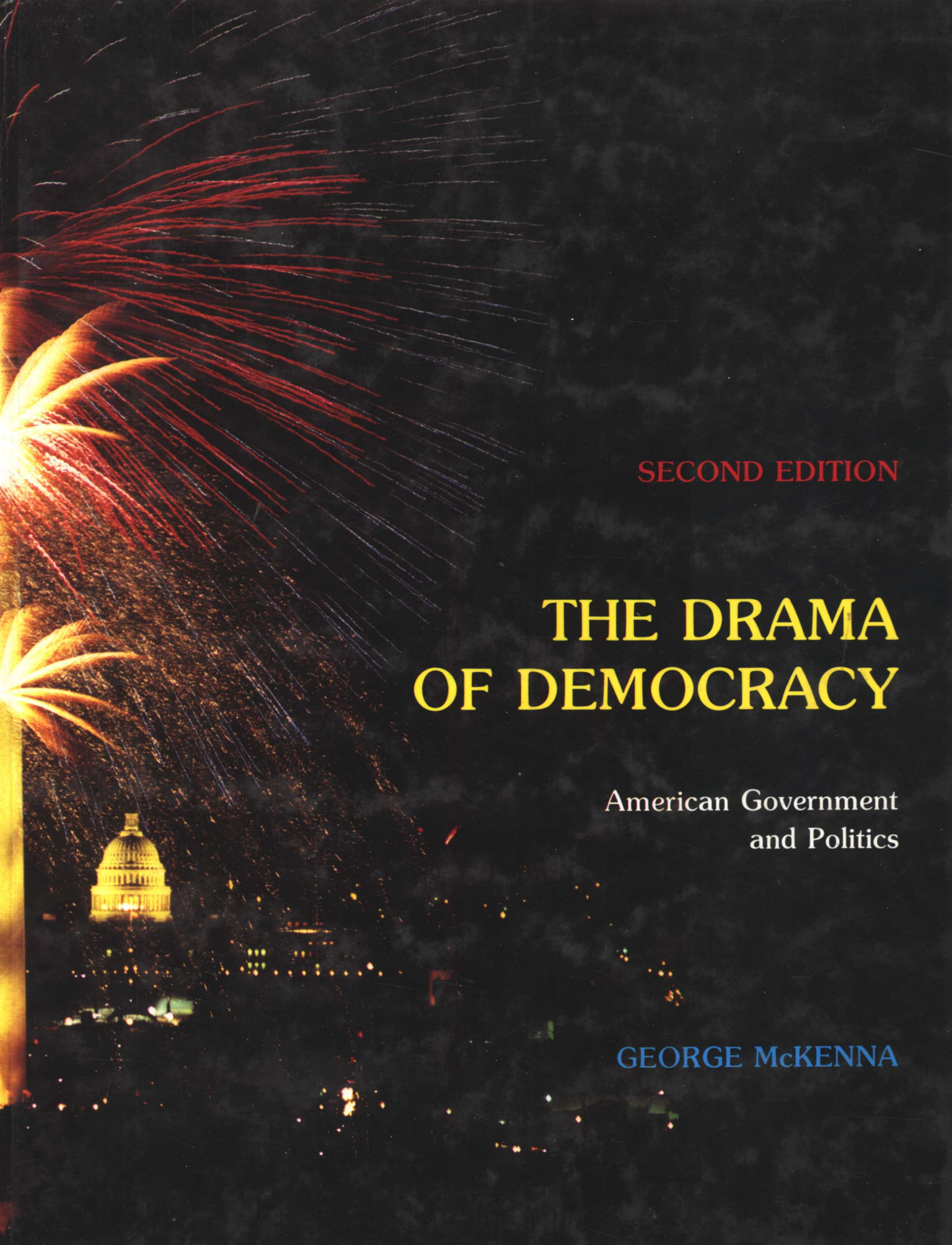

SECOND EDITION

THE DRAMA OF DEMOCRACY

American Government and Politics

GEORGE McKENNA

Second Edition

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City College of New York

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TO SYLVIA, AFTER THIRTY YEARS

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Preface

The success of the first edition of *The Drama of Democracy* has encouraged me to bring out a new edition. Like the first, this edition is based on the premise that interest in politics does not come naturally to people.

It may seem to come naturally to those of us who teach it, because *we* like politics. We talk about it, write about it, and sometimes get involved in it. It is great fun—for us. But abundant empirical evidence supports Robert Dahl's observation that most Americans regard politics as "a remote, alien, and unrewarding activity."[1] The writer of an introductory American government textbook cannot assume, then, that there is an audience out there that can hardly wait to read about politics. It is better to assume that the students reading a text on American government and politics, who may have taken the introductory course to fulfill some core requirement, are rather wary of the whole business.

