. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, pp. 300–301; and Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, pp. 594–595, 613–614.

²⁶ *The Federalist*, p. 138.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206, emphasis in the original.

²⁹ Cf. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1888), I, 35–37. For many specific illustrations, see Arthur Taylor Prescott's useful speech-by-speech account of the Constitutional Convention: *Drafting the Federal Constitution* (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), for example, pp. 64–82, 211–212.

I think, explains why they were often impatient with critics who attacked the new institutions because they were less than perfect. In the Thirty-Seventh *Federalist*, for example, Madison reviewed many of the difficult conflicts the Constitutional Convention had confronted and resolved, often by compromise. He added, with an understandable testiness, this comment: "[It is not surprising that] under the pressure of all these difficulties, the convention [was] forced into some deviations from that artificial structure and regular symmetry which an abstract view of the subject might lead an ingenious theorist to bestow on a Constitution planned in his closet or in his imagination . . ."³⁴

4. *Experimentation and Revision.* Of all the leitmotifs sounded in the divine science, the most often heard was the theme that all political institutions should be viewed, not as sacrosanct in every detail forever, but as best approximations of the moment, which should be revised as experience, improved science, and changed circumstances dictate. That is how they viewed the institutions they were revising. For example, Edmund Randolph, in presenting the Virginia Plan to the Constitutional Convention, "professed a high respect for the authors [of the Articles of Confederation], and considered them as having done all that patriots could do in the then infancy of the science of constitutions and confederacies. . . ."³⁵ And John Jay observed in the Second *Federalist* that the authors of the original union

. . . formed it almost as soon as they had a political existence; nay, at a time when their habitations were in flames, when many of their citizens were bleeding, and when the progress of hostility and desolation left little room for those calm and mature inquiries and reflections which must ever precede the formation of a wise and well-balanced government for a free people. It is not to be wondered at that a government instituted in times so inauspicious should on experiment be found greatly deficient and inadequate to the purpose it was intended to answer.³⁶

Moreover, the framers of the Constitution viewed their own handiwork in exactly the same experimental mood. In the Convention and afterward they repeatedly stressed the importance of building into any constitution mechanisms for review and amendment. Madison put this crucial point in the Thirty-Seventh *Federalist* as follows:

It has been shown in the course of these papers that the existing Confederation is founded on principles which are fallacious; that we must consequently change this first foundation, and with it the superstructure resting

upon it. It has been shown that the other confederacies which could be consulted as precedents have been vitiated by the same erroneous principles, and can therefore furnish no other light than that of beacons, which give warning of the course to be shunned, without pointing out that which ought to be pursued. The most that the convention could do in such a situation was to avoid the errors suggested by the past experience of other countries, as well as of our own, and to provide a convenient mode of rectifying their own errors, as future experience may unfold them.³⁷

5. *Model for Mankind.* The final characteristic of the designer's political science is their conviction, permeating everything they did, that the principles they were discovering and the institutional experiments they were launching provided a model for the rest of mankind. There are many expressions of this conviction, but the following statements by three of the divine science's greatest practitioners should give the flavor:

The first paragraph of the First *Federalist* paper, written by Alexander Hamilton, declares:

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important questions, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.³⁸

In the same vein, George Washington in his First Inaugural Address said: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as *deeply*, as *finally*, stated on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people."³⁹

And James Madison, reflecting in his twilight on the significance of the system he had helped so much to create, wrote to a friend: "The free system of government we have established is so congenial with reason, with common sense, and with a universal feeling, that it must produce approbation and a desire of imitation. . . . Our country, if it does justice to itself, will be the [workshop of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226, emphasis added. For an overview of the Framers' experimental mood, see Adrienne Koch, *Power, Morals, and the Founding Fathers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Great Seal Books, Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 1, 131-132.

³⁸ *The Federalist*, p. 33.

³⁹ Quoted in Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic*, p. 351, emphasis in the original.

³⁴ *The Federalist*, p. 230.

³⁵ Prescott, *Drafting the Federal Constitution*, p. 47.

³⁶ *The Federalist*, p. 39.

liberty], to the Civilized World, and do more than any other for the uncivilized."⁴⁰

The Problems and Promise of Political Engineering Today

That is how it seemed to the men who first developed and applied the divine science of politics. And that is how they came to embark upon their great experiment, the American way of government. Today, two hundred years later, that experiment and its consequences are still being praised, condemned, and—above all—*studied* all over the world.

And so they should be. Whatever else it may be, the Bicentennium is surely a time for students of government to ask questions of far more than antiquarian interest: How has the experiment worked out? But what standards should we evaluate it and all other experiments like it? What modifications in the original design have been made? With what consequences? What further modifications should be made? At what costs and with what anticipated benefits?

Prudence and compassion alike restrain me from using the few remaining pages of this paper to dispense my own answers to these tough questions. I want instead to suggest that whatever we may think of their craftsmanship, the Republic's designers launched a new faith in political engineering that has persisted strongly in American culture ever since. The main articles of that faith still hold that for every problem there is a solution. That it is better to do something about a problem than to do nothing even though the something may be less than perfect. That, above all, if we can figure out and establish the right *institutions*, the right policies are bound to follow.

