
**An American Defense
of Politics, of Government
and Maybe Even of Congress**

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I.

I am not a politician, as Ambrose Bierce said, and my other habits are good. I do watch politicians on C-SPAN, and see them on "The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour" and CNN and sometimes even, as we now say, "live" (I mean really alive, in their actual flesh and blood). I have a different opinion about their collective obnoxiousness and the obnoxiousness of their institutions than the one vividly expressed by many of my fellow citizens. I live outside the Beltway, but I don't hate Washington. I don't hate politicians. I don't hate "government," as most of Mr. Clinton's recent predecessors have said that one should. And -- perhaps most shocking -- I don't even hate *Congress*, as both of his opponents in the election last year implied that one should, and as almost everyone seems automatically to assume that one should. I propose to venture a word or two in defense -- in distinctly *American* defense -- of these much disdained parts of our national life.

I believe that the venture of defending politics, Washington, government and Congress -- which I certainly recognize to be, in the current climate of opinion, uphill work -- is nevertheless in the spirit of the Poynter Center at Indiana University. Twenty years ago, when Nelson Poynter, at IU Chancellor Herman Wells' instigation, gave his gift to his alma mater, the guiding topic that these two outstanding Hoosiers chose for the use of that money was "the credibility of American institutions." Mr. Poynter's gifts, and then the Poynter Center, were to do their part to combat the increased cynicism and skepticism that the polls showed that the

American people felt for American institutions -- for the professions, the business world, the universities, the churches and particularly -- and of particular interest to Nelson Poynter -- the press and the government. I want to say a word now, twenty years later, about American cynicism toward politics and government.

About a year after Mr. Poynter's initial benefaction to I.U., an unbelievable series of events occurred that certainly did nothing to discourage public cynicism. Mr. Poynter was careful to point out that the gift had been given and the Center had been founded *before* Watergate had provided so dramatic a revelation of the reasons Americans might now have for disbelieving their leaders. In other words, there was in his mind -- and ours, too -- a persisting problem larger than the response to that one episode.

But, in a way, Watergate did vindicate the importance of that first focus of the work of the Poynter Center -- the fabric of institutional believability and trustworthiness. And Watergate also markedly increased attention to what would become the second focus of the Poynter Center: the ethics *of*, and ethics *in*, American institutions. Watergate did for ethics something like what James Watt at the Interior Department did for the Sierra Club and the environmental movement: By furnishing a stark and real example of the evils and the perils, it stimulated a sharply increased attention to threatened values.

The anti-governmental and anti-political cynicism to which I have referred was indeed reinforced by the actions and characteristics of two successive presidents, Lyndon Johnson and

Richard Nixon. The original Poynter Center word "credibility," and its close association with the word "gap," entered the general vocabulary as applied to Lyndon Johnson and his representatives in the years 1965-68, as he and they made their many attempts to defend the Vietnam War. The phenomenon the phrase described was reinforced by aspects of the presidency of Richard Nixon even before Watergate made the point with multiple exclamation points.

Now we have a new occupant of the office Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon once filled. He has come into his high office following a long string of predecessors whose service was in some way incomplete or unsuccessful, and also a long string of predecessors who expressed disdain for the governmental institution of which, nevertheless, they proposed to be the chief executive. The incompleteness or lack of success included an assassination; a withdrawal of candidacy under fire; a resignation under threat of impeachment; a brief, uniquely unelected presidency; and, surrounding the one apparent exception, two presidents defeated for re-election after one term. The apparent exception to that sequence, Ronald Reagan's two terms, lost altitude in the public mind, first when it appeared with the Iran-Contra affair that that president was congenitally befuddled, and then, after the Reagan administration had ended, as the lasting negative economic consequences of those superficially rosy years -- rosy for some -- have come to be more widely understood.

As for disdain for government, in that sequence Mr. Reagan is the prime, but not the only, example. Every president since Lyndon Johnson has drawn

upon the anti-governmental strain, and the standardized hostility to "Washington," and to "politicians," that runs deep in American culture. Even the one Democrat in the group, Jimmy Carter, had his version of these familiar themes, insisting (all too truthfully, as it turned out) that he was an outsider, untainted by the ways of Washington.

Now we can formulate a hope for Mr. Clinton's presidency, in these days when, despite its troubles, it is still new, and it is still possible to have hopes. Perhaps in the longer run Mr. Clinton will provide the simultaneous ending to both of these sequences of recent presidential history. Perhaps he will be -- it is still early enough for one to hope he will be -- a president who is both a success and also a persuasive believer in the role of democratic government in human affairs. He just might help to restore a realistic attachment to democratic government, and therefore to politics and politicians, in the American people.

