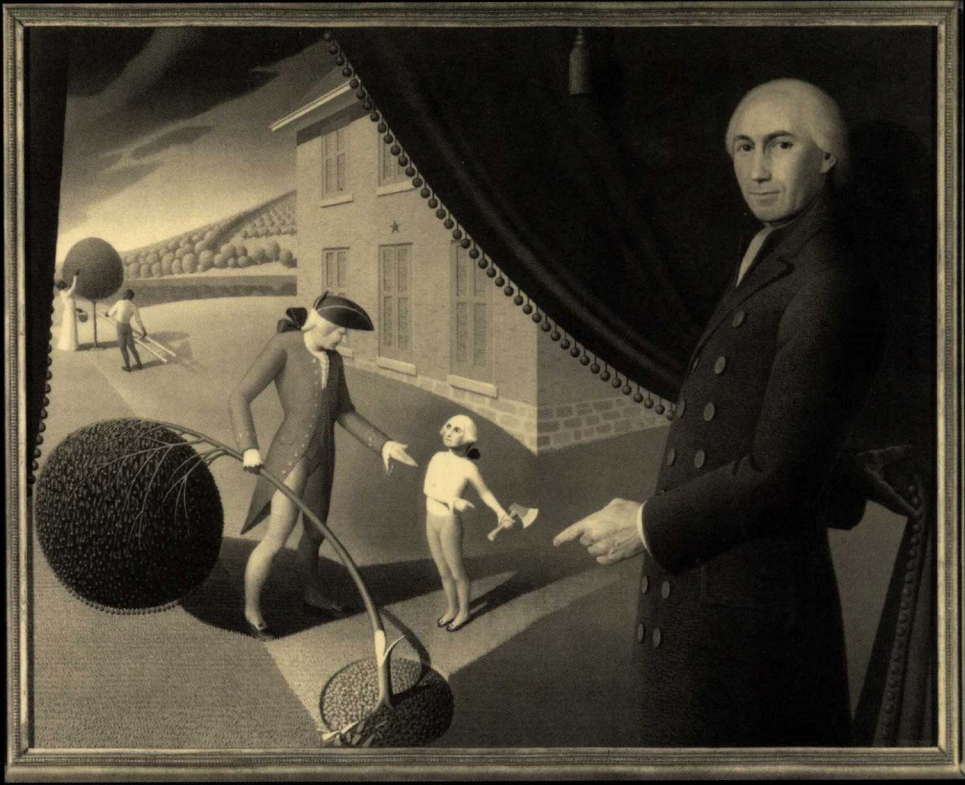


Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States



Ajume H. Wingo
with a Preface by Jeremy Waldron

CAMBRIDGE

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Palatino 10/13 pt. System L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data available

ISBN 0 521 81438 3 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89128 0 paperback

*To my matrilineal ancestor, Ngonnso,
my late father, Wirngo,
and to Anna, Wirndzenyuy, and Leopoldine
– to my source and destination*

In order that we should love our country, our country ought to be lovely.

– Edmund Burke

Preface

Jeremy Waldron

Maurice and Hilda Friedman Professor of Law,
and Director of the Center for Law and Philosophy,
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Liberal political philosophy sometimes seems beset by a curiously naive literal-mindedness. We write as though the tasks of politics were reducible to the choice of principles, and as though principles formulated in the theorist's study could constitute the basic structure of a well-ordered society. We know, of course, that the articulation of principles for a liberal order is a tricky business; they have to be sensitive to all sorts of things, such as the tensions between liberty and equality, equality and opportunity, rights and efficiency, and stability and justice. And so we spend years – collectively we spend decades or generations – debating them, elaborating them, refining them. All this is done in the hope that *if only we could get the principles right*, we would have a basis for a decent, just, and prosperous social order, which could be enshrined in our laws and constitution.

