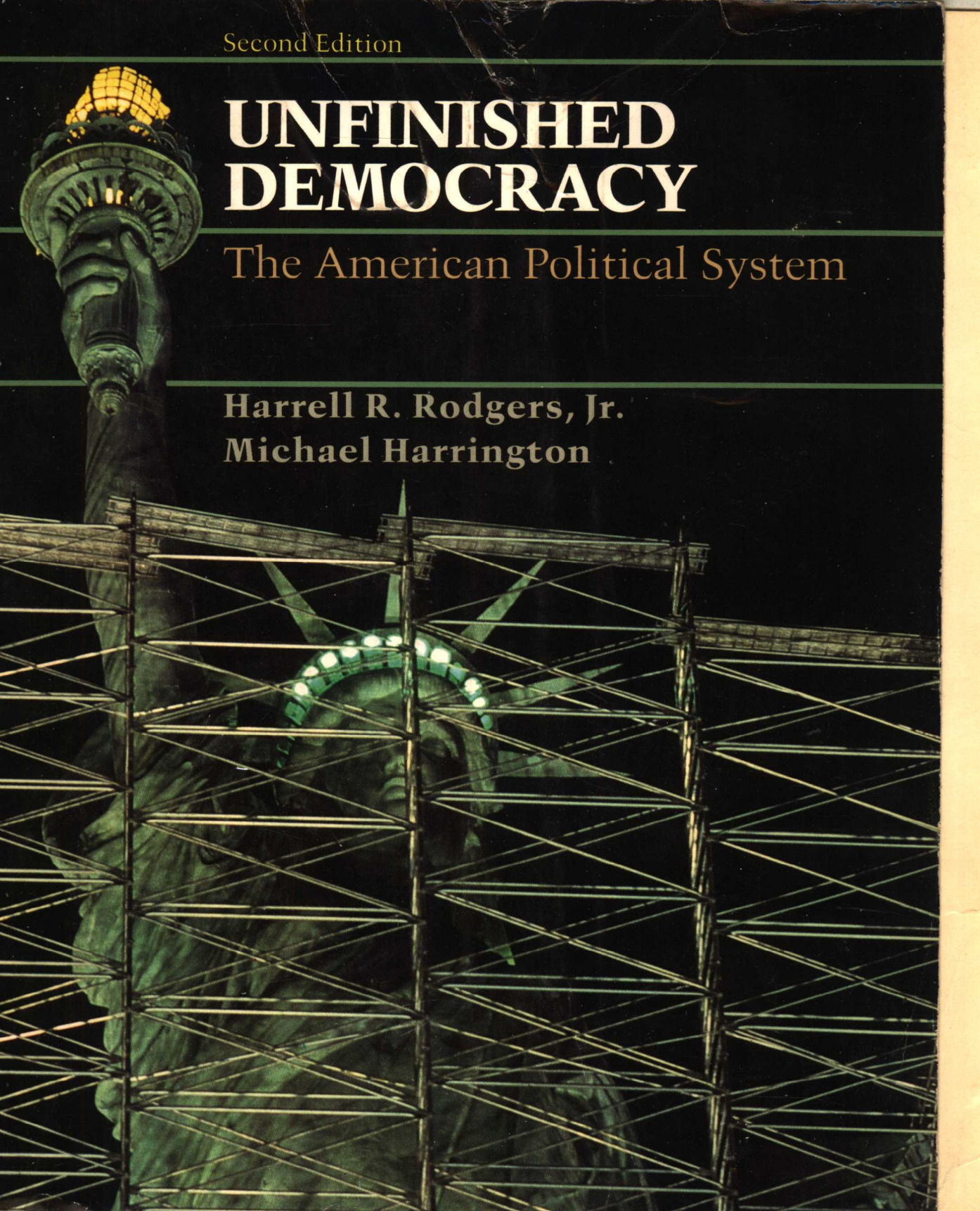


Second Edition

UNFINISHED DEMOCRACY

The American Political System

Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr.
Michael Harrington



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M.H.

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The Crisis of Government



He that goeth about to persuade a multitude that they are not so well governed as they ought to be, shall never want attentive and favourable hearers.

Richard Hooker

Throughout history most governments have been failures. Unsuccessful governments—sometimes overthrown by their populace, sometimes destroyed by foreign invaders, but often merely collapsing on their own—are piled high through the pages of world history. Most of them have failed because they have not been based on the consent of their citizens, have not been attuned to the public's needs, or have been too inept to establish a society in which people could live safely and happily.