The anti-political and anti-governmental themes in American culture, of course, go much deeper than the response to presidents, whoever they may be and however they may conduct themselves. The original problem identified by Nelson Poynter -- public cynicism about American institutions -- has two sides: the institutions and their leaders, on the one side, and the public, on the other. The institutions may have deep faults, but the public may have even deeper prejudices. Leaders may do reprehensible deeds, and those deeds may cause negative public judgments that are, up to a point, justifiable. But the public, for its part, may carry those negative judgments far beyond that point. The

public may indulge in inappropriately sweeping negative generalizations; may develop lazy stereotypes; may draw upon persisting cultural attitudes. In other words, the cynical atmosphere that the original IU Poynter project was intended to combat may be the fault not only of defective institutions and unworthy leaders but also of the public and its thoughtless attitudes. I remember once when "politicians" were being criticized for some among their many faults the intelligent and worthy public servant Barney Frank of Massachusetts responded with a remark one almost never hears American politicians utter: "Yes," he said, "that's true -- but the people aren't such a bargain either."

II.

The attitudes I refer to are so ubiquitous as not to need illustrating, but I will illustrate them anyway. Let us note first of all that they have a long history. Disdaining politics, disdaining Washington, disdaining *government itself*, above all disdaining Congress, is by no means new. In the late nineteenth century, Ambrose Bierce could get a laugh with the line I have already quoted. Mark Twain got many laughs with many lines like: "Reader, suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were member of Congress -- but I repeat myself." Thoreau's classic 1848 essay now called "On Civil Disobedience" is anti-political and anti-governmental to the point of anarchism; that would indicate both that such attitudes go well back into our history and that they do not arise solely from what became the conservative side, or the

laissez faire ideology, that developed after the Civil War. An anti-political attitude is apparent on the left as well as the right; together they created a pincers movement in the 1960s, some effects of which are still with us. We could put our hopes for a Clinton presidency this way: that it would simultaneously diminish both of these inherited forms of anti-politics.

We have recently experienced particularly virulent forms of these old American diseases. One evidence is the Ross Perot movement, which, mingling a desirable focus on the deficit and the economy with an undesirable anti-political attitude (anti-political in its authoritarianism, its simplicism and its plebiscitary populism), managed to get 19 percent of the vote in a presidential election, and to draw even higher approval ratings at the time of this writing. Another evidence is the term limits movement, promoted by, among many others, IU Poynter Fellow George Will, but soundly attacked by two-time IU Poynter Fellow David Broder. Still another evidence is the automatic anti-incumbent mood that manifested itself for a time last year and the year before, an outlook that even included the proposal by THRO, a Florida-based organization, to throw *all* the rascals out, without selectivity, as though they then could be replaced by some other sort of creature, from some planet where politics is unknown. You won't design the right reforms if you start with a warped and cynical idea of the institution you are proposing to reform.

Then, of course, there is the pungent evidence of citizens on talk shows. The only ones I listen to are on C-SPAN, but that's enough. One constant

thread in the citizen comments is the sense of disdainful superiority to politicians. Newton, New Jersey, said that her sixth grade class could do a better job than these clowns in Washington. Raleigh, Texas, said of Congress working on the budget that these guys couldn't hit water if they fell out of a boat. Santa Barbara, California, said that these men act like a bunch of kids playing with candy. Long Island, New York, said that they are running government like a gong show. Santa Anna, California, said it was a circus in Washington, and that *all* the committees should be purged. Pampa, Texas, said that members of Congress are hypocritical rascals and he would vote against *all* of them.

To be sure, many political leaders, or many acts and positions of particular political leaders, deserve disapproval and even condemnation, but surely one should be selective. And some of our political institutions do require reform, but by what criteria? By the criteria appropriate to them -- to the political institutions of a free republic, and not by those appropriate to some other institution or activity. Most often, the popular criteria for evaluating the nation's political institutions are likely to be either the wrong one of sheer efficiency, or the wrong one of sheer plebiscitary democracy -- decision making by mindless button pushing, poll taking and number counting.

As to business-style efficiency as a criterion, Redondo Beach, California, says, "Those people couldn't run my dry cleaning business." Albuquerque, New Mexico, says "Politics stinks. I think we should run this country like a business. The American Way is to Hire and Fire." But the American way in *political*

institutions is *not* to hire and fire; that command-and-obey hierarchical principle, by which many human societies *do* make their decisions and which all societies, including our own, use in some settings, was not to be the ultimate ruling principle here. Our forefathers rejected that principle as they perceived it in the person of King George and his royal governors, and we have kept on rejecting it. A symbol of our rejection of that way of doing things was our insistence that the most important command-and-obey institution, the military, was to be subordinate to a popularly chosen civilian -- to an authority that emerged out of the give-and-take of politics.

The implicit or explicit criterion of "efficiency" and the comparison to business recur constantly, without much evidence that the critics perceive that those criteria are inappropriate. Trim "efficiency" may be a criterion where the goal is settled and indisputable and execution the only issue, as is theoretically the case in a business seeking profits and in a war seeking victory, but it is the wrong criterion for the legislative body of a republic, in which -- it is the glory of such a political system to say -- the goals themselves are in continual dispute.

Good government critics of a large partisan Board of Aldermen chosen by wards in an Eastern city, used to say that if it were made over into a smaller nonpartisan board chosen city-wide it would attract "better people." (You will understand that this analysis somehow lacked appeal to those of us then serving on the board.)

