H. G. NICHOLAS

THE NATURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

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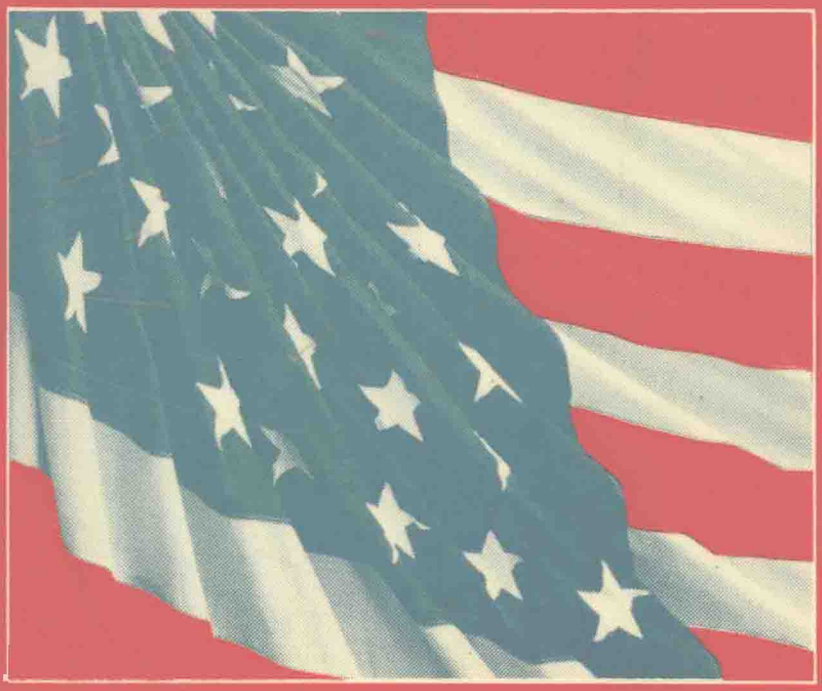

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The Nature of American Politics

To Eveline and Doris

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H.G.N.

New College, Oxford
September, 1985

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1 Why the United States is a difficult country to govern

Most British observers of American government look at it with eyes which have so long been focused on the tidy, compact pattern of the United Kingdom that they have a real difficulty in adjusting themselves to the huge, sprawling conglomerate that constitutes the governments (in the plural) of the United States. Indeed, despite a shared inheritance of history, race, language, and political beliefs, it is arguable that the British are peculiarly ill-placed to estimate the nature and efficiency of American political arrangements. For whereas Britain is small and unitary, the United States is vast and federal. Whereas the British constitution is unwritten and flexible, the American is written and, by comparison, rigid; moreover where Britain's is ancient and rooted in tradition, America's is (comparatively) recent and historical. Finally the shape and direction of the one are basically parliamentary while the shape and direction of the other are presidential. In most of these respects it is arguable that a Canadian, an Australian, an Indian, or even a Russian starts off with certain advantages of comprehension denied to ourselves. At least he will have a readier awareness of what the basic American problem is, of what it means to organize government for a vast territory, and is not likely to make the initial false assumption that the organization of such a government is an easy or once-for-all task.

In Britain, to a degree perhaps unique in the world, government is a datum—something there, something continuously existent from time immemorial. Discussion is about emendation, adjustment, modification. In the United States government has perpetually to justify itself, to overcome a set of peculiar resistances, from the psychological to the physical, to maintain, as it were, its ascendancy over the competing elements in the dynamic life of a diverse and restless people. Entering its third century, the American Constitution may be thought to have demonstrated remarkable powers of endurance, in a world which has seen so many constitutions come and go.

Yet its life has been a hard one. It has experienced a long and bloody civil war. During the 200 years of its existence, four Presidents of the United States have been assassinated and a fifth has had to resign to escape impeachment. Its survival through such vicissitudes, and the pervasive loyalty it has retained, must be accounted one of the most remarkable evidences of the democratic faith; how remarkable we can only realize if we appreciate the difficulties that stood, and still stand, in its way.

The first difficulty is, quite simply, *size*. Committed and habituated to representative government, we smile at Rousseau's conviction that democracy is possible only in a very small state. In this sense no one is a Genevois today (except perhaps the Genevoix). Yet it is a great mistake to assume that in a large country the inescapable loss of community and intimacy can be made up by the technical wizardry of modern communications. The United States had—and still has, though in diminished degree—the best system of communications of any large country, but there is still no national daily paper, it is still not practicable for everyone to pay easy and frequent visits to the capital, or to be equally well acquainted with more than a proportion of the regions and cultures between Alaska and Florida. Americans can—and frequently do—read the same news magazines, columnists, and comic strips. They watch much of the same TV news and entertainment. They do not lack agencies of cultural intercommunication, even of standardization. But, if they are not to lose all individualism and variety, they cannot escape the physical limitations that the American continent imposes. For most of them direct contact with their central government must be rarer and less intense than for citizens of smaller countries. There must always be a remoteness about Washington greater than that which attaches to London or Paris. The New Yorker or Washingtonian who re-crosses the Appalachians after a visit to the Mississippi valley or the West Coast must expect to be interrogated on his return about conditions 'out there' in a way which has no parallel for the Londoner when he re-crosses the Trent. The East Coast American has after all been in a far country, below the horizon of day-to-day consciousness of his neighbours.