Occasionally, in the wee small hours of the morning, it occurs to some of us that principles, formulated and refined by theorists, are not necessarily the key to a well-ordered society; laws and constitutions are often eclectic and half-coherent accumulations of wisdom rather than embodiments of well-worked-out principles; and anyway, laws and constitutions are not all that there is to social order. There is also the real world – the world of human nature in its more sordid or less calculable aspects, the world of chance and fortune, of crime, fanaticism, and war, of tears of pride and rage, the real world of faith, patriotism, and other creeds we would like to be able to dismiss as non-rational. Sometimes, it seems, these make a mockery of our devotion to principle-mongering. One response to these misgivings is to attempt a further refinement of our principles – attempting to make them more sensitive to various issues and vicissitudes of the real world. We might incorporate incentives into our theories or make greater provision for exceptions or sanctions or

whatever. But a response of that kind seldom allays the nocturnal mis-giving. What torments some of us is the possibility that there might be something wrong with our entire orientation to politics. For example, there might be something awry with the idea that governance shares with theory an orientation *towards propositions*. Let me explain what I mean. A principle is a normative proposition that says that things ought to be thus-and-so. A law inspired by a principle is supposed to be an imperative proposition: Let things be thus-and-so (and let this-or-that person be responsible for making them thus-and-so). And the law (and the principle it embodies) is supposed to work when things actually *are* thus-and-so, that is, when the society in question is actually governed, through its laws, by the principles we have formulated in the way that the principles say it ought to be governed. Maybe – and this is the thought that, as I said, comes to us in the small hours of the morning – there is more (and less) to the good ordering of society than this. Think of it this way: A society is not just a set of states of affairs, corresponding (or failing to correspond) to the content of a given set of normative propositions. It is a congeries of relations, dispositions, and emotions that are implicated with one another and with shared arrays of fear, hope, and history, in ways that defy any tidy propositional scheme. Now perhaps it is the error of communitarians and nationalists to pretend that this congeries represents an homogenous body of experience rather than something rich, ragged, and variegated. But liberal political philosophers are always in danger of making the opposite mistake – of thinking that it can be ignored altogether, or simply dragooned into the service of efficiency or justice.

These thoughts are not original. Since Edmund Burke complained about “all the decent drapery of life” being “rudely torn off” by those who would reduce the science of government to a priori speculation, there has been no shortage of critics to challenge liberal theory on this ground. They line up around the block. But there has always been a shortage of thinkers willing to do the hard work of giving an *affirmative* account of what is supposed to be lacking in the liberal picture, thinkers who are not content merely to carp, but who set out to show what a richer and more adequate philosophy of politics would look like. Ajume Wingo is one of the very few who are willing and able to do this, and for that reason I believe this book marks the emergence of a refreshing new voice in political theory.

As you read on into *Veil Politics*, you will find a deep, subtle, and sometimes disconcerting account of the role of myth, symbolism, monument,

and ritual in modern politics. Much of it is about the United States: Dr. Wingo begins at the Lincoln Monument and proceeds down the Mall to end with some reflection on the racially rather sanitized depiction of American history in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. In between, you will read about classroom history, war memorials, the inscriptions on our currency, the Confederate flag, the Great American Seal, and the Gettysburg Address. These are sites and emblems of a politics – and of a kind of legitimacy – that goes much deeper than proposition or principle. “To make us love our country,” wrote Burke, “our country ought to be lovely.” Well, these are places where the love is elicited or withheld, and where loveliness or its opposite are put on display for all to see. It is places like these we must recur to if we want to develop an aesthetics of governance.

But I don’t want to give the impression that *Veil Politics* is just about America, or that the part that is about America is an uncritical celebration. Quite the contrary – this book is also an account of the evasion, shame, dispute, and false consciousness embedded in this country’s iconography. What Wingo insists, however, is that these too are not just matters of the truth or falsity of propositions, or the satisfaction or violation of principles. They are not just about what lies behind the veil; they are features of the veil itself.