The good government people also argued that their small civic-minded, nonpartisan, better-people board could do

the work of the city more efficiently than "politicians," because "there is no Republican or Democratic way to pave the streets." But there are differences over which streets to pave, and whether to pave them or to spend the money elsewhere or to reduce taxes instead -- differences not of mere administration but of policy, which involves both differing values and differing interests, and therefore, in a free country, politics. The republican form of government that our forefathers worked out, using the experience of many other peoples across many centuries, was government not by authoritarian command but by mutual deliberation. That mutual deliberation was to be carried out through representative institutions, borne on a great sea of free public argument. To establish such a government -- of, by and for the people, government resting on consent of the governed -- was a great human achievement, but its greatness does not rest in its being "efficient."

Not "efficient," that is, in the way that word is usually applied, in a technologically advanced commercial society -- "business-like"; swift; "It's just that simple"; trains run on time; find the "one best way" and do it, pronto. A republican form of government should aspire to be efficient in its own terms, but not by rolling over people, making everyone shut up, ignoring important human interests and values or tearing up the First Amendment. It is still one of the great historic events of recent years that, with all its faults and Yeltsin's troubles, the Russian Parliament will now no longer be an "efficient" body.

Another sign that one does not comprehend the institution's essence is the stereotype of the individual who serves in

it -- the politician. If one does not recognize the nature of the work at hand, then one does not honor the attributes that that difficult vocation requires. Does the member of Congress deserve contempt because he or she is not a worthy member of Congress? Or because there is no such thing -- because the phrase "worthy member of Congress," as the jokes would surely have it, is an oxymoron? Many comments imply that the attributes of a "politician" are in themselves contemptible. A Congressperson is then disdained not for being a *bad* member of Congress but at least implicitly for not being something else -- a CEO, a four-star general, a talk show host, a feminist literary critic or a starting pitcher.

Citizens deploring politicians have this subtle advantage over politicians themselves: They don't have to share any collective guilt for the nonsense put forward by other citizens deploring politics. IU Poynter Fellow William Buckley has famously said that he would rather be ruled by the first hundred names in the Cambridge telephone book than by the Harvard faculty. Any veteran of faculty meetings might agree, but that's not the issue. The issue has to do with the persons actually produced by the political system: those seeking and holding public office. For example: Would the Senate and the House really be better, as many such callers imply, if composed of the next 535 callers to talk shows? Listen carefully before you answer. One talk show caller says that Congressmen are elected by Americans but instead work for "countries like Europe and Israel"; another attests her impartiality by saying she would be willing to vote for anyone -- "man, woman or independent"; a Democrat-who--

votes-Republican from Texas complains that "the hierarchy of our (Democratic) party has totally deserted the heterosexual taxpayer" (a category I had not previously thought of). How about that citizen who asked why they always make the *taxpayer* pay for all these programs; why don't they, instead, just have the *government* pay for them? (Actually, that proposal has a certain resemblance to what we did during the 1980s.) Denouncers of politicians have an implicit picture of a smoothly working, ideal political system composed of persons like themselves. For a real test, though, they would have to include in their picture the callers who preceded them, the callers who followed them, the callers who were so enraged by their comments that they kicked their TV sets.

That is the important point: Many politics-bashers do not include in their equation the contradictions to their own views put forward by other, perhaps equally angry citizens. Editorialist One hates Congress for A; Editorialist Two hates Congress for Z; so long as they are separated, each can add wattage to the communal electricity sizzling Congress. Each is spared the necessity of combining with the impossible others to make an omelette of collective policy. But if you put the two editorialists in the same room, together with others endorsing G and L and X, all of whom also condemn Congress, you would not have a smoothly working common view. You would instead have something like -- Congress, except worse.

Any true picture of the political system must include a full presence of views opposite to one's own, as these views actually exist in the whole people. One sure giveaway that the complaining

citizen fails to understand the principle of the political system is the implicit, but blatant, expectation that it should be composed of representatives with views like the complainants' own. But the Constitution was written for a people who hold *different* philosophies, *different* values, *different* interests. That is its point and its genius. The political system is the primary arena in which those differences continually manifest themselves.

Part of the public hostility to political institutions springs from our unawareness, or our reluctance to admit, the many values and interests different from our own in this enormous, immensely variegated country; it is common to live in insulated pockets. We have parochialisms of the left and parochialisms of the right, both claiming to speak for "the people," and parochialisms of many other kinds; the federal government in general, and Congress in particular, earns some of its disfavor by the shock it continually presents to all our parochialisms.

The charge against "Washington" is that it is a self-enclosed world "inside the Beltway" that loses touch with the Peorias, Fort Lauderdals and Sioux Cities of the rest of the country -- with ordinary non-Washington citizenry. But is that charge, half true perhaps, the whole story? Surely Washington is much more connected to the rest of the country than New York, or Beverly Hills, or Palm Springs, or dozens of other protected or isolated enclaves (East Harlem and Watts as well), because Washington's core institutions are attached to the nation and its parts and its people by constitutional necessity. Sit in the gallery of the House and see the mosaic of the nation before

you, in all its immense diversity. Visit offices in the House office buildings; each one you enter is a new little world, a piece of Arizona with Indian artifacts on the walls, a limb of South Side Chicago with big shoulders and big projects, an offshoot of Vermont with syrup and pine trees. And, as they say in the advertisements, much more. Each of those 435 representatives is attached by the necessity of biennial votes and constant visits to a small piece of America; each of the 100 Senators is attached to a bigger piece. Even that occupant of the White House, in whom you are likely to be more interested, whether you like him or not, than you are in Congress (another unfortunate tendency of the public, this excessive concentration on the President) had to pay attention to the pieces and parts and localities of the nation in order to amass the electoral votes that got him there, and must continue to pay attention in order to do the things he proposes to do and to try to be re-elected.