In *The Gulag Archipelago* Alexandr Solzhenitsyn pointed out, "With the exception of a very limited number of decades, the history of nations is entirely a history of revolutions and seizures of power. And whoever succeeds in making a more successful and enduring revolution is from that moment on graced with the bright robes of justice."¹ Even in modern history political change is often frequent and violent, according to political scientist Thomas H. Greene:

*Between the end of the [Second World War] and 1969, forty of the approximately 100 states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America experienced at least one successful military seizure of power. Between 1948 and 1967, almost all the countries of Latin America, two thirds of the countries of Asia, and one half of those countries in Africa independent by 1962 recorded one or more successful or unsuccessful attempts to change their governments by unconstitutional means. Over a shorter time span (1946 to 1959), but including a wider range of type of political stability, Eckstein cites the New York Times as reporting more than 1200 clear cases of "internal war," including "civil wars, guerrilla wars, localized terrorism, mutinies, coups d'etat."*²

Indeed, failure of governments is so prevalent that only a relatively small percentage of all the people in history have had the good fortune to live in even modest prosperity and peace. Even today most humans do not enjoy political freedom, and most are illiterate and poor.

In late 1980 Amnesty International released a study showing that in at least half the nations of the world people are routinely arrested for their political or religious beliefs. They are often jailed, tortured, or even executed after summary trials that bear no resemblance to justice or due process of law.³ In a similar study Freedom House, a New York-based organization, reported that in 1981 some 2 billion people (about 43 percent of the world's population) were living in fifty-eight nations that did not extend democratic rights to their citizens.⁴

By historical and current world standards, then, Americans have been fortunate. Our political system is celebrated by many as one of the most enduring and enlightened of all social contracts among a free people. Despite political crises, internal and external wars, depressions and civil revolts, the American political system has persevered. In his inaugural address President Ronald Reagan paid tribute to the remarkably stable patterns of democratic government that Americans take for granted:

To a few of us here today this is a solemn and most momentous occasion. And, yet, in the history of our nation, it is a commonplace occurrence.

The orderly transfer of authority as called for in the Constitution routinely takes place as it has for almost two centuries and few of us stop to think how unique we really are. In the eyes of many of the world, this every-four-year ceremony we accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle.

And, indeed it is! The American political system is clearly one of the most successful on earth. Yet it is a system in crisis.

The Crisis of the Eighties

The United States in the eighties is going through more domestic and international crisis and change than at any time in almost half a century. In recent years it has often been said that the country is being forced to adapt to a world it no longer dominates. While this is clearly true, the United States is also struggling with many of the same domestic problems that have always challenged it. Thus any analysis of our basic social, economic, and political institutions must understand them in a context of transition, of new, and sometimes uncertain, response to both unprecedented conditions and unresolved problems.

The most obvious indicator of the turbulence of these times is to be found in the economy. In the campaign of 1976, Jimmy Carter attacked President Gerald R. Ford by charging that the "misery index"—the sum of the unemployment and inflation rates—was an intolerable 12.5 percent. In 1980 Ronald Reagan attacked President Jimmy Carter, arguing that the "misery index" was then 19.5 percent. In the 1982 congressional elections the Democrats attacked Reagan's Republican party on the grounds that, although the inflation component of the "misery index" had declined, unemployment, which reached 10.8 percent in December 1982, was at a higher level than at any time since the Great Depression.

Then in 1983 inflation began to go down. But so, too, did the unemployment figure, which was below 9 percent at the end of the year. There were politicians who said in the grim winter of 1982-83 that President Reagan would have great difficulty in being reelected. They then began to argue, in the light of the new statistics on unemployment in late 1983, that he was all but unbeatable.

The persistent economic problems of the 1970s and early 1980s have undermined a public philosophy that played an important role in American society for some five decades. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to the problems of the Great Depression provided what political scientist Samuel H. Beer has defined as the **public philosophy** of the United States during

the next generation.⁵ That does not mean that everyone agreed with the philosophy of the New Deal, but it did provide a certain consensus within which the political system functioned for a long time.

In the eighties, however, the coherence provided by the philosophy of the New Deal has begun to unravel. In his 1982 economic message to Congress, Reagan candidly recognized that he was "reversing the trends of the past."⁶ And economist George E. Peterson noted that Reagan's proposals for a "new federalism resembles nothing so closely as the reality of . . . federalism in 1933."⁷ One response to the crisis of the eighties, then, was to try to unwind almost five decades of American history. That is one sign of the kind of radical political response provoked by an economy with serious structural problems.

Indeed, in setting the stage for the ways in which American democracy now gropes with new and puzzling issues, it would serve us well to return briefly to that public philosophy of the last generation, which for several decades seemed to offer the best solution to our problems but which is now so much in doubt on both the Left and the Right.