The implications of this assumption should be clear. Any American government text worthy of the name must have solid factual substance, but it must also have some means of drawing the student into the material, getting the student to *care* about the subject matter. If the reader keeps asking, "Why is he telling me all this?" or "Why is she going on and on?" then something is wrong. The author has not whetted the student's appetite. In this book I have tried to whet appetites.

One way I have sought to do this is by starting each chapter with a story that introduces some of the chapter themes. The opening chapter, for example, starts with an account of the student pro-democracy demonstration in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the brutal repression of it by the Chinese authorities. This introduces the chapter's main topic, democracy, as well as many of its subthemes, such as legitimacy, human rights, and the limits of state authority. Beginning, then, with a narrative of the events that took place over the course of a few days in China, the chapter introduces the reader to some of the basic issues of politics and government. An understanding of such issues is critical to understanding both the theory and practice of American democracy, but by themselves the topics often seem dry and abstract to beginning students; the attempt here is to lead them to these universals by means of the singular and the concrete.

That method is used throughout the book. To take another example, chapter 17, on campaigns, elections, and voting, begins with a discussion of Richard Nixon's famous "Checkers" speech in 1952. The introductory story tells what it was that prompted Nixon to go on television with the speech, what he said in the speech, how he felt as he delivered it, and what happened afterwards. It then discusses the significance of that

speech: the first successful use of a television spot to influence voter opinion on a mass scale in a presidential campaign. Chapter 17 contains much else, from a discussion of critical elections to questions about campaign finances, and here, too, the "Checkers" story ties in. By this point in the text the reader has already been introduced to the chapter themes and may, by now, be interested in the material.

The stories are true. There are no docudramas in this book. The stories are vignettes from American history, and they may help, however modestly, to fill the gaps in American students' knowledge of history. Moreover, knowledge of these episodes is necessary if the student is to understand major developments in our political system. How can the student understand the party reforms of the 1970s unless he or she has some knowledge of what happened at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago? How can the student understand the domestic political reaction to the Vietnam War without knowing about the Tet offensive of 1968? The stories, then, are both true and useful. One might call them case studies in American politics, except that the term *case studies* has an academic feel, which is not what I intended in writing the opening stories. Typically, case studies in politics relate an episode, usually a rather complicated one, and then draw conclusions or lessons from it. They are useful and they can even be interesting, at least to those who are interested. But there we see their limitation. If, as I believe to be the case, most Americans care little about politics, the case study is not the best way to arrest their attention. A case study, which is written with a clear analytic purpose, leaves little room for emotion or descriptive detail, unless these clearly fit into the point of the analysis. A story is quite different. It can describe the heat shimmering above a campus roadway at the University of Alabama, or the sudden terror felt by student demonstrators in Tiananamen Square when they realize that the guns leveled at them are shooting real bullets. A story is a drama, and I have written the opening stories in a way that conveys this sense of drama.

A vivid opening may arrest the reader's attention, but how does one hold it? I have tried to do this by writing as clearly as I can, by avoiding academic jargon, and by using concrete examples wherever possible. I have also tried to sustain interest by pointing out the unresolved tensions and the clashing points of view in the field of American politics. Since 1978, Stanley Feingold and I have been editing an American government reader entitled *Taking Sides,* in which we present contrasting points of view on a number of political issues. Borrowing the *Taking Sides* format, I have inserted a one-page *Taking Sides* section into each of the chapters in this text. On opposite sides of the page, I summarize the pro and con views of authors who vigorously disagree with each other on one of the issues covered in the chapter. In chapter 5, on civil rights, for example, the *Taking Sides* section summarizes the contrasting views of Professor Glenn Loury and writer Herman Schwartz on the merits of affirmative action. The point of these exercises is not only to help students to think critically, but also to underscore the fact that there *are* tensions in the field of American government, that the "experts" often disagree. The object is to get the student involved in the argument. I am telling the student: "Don't be intimidated. Don't feel that you have to memorize everything because even the 'experts' often disagree. Listen to their arguments. Which seems more reasonable? Try to take sides in the dispute."

The two features of the text, the opening stories and the *Taking Sides* segments, justify use of the term *drama* in the book's title. I have tried hard to work color, tension, and descriptive detail into this text, and these features, I believe, set it apart from others in the field. But there are other features that are also unique to this text that deserve mention.