And *Veil Politics* is not just a study of America. The fact that it is above all a work of theory – a fine work of political theory – is an irony, I guess, in light of the way I began these comments. But Wingo has succeeded not just in his critique of contemporary theory; he has succeeded in his ambition to theorize the very matters whose absence from our conventional theorizing is the premise of his work. The veil politics of the United States may be the starting point, but what is important about this book is the reflection that they stimulate and the way that Dr. Wingo is able to fold that reflection back into the traditions and experience of existing theory, to complement it and enrich it. He is helped in this by a remarkable openness and generosity of spirit. I mentioned already that Wingo’s contribution is affirmative, rather than merely critical. His aim is not to discredit liberalism, as though that were worth doing for its own sake. Perhaps more generously than we liberal thinkers deserve, he sets out to nurture themes in liberal thought that have been subdued, and to push a little into the background those jagged aspects of our political philosophy that we have tended stupidly to exaggerate. He seeks to enrich and contextualize our discussions of legitimacy, autonomy, justice, even transparency, and to

make us ponder their significance. He does not seek simply to discredit them.

At the dawn of our tradition, we learned from Aristotle that the best political theory is the offspring of comparative politics; we see how to theorize our own politics when we make it strange to ourselves by comparing it to the politics of another society. Now, as I said, Ajume Wingo writes about the United States, and it is contemporary American liberalism that he is seeking to enrich. But he does so as an outsider, an African, a Cameroonian, of royal blood and considerable political experience. Those who remain inward-looking quickly learn to miss or blur the most interesting features of the politics of their own society. There is no chance of that with this book. We should be grateful to Ajume Wingo for teaching us to see things new and for showing us – in a way that many of us would do well to imitate – how the new things that we see can be incorporated into our reflection on the things that for too long have been dominating our vision.

New York
July 30, 2002

Acknowledgments

The satisfaction I take in having completed this book is like that of a gardener looking over his own small plot, seeing in its fruits his own labor and sweat and remembering not a few sleepless nights worrying over killing frosts, choking weeds, and withering droughts. But a gardener knows that the end of his labor depends on its beginnings; no amount of sweat and labor will yield a crop when the soil is barren, and no amount of restless tossing and turning in bed can help when the sun doesn't shine or the rain doesn't fall. In the course of writing *Veil Politics*, I've had the exceptionally good fortune of teachers, friends, and colleagues who have provided me with a fertile plot to work, helped me till and plant that plot, and pushed me to weed and nurture my ideas and arguments.

Two people deserve special mention for their role in the writing of this book. The first is Jeremy Waldron, whose kind encouragement so many years ago helped to germinate the first seeds of this book. He was the first person who listened to me talk about my ideas, and when he said "these are good ideas, stick to them," I heard and believed him. I can only hope that this book – in many ways the fruit borne of that first encouragement – adequately reflects how much his generosity and support have meant to me.

The second is Michael Kruse, a friend who stood by me from the beginning to the end of this project. He made valuable contributions to this book, reading each word of each draft, spending countless hours discussing, criticizing, and commenting on the arguments and ideas contained in this book. His critical eye forced me to think hard about – and sometimes, rethink entirely – many of the issues in the book, and while he reveled in playing devil's advocate with respect to the details, maintained an abiding faith in me and the project.

Acknowledgments

The first recognizable ancestor of this book was my doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and my sincerest thanks go to the members of my committee for their support and encouragement: my advisor Patrick Riley, David Weberman, Paula Gottlieb, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Allen Buchanan. Since coming to Boston in 1997, I have been extremely fortunate to have access to some of the best minds in the field whose talents and abilities have been matched only by their generosity. Among these, I am especially grateful to Kwame Anthony Appiah and Kwasi Wiredu for the conversations we've had over the years on some of the ideas contained in this book. Thanks also to Jane Mansbridge, with whom I have had regular conversations on these issues, and my colleague Larry Blum, who read the entire manuscript and whose comments greatly improved Chapter 3. Sally Haslenger's comments on Chapter 2 were also very useful, as were comments, criticisms, and suggestions from Meira Levinson, David Lyons, Valeria Ottonello, Mary Sarko, Steven Teles, and Flavio Baroncelli, all of whom generously read all or parts of the manuscript. To Sanford Levinson, a friend with whom I share an interest in public monuments, I owe many thanks as well, not just for his input on the manuscript, but also for the opportunity to present parts of Chapter 3 at a seminar at the Law School at the University of Texas at Austin.

