

ne PURSUIT of HAPPINESS overnment and Politics in America

FIFTH EDITION

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN AMERICA

FIFTH EDITION

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MACMILLAN PUBLISHING COMPANY

New York

MAXWELL MACMILLAN CANADA

Toronto

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Printed in the United States of America

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Macmillan Publishing Company 866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022

Macmillan Publishing Company is part of the Maxwell Communication Group of Companies.

Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc. 1200 Eglinton Avenue East Suite 200 Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moore, John Allphin, 1940-

The pursuit of happiness: government and politics in America / John A. Moore, Myron Roberts.—5th ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-02-383190-1 (paper)

1. United States-Politics and government. I. Roberts, Myron.

II. Title.

JK274.M67 1992

320.973—dc20 91-25656

CIP

Printing: 3 4 5 6 7 Year: 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

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Preface

This, the fifth edition of *The Pursuit of Happiness*, is being brought to our readers somewhat earlier than the four previous editions published over the past decade and a half. The pace and impact of recent events have led us to believe that a book on American government and politics written prior to the Gulf War, the profound changes sweeping the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the reunification of Germany, to name but a few historic changes, required a timely update.

Given the high drama and massive exposure of many of these events, particularly on television, most students will be aware that they are living in an exciting time of change, opportunity, and danger. What some may lack, however, is an understanding of why these things are happening, how they evolved, what they portend for American life, and how they relate to a study of this nation's government and politics. These are questions we address in this fully rewritten, updated, and reorganized volume.

Our basic premise continues to be that government represents not a special, narrow aspect of society, but the most important expression of how we live. As we argue in the ensuing pages, we believe that while much can be judged about a given nation or people from their art, music, drama, literature, economic system, or even sports, nothing speaks more eloquently about the quality and level of civilization achieved by a nation than how well or how ill it governs itself. And since government encompasses all of these activities, we continue to approach our subject by relating the actions and principles of government to the broader culture that it sustains.

We have taken seriously many suggestions for improvement offered by critics, colleagues, and students of earlier editions. In some cases, we have happily made changes; in others, we persist in our folly. We wish to express our appreciation to all those who have assisted us in this work. Among these are

Preface

Professors Susan Roberts (Winthrop College, Rock Hill, South Carolina), Don Dugi (Transylvania College, Lexington, Kentucky), Karen Hult (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia), Carl E. Lutrin (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California), R. A. Perchlik (University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado), Ronald W. Melugin (Cooke County College, Gainesville, Texas), John A. Peeler (Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania), Ed Sidlow (Miami University, Oxford, Ohio), and Larry Elowitz (Georgia College, Milledgeville, Georgia). Walter P. Coombs, Richard Hyslop, Sheila McCoy, and John Korey-all at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona-have been generous with their suggestions for improving this edition. Colleague Richard Johnson has provided new insights and invaluable advice. John Murphy has been an inspiration. Macmillan editor Bruce Nichols and Production Supervisor Patricia French have expertly guided this edition through to completion. We would once again like to thank our wives, Linda and Estelle, for their advice, patience, and assistance. Finally, our gratitude goes to JoAnne Noyes for her diligent help in securing and organizing the illustrative material, to Laura Jane Moore for her early help and encouragement, and to John Stephen Moore, whose computer skills have helped make the work on this edition most pleasurable.

As we noted in the preface to earlier editions of this book, our aim has not been to press upon students a particular view of politics, although even a casual reading will reveal that the authors do indeed have a point of view and do not try to conceal it. Our objective, rather, is to provoke the student to think, to examine his or her life and ideas in relation to the values and institutions of society, with the hope that this may lead to a broader view of both the problems and possibilities of civil life.

J. A. M. M. R.

Contents

Introduction

1	
Shine, Perishing Republic	7
The American Success Story: Is It Over? The Negative Argument 10 The Positive Argument 13	8
2 The Pursuit of Happiness	17
What Is an American? 19 The Puritan Thesis 20 The Frontier Thesis 22 The Melting-Pot Thesis 25	
Popular Culture and the American Character Violence and Organized Crime 29	27

Contents

Materialism 31	
Racism 32	
The American Woman 34	
Mobility 37	
The Cult of Youth 38	
Education in America 40	
American Values 41	
3 The Constitutional Framework 47 Origins 49 Principles 54 Federalism 60	
Free at Last: Civil and Uncivil Liberty 67 Civil Liberties: The Individual and the State 69 First Amendment Rights 73 Equal Protection of the Law 77 Life, Liberty, and Property 78 Process and Rights 79	7
	3
Leadership 86 The Nixon-Ford Presidency 88	