Some objections to Washington really arise not because that city does not represent the country, but because it *does* -- the *whole* country, not just your little part of it. If the representative from Slow Rapids, Indiana, expects the federal city to be just another, larger version of his own home town, then of course he will be disillusioned. Peoria must learn that the Bronx exists, and Butte that there is a Hoboken, and Selma that there is a Watts, and vice versa. Washington represents America better than any of its parts do.

But there is another dimension in which it is true that Washington does *not* just "reflect" the country -- and it is good that it doesn't. "Washington" brings all those parts of the nation into conversation with each other, as no one of those parts

does, and out of that conversation (that clash of interests, but of values and arguments as well) emerges, often painfully, a *policy*, a *law*, for the nation as a whole. When Madison and other writers described representative, they pictured not only the contending and balancing of interests but also deliberation about the common good. Some of that deliberation, some of that common good, indeed may not be apparent back in Slow Rapids. But the high necessities of governing a powerful nation in a post-industrial nuclear age, shared by a vast collection of other responsible officials, may lead one, like Senator Arthur Vandenberg in the late '40s, to positions one would not have taken back in one's home town.

There is a sentimental picture of local small town virtue, coming to the corrupt capital and reforming it. That was certainly the theme of Frank Capra's popular old movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and there is some remnant of that theme in the otherwise rather sweet current movie, *Dave*. But I suggest a different view: All these Mr. Smiths come to Washington, and the better ones *change*.

III.

In 1991, *Washington Post* reporter E. J. Dionne wrote a book called *Why Americans Hate Politics*, a stimulating survey of thirty years of American politics and political ideas, informed and useful, full of valuable information and interpretation. I mention the book, however, only because of its title. Dionne argued that the reason Americans now hate

politics is that the political parties and political ideologies (conservative and liberal, with their variants) are still locked in the aftermath of the '60s, and offer choices the voter doesn't want -- choices growing out of the cultural politics that exploded in that decade. Americans hate politics, he wrote, because conservatives have failed to represent their interests while liberals have failed to represent their values. Well, maybe so. Certainly some important new elements have emerged in American politics since "cultural" or "social" issues came to play such a prominent part, and certainly the disdain for politics has been unusually intense in recent years.

But I want to make two additions, one ancient and one modern, to Dionne's answer to the implied question in his title. The ancient one is that the popular American hatred of or disdain for politics did not start in the aftermath of the 1960s. It has a long history. Dionne writes about getting "back" to some earlier condition, as though there were a time when "Americans" *didn't* hate politics. But I suggest, as already indicated above, that the anti-political strain goes very far back in the nation's history and culture. It is linked to American individualism, moralism and, for want of a better word, "harmonism" -- the too easy assumption that we all agree. It is linked, in other words, to a major aspect of the culture that took shape in the nineteenth century.

Simplifying for our purpose, we might see two streams of American cultural attitudes coming down through the years. One stream, beginning with the founders themselves, is a realistic affirmation of republican politics, which turns into a functioning two-party

democratic political system that makes the people's collective decisions and lasts across two centuries, one of the most successful political systems in the world, the envy of other peoples.

The other, anti-political stream, may have its headwaters in the religious revivals of the first half of the nineteenth century, but it has many tributaries. One tributary was the individualistic and anti-governmental side of the older liberalism, in this nation in which classical liberalism (i.e., individualism) was on the ground floor. Another was the utopian ingredient in the transcendentalism and reformism that succeeded puritanism. Another enormous tributary was the laissez faire ideology that accompanied expanding capitalism after the Civil War. And this big stream of anti-politics was fed by the material success of the new nation -- the great resource of a continent, new frontiers, an expanding economy. A great swath of middle class America could have the illusion that there could be a functioning society without "politics," with its necessary emphasis on interest, power and conflict. The Protestant middle classes of the American hinterland developed a pious and sentimental individualism and moralism in which "politics" was not necessary; the "good man," good will and harmony all around, would solve all problems. The picture of the world implicit in that attitude was still present, ready to be picked up by anti-political impulses more particular to recent times.

Still another ingredient, a modern one, must be added to the anti-political stew that Dionne describes. This one has to do with mass communication, and because that was another of Nelson

Poynter's chief interests, let's take a little longer look at it.

One hesitates to blame TV again, because it is such a cliché to do so, but clichés often hold truth. It is sad as well as ironic to hear Sig Mickelson of "CBS News" describe how elated the network news people felt, in their studio above Grand Central Station, at the end of the 1952 election, the first real television election: Now we would have real substantive debate! Short campaigns! Better candidates! A great improvement in our politics!