One is the *Global Perspective* section in each chapter. As we saw by the events in Eastern Europe, where democracy movements in 1989 rapidly spread from country to country, no nation today can long remain isolated from the events in other countries. For better or worse, we are linked together by channels of economics, culture, technology, ecology, and, of course, politics. Even as we study American government, we should keep in mind the similarities and differences between our political system and those of

other countries. In each chapter I have included a brief sketch of how another country handles an aspect of government or politics. For example, the *Global Perspective* section in chapter 3, on federalism, discusses the federal system of Nigeria, and the *Global Perspective* section in chapter 13, on public opinion and political socialization, discusses changes in public opinion in Argentina. In all, 20 different countries of the world are covered in these sections. A *Global Perspective* is just that: a perspective, a glimpse, not a definitive study. It gives the reader a sense of how political issues, processes, and institutions are handled in other countries. Perhaps we can learn from their experiences. We can certainly learn more about our own system by seeing how it differs from and resembles other systems in this world.

On a more prosaic level, another unique feature of this text is its system of internal summaries, its lists of key points. In my 30 years of teaching I have encountered the following many times: In trying to help students prepare for exams I have advised them to mark important passages in the text; what often happens then is that students underline nearly everything. Page after page is filled with markings of various kinds; everything is important, so, of course, nothing is particularly important. In this text I have tried to indicate what is particularly important by providing periodic lists within the chapters of *Points to Remember*. These sections are set off from the text and can be ignored by anyone who wants to get on with the reading. The alternative is to include a summary at the end of each chapter, but these final summaries tend to suffer from one of two problems. Either they are too general and skimpy, or they go on so long that the reader has trouble remembering and may need a summary of the summary. My periodic lists permit students to review the material section by section. These also permit me room at the end of each chapter for *Reflections*, another feature which I have not seen in other texts.

The *Reflections* pull together general themes of the chapter and share my thoughts with the reader. Nothing here is graven in stone; there are no final lessons. What I do instead is suggest a few tentative conclusions, without denying that others can be drawn. I want these sections to be less structured and more personal than the body of the text. Here I reveal more of myself and my views than I do in the rest of the text. I think it is wrong for professors to use their lecterns as soapboxes to try to foist their ideologies on their students—it offends my sense of fairness—and this is also true of writers of textbooks. It seems neither possible nor desirable to write a "value-free" textbook, but surely authors of textbooks should try to keep their views from dominating the material. I have striven for a certain kind of objectivity in these chapters. But I have left some room at the end of each, so that the student may get a closer view of what I think about some of the issues raised.

On that last note, I should say a word about my own point of view. I wish I could locate it on an ideological scale of "Left" and "Right," "liberal" and "conservative," but that is not easy to do: The terms seem to be losing their meaning by the day.[2] The news media, for example, usually call Russian president Boris Yeltsin a "liberal" and his opponents "conservatives," even though Yeltsin wants to move his country closer to a market economy, which is favored by "conservatives" in this country. (And where does that leave Cuba's Fidel Castro, who hates Yeltsin's policies? Is he really a "conservative"?) Instead of resorting to such labels, I would rather locate my views within the American political tradition. My allegiances and affinities are to the reform movements of American history, from the abolitionists and populists of the nineteenth century to the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s. Such movements have been the source of continuing revitalization because they keep reminding us what this country stands for. At the same time, I heed the warnings of such observers as James Madison and Reinhold Niebuhr that human nature has a dark side, so that even good movements and good people can become dangerously arrogant. "In political struggles," said Niebuhr, "there are no saints but only sinners fighting each other."[3] That makes sense to me, and it is why I think that the Madisonian concept of checks and balances also makes sense. Power can only be resisted by power, and tendency by tendency. That does not have to

add up to inaction. What it means, as I interpret it, is that we must at once promote reform and force reformers to explain themselves. Democracy, I believe, is well suited to that purpose. As Niebuhr put it: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[4]

NEW TO THIS EDITION

Much has happened in the world and in this country since the first edition of *The Drama of Democracy* was published in 1990. To take account of these changes and make other improvements that seemed warranted, I have made extensive revisions. I have added a new chapter on "The Economy" and consolidated two chapters (on national defense and foreign policy) into one. I have revised the *Global Perspective* sections, changed four of the opening stories, and replaced many of the *Taking Sides* arguments with new ones. This edition also tries to digest some of the lessons learned from our 1992 elections and the beginning year of the Clinton administration and the 103rd Congress, and to take account of the issues faced by American policymakers in a post-Soviet, post–cold war world. Readers of the first edition will also notice the physical improvements in this edition, especially the color photographs and the maps.

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GEORGE MCKENNA

1. Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 279.
2. See further, Christopher Lasch, "The Obsolescence of Left & Right," *New Oxford Review* (April 1989), pp. 6–15.
3. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Leaves From the Notebook of a War Bound American," *Christian Century*, November 15, 1939, p. 1406.
4. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. xiii.

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