The Carter Presidency 90
The Reagan Presidency 93
The Bush Presidency 96
What Is the Presidency? 98
Precedents 100
Roles, Power, and the President 102
Checks: Real or Imagined? 106
The Milieu of the President 108
What's Wrong? 110
Democracy and the President 113
6
The Bureaucrats: Attendant Lords 115
Bureaucrats 116
The Nature of Bureaucracy 120
The Federal Bureaucracy 122
History and Reform 124
The Bureaucracy: An Evaluation 128
7
Construct and the Oritics 424
Congress and Its Critics 131
What's Wrong with Congress? 133
Representation 141
The Achievements of Congress 146
The Functions of Congress 151
Congressional Committees 152
Making Law 155
The Lawmaker 157

Contents ix

The Courts: The Search for the Just Society 161

The Just Society 163 The Supreme Court 166 The National Court Structure 169 The Venerable Court 172 Judicial Review 173 The Warren Court 175 The Burger Court 177 The Rehnquist Court 180

Justice: Where Do We Stand? 182

9

The Art of Politics: Parties and Elections 187

What Is Politics? 189
Politics and Issues 192
Parties and Politics 193
What Parties Do 199
Third Parties 200

What's Wrong with the Two-Party System? 203

The System Changes

Elections 208

The Election of 1988 211

The Elections of 1990 213

A Theory of Critical Elections 214

202

Politics Reconsidered 217

Who Rules America? The Elite, the Interests, and the Voter 219

Democracy: Rule by the People 220

Making Public Policies 221

Pluralism: Rule by Interest Groups 223

Elitism: Rule by the Powerful 225

Voting 231

Political Socialization 234

Apathy and Anger 235

The Attentive Public 237

11

Media, the Shadow Government: Power and the Press 241

Media 242		
What Is News? 2	42	
Events, Personalities, and the M	1edia	243
The Media's Audience	247	
The News Business	248	
Presidents and the Media	250	
Kennedy and the Media	252	
Nixon and the Media	253	
Carter and the Media	254	
Reagan and the Media	255	
Bush and the Media	256	
Television 258		
The Fourth Fstate: An Assess	nont	263

12

Economics: The Prevailing Smell of Money 267

Rich Man, Poor Man 271 Capitalism 273 Socialism 275 Social Democracy The Best of Times, the Worst of Times 282 Welfare for the Rich or the Poor? Is Less More? 291 Politics and the Economy 294 The New International Economy 297

13

Trumpets and Flourishes: America in the World 299

Nationalism 302		
War 304		
Deterrence and Nuclear War	305	
Foreign Policy and Diplomacy	307	
Making Foreign Policy	308	
American Diplomacy: Principles, Perceptions	, and Polic	ies 310
From Cold War to Realism	314	
Foreign Policy under Carter	316	
Foreign Policy under Reagan	318	
Foreign Policy under Bush	322	
Lessons from the Past	324	
The Future of American Foreign Pe	olicy 32	6

14

Politics and the Pursuit of Happiness 331

Government: The Cause or the Cure? 332

The Individual and Politics 336

Of Politics and Americans 337

Appendixes 339

Glossary 340
Suggested Readings 350
The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence 366
The Constitution of the United States 369

Index 391

Contents xiii

lı	ntrod	lucti	on		
					e e
 		_		ty - and a	

Thus, we presume to write, as it were, upon things that exist not, and travel by maps yet unmade.

Walt Whitman
Democratic Vistas

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.

Alexander Hamilton
The Federalist No. 1

The premise of a democratic society is simple and audacious. Democracies are built on a fundamental belief that people are capable of making intelligent decisions, not only about their personal lives and affairs, but also about how their government should conduct itself at home and abroad. Through much of past human experience democratic self-government has been a rare and exotic flower struggling to survive among the weeds of history. Normally, people have found themselves ruled by monarchies, dictatorships, theocracies, alien empires, or self-perpetuating and self-serving elites.

Certain preconditions seem to be necessary before a people or nation can trust its fate to what we might call a free society. Usually the society must have achieved a degree of wealth that permits most people to enjoy a decent standard of living. There must be a high level of literacy and access to information and education. There should be tolerance within the culture for others' personal freedom, particularly the freedom to disagree with the government and the ability to make that disagreement known without fear of prison, torture, death, or other forms of repression. Because these circumstances have been relatively rare, democracies have been the exception rather than the rule (although democratic procedures seem to be on the rise recently).

There is one other fundamental prerequisite to a successful democracy. Because ordinary people finally are expected to decide the nation's policies regarding peace and war, the economy, race relations, education, taxation, and more, it follows that these people must take that responsibility seriously. Citizens of a democracy are presumed willing and able to be informed and concerned about their society, just as family members must assume that they know and care about each other. But many Americans are so absorbed in their personal lives that they expend little or no time or energy on the affairs of the nation. About half rarely bother to vote. Although all school children are required to complete courses in American history and government, polls and various other indicators of the public psyche tend to confirm an astonishing lack of knowledge

on the part of many citizens, not only of historical facts and current issues, but of the most fundamental principles and ideas around which a democratic society is organized. Yet we all sense instinctively that full citizenship requires not only that we exercise the right to vote, but that we participate in the dialogue about political events that shape the nation and hence the lives of its people.