Nothing they expected has come to pass; politics in the TV age has gone in the opposite direction. What happened? Americans created, or allowed to be created, this quite peculiar new form of mass nationwide communication in which the content was designed and judged not on its own merits but by an antecedent purpose, to sell the attention of multi-millions to the merchants of beer, cheeseburgers, pickup trucks and hemorrhoid remedies. For ABC, NBC, CBS and their affiliates, the true message was not the one that the audience turned on the set to hear and see, but the one that interrupted it -- the message we will now take a break for, which comes from our sponsor. The numbers routinely achieved -- every night -- by American television in pursuit of that peculiar transaction surpassed the reach of the adjectives we used to employ for ordinary pre-television hugeness: 125 million people, including me, watched the final episode of "M.A.S.H." on February 28, 1983; 106.4 million American viewers watched prime time television on just your average, routine Sunday night; the sets were on five hours a day, six hours, seven hours.

Those numbers meant money -- huge sums of money -- and of course careers and lives and the survival of organizations were at stake, in a few points up or down, a few million people turning or not turning the knob of a winter's evening. If you could receive a dime from every person in just one nightly television audience, most people in the audience would not notice the loss, but a little mathematics will tell you that *you* would notice the gain. A great meter is ticking, all through the day and especially through those evening hours, and dozens of very highly paid persons sweat over the possibility that too many of us might switch from one program to another or -- horrors! -- turn the thing off.

TV then created a tremendous undertow fashioning the content not of entertainment alone, but of the *res publicae*. In its comparatively innocent first days in the late '40s and early '50s, network television still had a faint sense of social responsibility -- a rudimentary "conscience" very much resembling the cynic's definition of conscience as the uneasy fear that somebody may be looking. This minimal sense of social responsibility, imported from radio, written into law in 1932 in the provision that stations should operate in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity," had been encouraged by the marked public service radio rendered in news and public affairs before and during World War II. To some degree, it drew upon the older heritage of the press. Commercial television, arising in part out of that past, and governed in theory by that law, slightly nervous, did at first apply to itself a certain deodorant of community service. Sig Mickelson's

happy moment in the booth in 1952 occurred at a time, and in an institution ("CBS News" as it then was), that allowed for the hope that TV would affect our politics for the better. But the potential for gain soon proved so vast that that early nod to the larger responsibilities was overwhelmed. As Mickelson himself said, the networks discovered that they could make money with *news*, as well as all the other "programming." News and public affairs became part of the trick to attract the viewer's attention in order to make sales. IU Poynter Fellow David Halberstam tells the story of departure of IU Poynter Fellow Bill Moyers from CBS. William Paley, who very much wanted him to stay, offered much and asked what more Moyers wanted. Moyers, frustrated by the network's limitations, asked for a regular prime time show much like the one Edward R. Murrow had had, on a regular schedule and at a set hour. Halberstam quotes Paley as saying, "I'm sorry, Bill. I can't do it any more. The minute is worth too much now."

IU Poynter Fellow Fred Friendly, the one-time executive of "CBS News," told the story of his struggles to make the network a responsible carrier of news and public affairs in his book *Due To Circumstances Beyond Our Control*. Friendly concluded that commercial television can make so much money doing its worst that it cannot afford to do its best.

There are two convenient symbols of the negative impact of this mass advertising-based television on American politics, although the impact is much wider than these items. One is very familiar: the TV political commercial, an abomination even when it is not "negative." The other

is the shrinking number of seconds devoted to presentations by leading political figures on the nightly network news, an item documented by Kiku Adatto in articles and a book that have attracted serious attention. The average length of a statement by the president on a network news broadcast, she says, fell from 42 seconds in 1968 to less than nine seconds in 1988; that statistic did not improve, despite network resolutions, in 1992. The time is filled by the anchor and the correspondents talking about image, process, the gaffe or scandal of the day. When you must attract and hold multi-multi-millions, you must move swiftly, without qualification or nuance, to the most elemental human emotions and desires. Mass television is driven by its economic base to be aggressively superficial, and that aggressive superficiality stands in direct opposition to the necessary complexity of democratic politics.

So mass commercial television features personalities, gaffes, scandals, images and process; avoids issues, substance, complexity; sheers off the sheen of issues in little melodramas when it is necessary to deal with issues, and thus contributes mightily to the cynicism about politics. An already cynical public encourages the medium that is utterly responsive to its most widespread, immediate and superficial urges and attitudes to present politics in a swift, empty, cynical form; the two cynicisms reinforce each other.