I am grateful to Neal Bruss and Larry Foster at the University of Massachusetts for helping me make a case for a reduced teaching load for a semester that gave me time to complete the book. The W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard, the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University, and the McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts–Boston also provided invaluable assistance in the form of fellowships that allowed me access not only to the superb research facilities at these institutions, but more importantly to their phenomenal academic communities. In particular, Glenn Loury, the director of the Institute on Race and Social Division, has helped me tremendously by organizing forums that allowed me to present and discuss my ideas with others. During my tenure at the Institute, I spent countless hours with him, discussing ideas that have helped me both in the writing of this book and beyond, and his sharp mind was one of the most important forces that helped me hone and clarify my arguments.

The names of two of my most insightful critics are, alas, unknown to me, being the anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press. Their candid observations and suggestions helped me greatly to improve the organization and arguments in the text. Their thoughtful

Acknowledgments

input has been but one part of the exemplary work Cambridge University Press has done in producing this book. To Douglas MacLean and Terence Moore (general series editor and general editor, respectively), I can only begin to express how grateful I am for their confidence in and support of this project from beginning to finish.

Finally, I would like to give a special acknowledgment to those who placed me on the path to this project. To Dennis O'Reilly, Janet Allen, Paul and Emy Gartzke, Elisabeth Bienert, Aaron Hyman, and Daniel Baker, I am especially grateful for the friendship and support they so freely offered to a newcomer to this country. To Bernard Williams, Janet Broughton, Samuel Scheffler, and John Searle, I offer heartfelt thanks for their inspiring example as teachers and wise instruction that first led me to political philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Veil Politics

1.1. POLITICAL VEILS

One of the great monuments found in Washington, DC, is the Lincoln Memorial. Inscribed on the south wall of the monument is the text of the Gettysburg Address, above which is a mural depicting the angel of truth freeing a slave. Engraved on the north wall is the text of Lincoln's Second Inaugural speech. In the middle of the pavilion is the figure of Abraham Lincoln himself, his grave countenance casting a palpable aura over visitors.

The power of artifacts like the Lincoln Memorial to stir the emotions is quite remarkable. But they are not alone in having this power: Novels, plays, films, and even manipulative television advertisements and greeting cards have the same ability to tap into the emotions of spectators. What – if anything – distinguishes civic monuments from artifacts like these? Are monuments of this kind merely public art of a particular kind, or do they serve another function that distinguishes them from other kinds of art?

One way to see what distinguishes civic monuments is to look at their effects. As we might expect, one of the effects of civic memorials is aesthetic. Just as an innovative artwork may please the eye or make us look with new eyes by jarring our sensibilities with new forms and unexpected lines, the Lincoln Memorial appeals to classical standards of proportion and symmetry, while the Vietnam Memorial is startling with its stark simplicity. For many works of art, this aesthetic effect is *all* that is intended – this is art for art's own sake.

Memorials like the Lincoln and the Vietnam War memorials, however, also play a socializing role as well: They are devices that convey particular social, political, and moral values. The Lincoln Memorial, for

instance, is not just a piece of art in an imposing venue. From its stairs rising from the reflecting pool before it to the names of the members of the Union ringing it at the top, the Memorial is an amalgam of symbols that tell a story about the ideals of the United States of America. The statue of Lincoln, as it were, tirelessly delivers his civic lessons to citizens, ceaselessly asking citizens to prove worthy of the fallen in this society, and serving as a physical manifestation of Pericles's statement that "It is by honor, and not by gold, that the helpless end of life is cheered." Simply put, Lincoln is a *paideia* for the discipline of living alongside one another in this community. The civic lessons he silently delivers to the polity are more than any words that can flow from the lips of a living civic tutor.