Ultimately, that dialogue comes down to choosing the men and women who will lead this nation. If they govern wisely and well, the chances that we the people will enjoy peace, the blessings of liberty, prosperity, and domestic tranquility are enhanced. If they blunder into war or depression or civil unrest, ordinary Americans will pay the price for their mistakes.

In a letter to John Adams, his political foe but personal friend, Thomas Jefferson defended the American political system that both men had helped create on the grounds that it provided the best means of elevating what he called the "natural aristocracy" into the offices of government. Jefferson defined the "natural aristocracy" as one based on virtue and talent rather than wealth and birth.

In a world in which talent is associated with the arts or show business rather than with politics and in which the word *virtue* takes on a somewhat quaint, priggish, and old-fashioned connotation, Jefferson's definition may require some additional explanation. By talent he meant, simply, the ability to govern well and effectively, "to manage the concerns of society," as he put it. What Jefferson meant by virtue is not so easily understood. It had to do with certain qualities that today we might associate with statecraft, qualities such as wisdom, self-control, vision, commitment to the common good, and, perhaps most important, the ability to provide moral leadership to one's fellow citizens. Statecraft does not require that a person live as a saint. Certainly Jefferson was no saint. He owned slaves, although he often denounced slavery, and other charges have been leveled at Jefferson the private individual. But it is quite another matter to fault Jefferson the statesman, who, with the power of his imagination, his words, and his deeds, helped create "a new man and a new earth." In the Jeffersonian sense, the statesman enlightens and ennobles, as compared with a leader who merely administers.

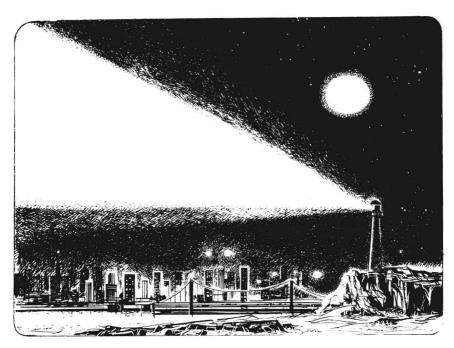
If today there is "no virtue in the Republic," as *Harper's* editor, Lewis H. Lapham, has suggested,² Jefferson would grieve to know it. He relied on the common people because he believed that they would demand "virtue" from their leaders. He knew, of course, that there would be ambitious individuals who might lead the country into defeat, disgrace, and failure. But he believed that the people, aided by education, would find the wisdom to reject the blandishments of the "pseudo-aristoi" and to select leaders who belonged to the "natural aristocracy."

Thus a republic of virtue and talent requires much from its citizens as well as from its leaders. For citizens to participate in the important political events of

Introduction 3

¹ The question of a natural versus a hereditary aristocracy is the subject of a letter from Jefferson to John Adams, written from Jefferson's home, Monticello, on October 28, 1813. The Jefferson –Adams correspondence, comprising more than 150 letters between the two old political foes, began in 1812 and continued until both men died on the same day, July 4, 1826.

² "The Easy Chair," Harper's, August 1976, pp. 10–12.



(Drawing by Joseph Mugnaini.)

their time, at the local through the national level, is not simply a right. The relationship between leaders and led may be crucial to a democracy such as ours; that is, the extent to which the United States is a great and advancing nation or in decline is, in part, as much the responsibility of those of us who vote for our leaders (or do not vote at all) as it is the responsibility of the leaders themselves.

An idealistic vision of ourselves is a recurrent theme in American life. Americans have held a belief that our nation has a special role to play in the unfolding drama of human history. Lincoln spoke of the country as the "last, best hope of mankind." From the Puritans to Woodrow Wilson to the soaring oratory of John Kennedy to George Bush's quest for a "new world order" organized and led by the United States, this idea has reverberated in our land. That we have not always acted in accordance with the lofty rhetoric of our leaders, or the ideals of our founders, is obvious to anyone who examines American life critically and objectively. Nevertheless, most Americans continue to believe that this nation, in Franklin Roosevelt's words, "has a rendezvous with destiny."

But whether the American political system as it exists today can meet the high standards announced in our political discourse and, more important, the demands placed on it by Jefferson is a core question that underlies the following pages. One of the most interesting of Jefferson's contributions to American ideas on politics was his decision to inject the curious phrase "the pursuit of happiness" into our most famous document, the Declaration of Independence. Like most memorable phrases ("to be or not to be," "do unto others"), the words glitter but remain