One faintly hopeful note: Mass network television is no longer the whole story of American television. Public television has merits the networks lack. Many had hopes for cable, and although

those hopes have not been realized, glimmers of new possibilities are apparent, for example in C-SPAN and what it represents. To take only one small piece of the puzzle: Televising sessions of Congress, unproduced and unadorned, in all their boring reality, offers a way that television might begin to redeem itself for some of the damage it has done, in its mass entertainment/commercial form, to our political institutions. One could glimpse the possibilities in a modest way even before cable -- in the networks' televising of the Erwin committee hearings in the summer of 1973, and of the House Judiciary considering impeachment in 1974, and again in earlier televising of the Canadian and British parliaments. Now, in the unedited broadcast of whole sessions on C-SPAN, without the terrible constraints of hype, time and commerce, one can discern a way that the new visual communication system could help, rather than harm, republican government. Citizens who do not have or do not watch C-SPAN might have got something of the same effect by watching the Congressional debate on policy toward Iraq just before the Gulf War, carried by public television and even in small part by the networks. It all got swallowed in simplicities later, but there was a moment there when many paused to say, "Well, that was pretty good -- it had a seriousness and complexity that is not like our stereotype of Congress and politicians." The same thing would have happened if more could have watched the debate on the 1990 budget reconciliation -- the famous one that President Bush later repudiated, because the simple-minded summary of it was that he reneged on his promise not to raise taxes.

In the earliest days of the republic, Congress had a direct link to public debate through multiple opinionated party papers and the broadside, the main medium of the time. Congressional speeches were printed back home, and Congressional debates were read, and continued, in the tavern and the square. Think of the explosive fireball-in-the-night effect of the 1820s Congressional debates on the Missouri Question. (In South Carolina, the free black Denmark Vessey was actually moved to plan his rebellion by reading those debates in Congress.) The link of the public to Congress through the press began to change with the coming of a generalized advertising-based commercial medium, bringing to an all-purpose readership the all-purpose commodity, "the news." To skip lots of history, in the twentieth century, a commercially based mass television, as an aggressively simplifying associational medium, shoved politics and particularly Congress, further in the direction of a stereotyped irrelevancy. But televising Congress itself, without cuts or production, might draw some decisive fraction of the viewing citizen back into the debate -- into the real work. Of course, the numbers watching a "boring" Congressional debate would be infinitesimal or nonexistent by mass television standards -- but not by standards of republican government. One citizen watching Congress on C-SPAN is worth hundreds of thousands watching "Beverly Hills 90210."

This utopian thought about television is thrown into this otherwise realistic essay without extra charge.

IV.

So far, I have considered politics, politicians, Washington, Congress. What about the institution of government itself? The cynicism about government has something of the same shape as these other, overlapping, cynicisms. It is not a carefully thought out anarchism or libertarianism, but a vague, atmospheric and automatic popular presumption against the institution, which presumption then, ironically, contributes mightily to that institution's malperformance.

The failures of government -- for a major contemporary example, the creation of huge annual deficits and a gargantuan debt, and the inability to do as much as we should to reduce them -- have their root, in the end, not in some distinctive evil quality in "politicians" or in some sharply separated evil institution called "government," but in public attitudes. One can criticize politicians who opportunistically exploit those attitudes, and praise politicians who try to change them -- to lead -- but the fault is by no means theirs alone: It is shared by the broad public that constrains them. For a long time, one could not get public attention to the deficit; the better angels of our nature made a certain worthy but very brief appearance on this subject, but then we fell back into a tournament of selfishnesses. A broad-based energy tax? Energy states objected. Gasoline tax? Rural and western states objected. Slight reduction in the increase of Social Security benefits? Retirees objected. Many interests expressed their sour resistance to taxes.

To a degree, to be sure, all of this pushing and pulling is simply the "politics"

about which I urged the reader not to be cynical in the first part of this essay. But included in the mixture of public attitudes, along with politics, is cynicism about government, which, among its other bad effects, encourages us to be more selfish than we might otherwise be.

This vague cynicism tends to repudiate, without really intending to, the very *principle* of government itself -- but not consistently. The citizens who hold to it most of the time don't come clean and say they are anarchists. The same citizens who give voice to anti-governmental cynicism one day will turn around and endorse the most intrusive actions of government, through the powers of policing and military defense, on the next.

President Clinton's most ideologically potent recent predecessor said in his inaugural address: "Government is not the solution to the problem. Government is the problem." I suggest a different analysis: Government is not the problem; human self-love is the problem. Human self-love does express itself in and through government, and that is one of its most dangerous forms of expression, but it expresses itself in other ways, and in other arenas, as well. In fact, while government is in some ways an expression of that underlying problem, it is also a necessary corrective to other expressions (disorder, injustice, inhumanity, neglect) of the underlying problem of self-love.

And so you have a double difficulty. Government can be a problem, or an expression of the underlying problem, because "coercion" is of its essence, and some human beings are in position to do the coercing. Anarchy, an ungoverned society, is also a problem, because it gives the self-love of some other

human beings unbridled scope and allows nonlegal forms of coercion and injustice to reign. We need government to overcome those other expressions of self-love.

What to do? Is there any, has there ever been any, "solution" to this double problem? Yes. The solution is the constitutional government of the United States of America. It is ironical that Americans should be disdainful of politics and politicians and cynical about government, when it is exactly democratic politics and democratic government that is the core of the success of our nation.