The Public Philosophy of the New Deal

From the New Deal until Ronald Reagan—from 1933 to 1981—the federal government accepted the responsibility to intervene in the economy in order to promote full employment, prosperity, and price stability. This new role was the public philosophy that grew out of the New Deal. Republican presidents—Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford—accepted that obligation, or philosophy, and so did Roosevelt's Democratic heirs: Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter. The public philosophy of the New Deal, in keeping with capitalist principles, assumed that private corporations would make the fundamental decisions about the allocation of resources. Washington was to use **fiscal policy** (determining whether the federal budget would be in surplus or deficit) and **monetary policy** (controlling the supply of money) to ensure that there would be adequate buying power to absorb the output of the corporations, thereby keeping Americans at work, mainly in the private sector.

In theory, if buying power was insufficient, the government would operate at a deficit and put money into people's pockets so that they could purchase what the private corporations produced. If buying power was excessive, with too much money competing for too few goods and consequently creating **inflation**, Washington would raise taxes and/or interest rates to cut down demand. According to the theory, unemployment could be eliminated by small bursts of controlled inflation, and inflation could be reduced by slight increases in unemployment. In the long run the economy would



The Democratic Presidents pictured above at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention—Kennedy (top center), Truman (top right), and Johnson (bottom)—were all political heirs of Franklin D. Roosevelt (pictured top left). FDR's New Deal shaped government policies and political debate in America for a generation.

operate on an even keel. The deficits needed to combat joblessness would be compensated for by the surpluses required to deal with inflation.

This theory never worked so neatly in practice, but it did operate as a guide for Republicans and Democrats, for conservatives and liberals. To be sure, the conservatives tended to emphasize the problem of inflation, while the liberals focused on unemployment. But both were operating within a common framework. The highwater mark of confidence in this public philosophy occurred in the 1960s, the longest prosperous period in American history. As Lyndon B. Johnson left the presidency in January 1969, he proudly told Congress that his record in office:

demonstrates the vitality of a free economy and its capacity for steady growth. No longer do we view our economic life as a relentless tide of ups and downs. No longer do we fear that automation and technical progress will rob workers of jobs rather than help us to achieve greater abundance. No longer do we consider poverty and unemployment permanent landmarks on our economic scene.⁸

In the years since President Johnson made that statement, the American economy has experienced four recessions (1969-70, 1974-75, 1980, and 1982-83). In the seventies those downturns were accompanied by relatively high unemployment and double-digit inflation. In 1981-82 President Reagan predicted that double-digit unemployment at levels not experienced since the last years of the Great Depression (and some good luck on energy prices) would finally bring prices down.

What went wrong? There is no simple answer. In the early 1970s the economic techniques that grew out of the Great Depression and that had been relatively successful in guiding the economy began to fail. Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter each tried to use these techniques in basically traditional ways, but the economy would not respond. In 1980 Ronald Reagan argued that the problem was the government; that the government's intervention in the economy was causing stagnation. His solution was to lower taxes, to cut government spending (especially for social welfare programs), and to reduce governmental regulation of business. In 1981 and 1982 Reagan convinced Congress to adopt most of his major policies.

In the 1970s and early 1980s millions of Americans became the victims of the nation's economic failures. By late 1982 some 12 million Americans were jobless, and millions more were working part-time while seeking full-time employment. In 1982 almost 35 million Americans, the largest number since 1965, were living in poverty. Some 15 million additional Americans were living just above the poverty line. Cuts in social welfare programs meant that millions of down-and-out Americans had few or no benefits to fall back on. Even those "lucky" enough to receive assistance were receiving less. For example, the inflation of the seventies reduced the real buying power of those receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) by 28 percent. Even if one adds the cash value of food stamps to that of AFDC payments, in 1981 the combined total provided 4 percent less buying power than AFDC payments alone in 1969.⁹ At the same time the real value of the weekly earnings of workers in industry in 1982 was the lowest it had been since 1962, and it was 15 percent less than the peak value of 1973.¹⁰

But then did all these trends suddenly reverse themselves in the recovery of 1983? Did the president's "supply-side" theories finally prevail and thus provide the nation with a new "public philosophy"? We will look at that question in detail in Chapter 3. For now, we simply note that many liberals charged that the recovery had taken place in spite of, rather than because of, the president's policies, while a good number of conservatives were deeply troubled by the hundreds of billions of dollars in federal deficits that were a by-product of the Reagan program. To be sure, the president cited the upturn as proof that his tactics had worked. Instead of a new consensus, there was a continuing debate, both on the Right and the Left, with regard to the basic principles of national economic strategy.

The nation's economic problems also profoundly affected America's