This effect is, in part, the result of design; the classical motif and scale of the statue all strike predictable chords in Americans. But design is only partly responsible for the meaning that has been invested in the Memorial and the effect it has on many visitors. The other component is its own history, for the Lincoln Memorial is a living symbol, acquiring new significance as time passes. It is no accident that it was to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights marchers were drawn during the March on Washington. In the process, they drew upon its significance as a symbol of the promise of America and the sacrifices made for their sake, and at the same time transformed the Memorial, making it a symbol both of the will of the disenfranchised and of entry into full citizenship.

The Lincoln Memorial is a particularly recognizable political symbol, but there are many other less obvious devices that serve similar socializing functions – flags, uniforms, anthems, and pantheons of civic heroes. Indeed, such symbols are present in every state. Where will one find a state in the world without cultural, ethic, or political heroes, without a flag, without a national anthem? These objects, like language, highways, and cars, are found in all states. But unlike highways, languages, and cars, whose functions are apparent, the various functions of things like numismatic symbols, flags, and national anthems may easily be overlooked or dismissed altogether as merely decorative.

Consider, for instance, a simple penny. Its function is most obviously to serve as a medium of exchange or a store of value. But at the same time it is adorned with symbols that are not obviously linked to that role. Incused on the head side is Lincoln's face, gaunt with the burdens of office. Behind the collar of the regalia is carved "Liberty"; a halo of "In God We Trust" adorns the head. On the tail side of the

penny is a classic-style temple in which a sharp eye can make out the form of Lincoln himself. Above the memorial is a nimbus, "United States of America"; below, the motto of the United States, "E Pluribus Unum."

Why go to these lengths to adorn a penny? From a practical point of view, there are obvious virtues to using the faces of well-known figures on coins, currency, and stamps. Humans are very good at distinguishing human faces; using a famous figure's face on media of exchange is, then, an effective way of foiling counterfeiting efforts. But if *this* is the ultimate rationale for adding detail to money, what accounts for the particular images and details used? Other, more notorious historical figures (such as Napoleon Bonaparte or Adolph Hitler) are at least as familiar to most Americans as Lincoln – and are certainly more easily recognized than, say, Andrew Jackson, Alexander Hamilton, or Salmon P. Chase. If familiarity were the fundamental concern, why not place images of *these* persons on currency and coin? If the image of Elvis Presley is appropriate for a first-class stamp, why isn't it fitting for the dime or the ten dollar bill?

The reason it *isn't* is that the decisions we make about symbols of this kind are not just utilitarian ones, ones that turn on how easily an image can be forged or recognized. Rather, they also play an important role in shaping our political and moral intuitions; they are, in fact, often explicitly designed and selected with an eye toward valorizing particular images or individuals, all for the purpose of presenting, and thereby subtly upholding, the values and ideals associated with those images.

In this way, the image of Lincoln finds its way into every pocket and every child's piggybank, and in so doing, various ideals and virtues associated with the image of Lincoln find their way as well into the daily lives of citizens. In a sense, this image becomes invisible, blending as it does into the commonplace background of everyday life. But, like language and the countless other tacit assumptions of everyday life, these unobtrusive images play a role in shaping our values, judgments, and intuitions. Blaise Pascal noted that the best way to develop faith is to go live among the faithful. In a similar way, we might say that the best way to develop the habits, intuitions, and character of a citizen is to live amidst the symbols of a particular polity.

As an illustration of the power of these symbols, consider the way Lincoln's public image has been transformed since 1860. We live in a world in which Lincoln ranks with the founding fathers in greatness – perhaps surpassed only by Washington in importance. Today there is