I promised to present an *American* defense of politics and government, against the prevailing cynicism, and this is where we come to the American part. The discussion of self-love and the double difficulty about government is right out of the *Federalist Papers*, although they said it better than I did. You must have government -- I am paraphrasing what Madison wrote in those papers -- to protect you against the many ills that spring from the self-love of your neighbors (and they against your self-love); but then you must have strings on that government, in its turn, so that it may be controlled. What the Americans devised, drawing upon English and other republican antecedents, was an arrangement in which *resistance to* government was incorporated *within* government. One mechanism of resistance was a written bill of rights, limiting government and protecting fundamental human rights. Another, of course, was the checks and balances built into the structure of the federal government, but also the federal system that incorporated states as well as the federal government. The most important control on government, however, was its tie to the people: In

regularly scheduled elections, the voters could throw the rascals out and, as the joke would have it, replace them with another set.

The politician who is now the American president missed a chance to symbolize the original American case for politics and government in his pre-inaugural activities. When Bill Clinton's people arranged for his symbolic pre-inaugural trip, they had him start at Monticello in symbolic communion with Thomas Jefferson and arrive at the Lincoln Memorial in symbolic communion with Abraham Lincoln, which is all well and good. Unfortunately, that itinerary meant that their motorcade, on its way to its one stopover at the Baptist Church in Culpepper, went zipping right past Montpelier, the home of James Madison. 'Twas ever thus -- Madison overshadowed by more popular and glamorous figures, especially his life-long friend Thomas Jefferson. But although Jefferson and particularly Lincoln were certainly politicians, it was Madison, more than any other single individual, who shaped the distinctively American institutional solution to the problem of politics and government and gave voice to the ideas that undergird it. It should be noted that Madison's statements -- that "where power is, there is the threat to liberty," and that "any person possessing power should be suspect, to a certain extent" -- apply not only to governmental figures, but to all other power figures as well. On our own now, we might add that these other centers of power have substantially increased in the two centuries of national life since Madison wrote.

The American "revolutionaries" were markedly different from the French.

The "Twelve who made a Revolution," the leaders of the terror in France in 1793, according to Robert Palmer, included *no one* who had experience in an actual parliamentary body. But the major American leaders were *all* politician, all, more narrowly, legislators -Congressmen!

The two sets of revolutionaries had different ideas as well as a different experience. The Americans, like the French and like all "republicans," said that theirs would be a government of "the people." But the Americans -- notably James Madison -- saw that "the people" had many internal differences. The Americans, better than the French, understood that those differences were a constant, a given and a premise, not something to be forced or pretended away or ignored. Although the Americans, like the French, spoke of "the people," the Americans did not hold the dangerous view that the people would be one unit with a single voice, and that that voice would be the voice of God; they recognized the people instead as a conglomerate, a changing composition freely drawn from many and conflicting voices. The Americans even saw the way to turn that complexity to advantage. There had long been a parliamentary respect for His Majesty's loyal opposition, as an essential part of the government; the Americans complicated the picture further, recognizing the reality of a continuing melange of separating and recombining groups. Congress is the primary institution within the constitutional structure in which that fundamental complexity of freedom and popular rule works itself out. The name of that working out is politics.

Is it necessary to make the most fundamental argument for government as a human institution? One can see Madison developing such an argument even before he went to Philadelphia, and well before the *Federalist Papers*, when he was writing the memos in which he was considering government at the continental level -- a possible *federal* government. Suppose the laws of the states "were merely recommendatory"? Or suppose each county rejudged the state laws?

In his memos to himself, Madison dealt with such matters as they applied among the thirteen contentious, self-seeking former colonies, now states. Getting all thirteen clocks to chime once more together *voluntarily* would be impossible. One can see Madison getting ready to support a constitution for the union that would be "the Supreme Law of the land"; in place of violence, the "gentle coercion of the magistracy."

Madison gave a succinct three-point summary of the limitations of "voluntary" coordination in important matters. "In the first place, Every general act of the Union must necessarily bear unequally hard on some particular member or members of it." So the unequally treated ones scream and probably defy the act, and they estimate the inequalities from their own distorted perspective. "Secondly the partiality of the members to their own interests and rights, a partiality which will be fostered by the Courtiers of popularity, will naturally exaggerate the inequality where it exists, and even suspect it where it has no existence." And then there will be the acid of suspicion: "Thirdly a distrust of the voluntary compliance of each other may prevent the compliance of any, although it should be the latent

disposition of all."

That last is an important political insight: We all have, or should have, "a latent disposition" to collaborate as well as a resistance to "coercion." Political scientist Thomas Schelling gives the example, in another context, of the mattress fallen on the highway, slowing and backing up traffic. After you have waited a long time in line, you speed on by: Having the sunk cost of your long wait, you don't want to stop and lose more time with the difficult task of moving the mattress. But the collective good, which you recognize even as you fail to act to serve it, is undeniably to get that mattress out of there. Garrett Hardin presented the problem of the common -- each man's individual interest seems to be served by allowing his cow to eat all the grass he wants, but together the cows graze the common clean, so that eventually no one's cow gets anything. My air conditioner's part of the drain on the city's summer electricity, like my dripping faucet's part of the area's shortage of water, is infinitesimal; nevertheless, power failures and water shortages are serious for all of us.