That faith has animated our history's most powerful political movements. It sparked the Jacksonians' drive for long ballots, rotation in office, and convention-based parties. It undergirded the adoption of the Civil War constitutional amendments and the civil rights acts of the 1870s. It inspired the Progressives' crusade to cure the ills of democracy with more democracy, in the form of the initiative, the referendum, and the direct primary. And in my own lifetime it has stimulated and sustained the reforms of the New Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society.

It is, I suspect, a faith to which most in our profession still cling. Yet many of us today view it and its origins through the smoked glasses of Vietnam,

Watergate, inflationary depression, and the other great public failures of our grim times. Is it any wonder that we question, as our forebears seldom did, the whole idea of political and social engineering? We have too often seen how vast and disheartening are the gaps between the rich promises and the poor payoffs of so many of the public institutions and policies we count on most.

For example, who in my generation can ever forget the exaltation we felt when we heard John Kennedy declare in his inaugural: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."⁴¹ But also who among us can forget that Rusk, Rostow, MacNamara, and the other knights of Kennedy's Camelot joined with Lyndon Johnson to convert that noble sentiment into an ignoble war—a war which not only failed to secure either survival or liberty in South Vietnam but shook our confidence in ourselves and the world's confidence in us as never before?

By the same token, who can forget the excitement and hope with which we hailed Johnson's massive commitment of federal resources to a much nobler War on Poverty in 1964? Yet who can deny that eleven years later the modest gains for the poor have been matched or exceeded by the increasing tax burdens of the middle and working classes?

Then came John Mitchell, Spiro Agnew, and Richard Nixon. "Judge us by what we do, not by what we say," they said. Fair enough. By that standard, while they *spoke* often and eloquently of the need to restore law and order to America, what they *did* was to perpetrate the most corrupt and criminal national administration in our history.

With such enormous failures all too fresh in our minds, what place can we honestly give *today* to our traditional faith in political engineering? I, for one, feel that faith still merits a judgment once made by a wise man about the process of growing old: "It's not for sissies," he said, "but it beats the alternative." If the alternative in this case is the resigned acceptance of human impotence and passivity in the face of human misery, then surely political engineering, with all its faults and failures, beats that.

But perhaps we can improve it. Perhaps we can modify some of its flaws so as to narrow future gaps between promise and performance. Perhaps, for one, we can supplement the faith with an article of the physicians' creed: *first, do no harm.*

⁴⁰ Quoted in Koch, *Power, Morals, and the Founding Fathers*, p. 128. For other descriptions of the Framers' millennial sense of providing a model for the world, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), pp. 37–38; Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, pp. 139–140; and Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic*, p. 415.

⁴¹ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961, in Jay David, ed., *The Kennedy Reader* (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), p. 8.

Perhaps our leaders can present their programs as reasonable probabilities to alleviate some evils, not as moral certainties to end them forever. Perhaps we ordinary citizens can help our leaders achieve this enlightenment by paying more attention to what our political candidates have done and less to what they say they will do—and to how they say it. If you and I stop yearning for ideal leaders who sound like Churchill in the Battle of Britain, perhaps our actual leaders will less often seem like Hitler in the Battle of the Bunker.

Above all, perhaps we can recapture the *experimental* mood of the men who created the divine science, and constantly remind our students and ourselves that *every* institution and program is at best a reasonable guess about what might work; that we must constantly check experience to see how well or badly it is working; and that we must always stand ready to preserve what is working and change what is not.

Like every people and every polity, we must, in the end, risk our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor upon faith, not certainty. But let that faith rest on Madison's conviction that *experience* is "the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found."

Conclusion

Finally, then, what can we in the long night of Vietnam and Watergate say about the birth of the divine science of politics in the golden age of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? Looking back on that epoch through the dimness of our remoteness and our disillusion, perhaps we can say of it only what the elderly

Wordsworth said while musing on his youthful enthusiasm for the French Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.⁴²

I think we can do better than that for our own Revolution. I think we might well give the final say to the *Fourth* President of the American Political Science Association. The first words of James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* do very well as the last words of this paper:

The institutions of the United States are deemed by inhabitants and admitted by strangers to be a matter of more general interest than those of the not less famous nations of the Old World. . . . They represent an experiment in the rule of the multitude, tried on a scale unprecedentedly vast, and the results of which every one is concerned to watch. And yet they are something more than an experiment, for they are believed to disclose and display the type of institutions towards which, as by a law of fate, the rest of civilized mankind are forced to move, some with swifter, others with slower, but all with unresting feet.⁴³

And he added: "American history, of which Europeans know scarcely anything, may be wanting in colour and romance when compared with the annals of the great states of the Old World; but it is eminently rich in political instruction."⁴⁴

⁴² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XI, lines 108–9.

⁴³ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, I, 1–2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 6.