Sometimes common action through law can protect me in a worthy act. Take gas station or motel or restaurant owners whose hearts were in the right place, in the old days. Under legal segregation, serving blacks was against the law; under *customary* segregation serving blacks might well put them at an impossible competitive disadvantage. Under the public accommodations section of the Civil Rights Act, a person of goodwill could say to disgruntled, prejudiced whites, "The law requires me to do it, and all my competitors must do it, too." A *pattern*

can be changed in a way that many of us may want but none of us can manage individually.

Remember John Kenneth Galbraith's picture of the imbalance between private and public goods: a shining, magnificent automobile, with gold-plated windshield wipers, driving on deteriorated highways, across crumbling bridges, to debris-strewn parks.

Those who live together in a society have always had many things in common -- the *res publicae*, from which our form of government took its original name. Such collective goods (and collective ills), such matters of the common good and social justice, always a part of human life, are vastly increased in modern advanced technological society. The modern world provides many *new* means and many *new* arenas, in addition to the old ones, for the world to exhibit its forms of self-love, of injustice, and mistreatment of humankind. At the same time that they are creating many human goods, including a higher level of material well-being, modern technology and mass production are also creating gigantic new centers of power and wrenching new patterns and effects of power, as giant collective forces reach into every hamlet, every life -- with which democratic government must deal. New occasions teach new duties; the effects of modern technological society create new requirements for government.

Of course, there are many good reasons for criticizing particular performances of particular administrations and regimes, and particular politicians, and there are also some general negative tendencies of American political institutions. One may criticize Congress

for its short time horizon, its timidity, its log-rolling, its tendency to duck the big issues of governing, its parochialism. The major current problem is its relationship to money for campaigns; perhaps Congress will now enact significant campaign finance legislation. This institution finds it much harder to conceal its service to particular interests than does the president. As everyone says, it is difficult for Congress to generate incentives for governing, as opposed to advocacy; for serving the long-term good, as against the short term; and for service to the general good, as against the particular interest. There on C-SPAN is my friend Frank "Landslide" McCloskey -- not exactly an IU Poynter Fellow, but the representative of the district in which the Poynter Center is to be found -- arguing the importance to our defense of the Osprey -- which, it turns out, is partly made in Indianapolis. Henry L. Stimson long ago quoted a chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee as having said, when it was noted that the navy yards in his district could not manage the biggest ships, "That is why I have always favored smaller ships for our navy." But I have been suggesting that there is something more in the American disdain for Congress than rational and specific criticism would yield.

As for the president, although the undertow of a swift cynicism is there, ready to grab each new president, the larger shape of public attitudes differs from the attitude toward Congress. In shorthand, one may say that the cultural-personal presence of the president is too large, and the expectations too high. In a class of college undergraduates today, all students can name the president, his wife, his daughter, his cat, his musical

instrument and the woman he was alleged to have had an affair with; very few can name the two senators from the state, or the representative from the district, in which they reside. The president is a celebrity; the other figures in the political system are not. The president is a major cultural figure, as the others are very far from being. That creates a naive overbalance that goes with the cynicism. To understand the American political system, one must put the president, important as he is, in his place. It is the legislature, not the president, that not only was the historical origin of American government but the embodiment of its principled core as well.

To be sure, the Americans discovered that they did need an executive branch "for energy and dispatch" as Hamilton put it, and for separation and balance of powers. But all sorts of governments, including tyrannies and despotisms and dictatorships, have such "executives." They wave to adoring crowds from balconies; they grandly order their troops into battle; they sit surrounded by sycophants and issue their commands; they ride ahead of parades on horseback; they receive humble visitors in their rose gardens; they are driven through the streets in their limousines; they circle the world in their Air Force Ones; they commandeer television screens and, alone and unchallenged, with the nation's flag beside them, address their people. A despotism can have all of that, at least as easily as a republic, but no despotism has a genuine legislature -- a body of representatives chosen in freedom by the whole and diverse people, equal to and necessarily dealing with each other, locked in argument, truly making law.

By the realistic standards of human life on this planet, the American political system is a considerable accomplishment. Two hundred years of modern history is a long time. The United States has been able to unfold from the First Congress to the 102nd, from a nation of 4 million on the Atlantic Coast to a nation of 250 million stretching to, and out into, the Pacific. It has grown from a cluster of colonies on the margin of Europe to the unquestioned center of the world stage, to operate there as the first nation with weapons capable of world destruction, in the midst of the ideological fury of the twentieth century, with its constitutional system so far still intact. The United States and its subordinate units have made their way under this constitution through an unbroken string of regularly scheduled elections from George Washington to Bill Clinton. We managed to hold genuine elections in 1864, in the middle of a Civil War; in 1932, in the depths of a depression; in 1964, after Kennedy's assassination; in 1976, after Nixon's resignation; during both World Wars.

Americans ought to be proud of their 200-year history of government by mutual deliberation. But even if the current president, or any other influence, should move the American understanding of that worthy political heritage up a notch or two, and diminish the cynicism a notch or two, I think we still can be sure that the Poynter Center will continue to find work to do for another 20 years at least.