Allied to size is the second difficulty, *diversity*. Within this continent inescapable physical diversities occur on a vast scale—of climate,

landscape, vegetation, minerals. One does not have to be a Montesquieu to detect some correlation between man and nature in many American contexts—a natural harmony between New England puritanism and the rocky rigours of its terrain, between Californian eclecticism and a climate which is for all seasons, between the tempo and tempers of Louisiana politics and the enervating languors of the bayou. What for politics is more significant is the extent to which the geography of large regions predisposes them to be one-product economies—the corn and hog belt, the cattle plains, the cotton states, the silver, the coal, or the iron areas, each vast in itself and each quasi-monopolistic in its own territory. This comparative absence of interpenetration creates a succession of distinct 'interests', each dominating the representation of its area to a degree that has only faint parallels in, say, the cotton interest of Lancashire, the coal-mining of South Wales, or the broad arable acres of East Anglia. The economico-political diversities which government has to harmonize in the United States are thus not only more numerous; they are also more distinct and exclusive.

For much of American history these diversities of nature and economy were compounded by diverse rates of development. The whole of the continent could not be settled simultaneously; 250 years separate the settlement of Virginia from that of Oklahoma. For all the speed of the westward movement, it took time. Hence a society—or rather set of societies—coexisting under the same ostensible government but in fact representing every stage of political evolution, from the settled institutions of New England to the vigilante improvisations of the frontier. If this particular range of diversities now belongs to the history books and Hollywood, memories and attitudes survive as relics or totems which do not lose their potency as soon as they have been robbed of their historical justification.

History may have reduced one range of diversities, but it has contributed to intensifying another. 'We are', said John Jay, pamphleteering for the new Constitution in the second *Federalist* essay, 'one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs. . . .' His seductive generalization was not valid then; it became less valid with every year that succeeded. The American people who in 1789 were perhaps 75 per cent 'Anglo-Saxon' (if that term be stretched to include Scots and Scotch-Irish) became with

every year down to 1914 increasingly heterogeneous. *E pluribus unum* was not, as Jay contended, a fact; it was increasingly an aspiration: *heterogeneity of population* was swiftly added to the other diversities which American government had to embrace.

No democratic government has ever taken on such a task. The historical norm has been for government to be an expression of national unity and to consolidate itself step by step with a developing sense of nationalism, e.g. Italy or Germany. In the United States, government, although starting off from a fairly developed base of the kind that Jay hyperbolically identified, has increasingly throughout most of its life had to create and promote the unity which sustains it. Indeed the promise and success of that government had the effect of drawing to America's shores fugitives from every other who, in their political underdevelopment, presented a challenge which probably no other government could have handled and which even the American government found at times beyond its strength and elasticity.

The sheer scale of American immigration is hard to grasp. Between 1820 and 1981 over 50 million persons settled in the United States—the greatest movement of population in western history. Of the total population of the United States in 1900—76 million—10½ million had been born in Europe and another 26 million were of foreign or mixed parentage. Even as late as 1980 there were over 14 million foreign-born in the USA, (to say nothing about the unregistered illegal immigrants flooding across the Mexican border). The overwhelming majority of these immigrants came from countries where traditions of self-government were weak or non-existent. In the half-century between 1880 and 1930 over 4½ million immigrants arrived from Italy, over 4 million from Austria-Hungary and its successor states, and some 3¾ million from Russia and Poland.

To the problem of assimilation which these presented one ought, realistically, to add the challenge of another group, immigrants in a peculiar sense. These are the blacks, the involuntary immigrants of eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave-trading—they and those of their descendants who were not repatriated to Liberia or elsewhere in the wake of emancipation. For these Americans— something like a tenth of the total United States population at most periods—the legacy of slavery conjoined with racial prejudice meant that they lived for the most part outside the democratic system under which they

were supposed to be governed, physically immigrants, socially alien.

The challenge of immigration proceeded not only from differences of race, language, and previous political culture but also from differences in religion—historically often an even more divisive force. The America of 1789 was even more Protestant than it was Anglo-Saxon, but after 200 years a continuous process of religious diversification has produced a society of which only about 49 per cent is Protestant, while about 40 per cent is Catholic, about 3 per cent Jewish, and about 4 per cent Orthodox. If we are to judge American government by what it has avoided as well as by what it has achieved, one of its greatest claims to distinction must be its ability to get historically warring faiths to live amicably together over a period in which their relative strengths have undergone such changes. Lord Bryce held it a singular piece of American good fortune that lines of religious allegiance never happened to coincide with state boundaries and that no particular creed ever dominated any group of states. The generalization has to be adjusted to make allowance for Utah, settled and largely still preserved as a Mormon theocracy, but it is not invalidated thereby, since Utah's admission to the Union was contingent upon the adoption of a constitution bringing its practices in church–state relations into line with those of the rest of the United States.

Had America so chosen, the potentially de-stabilizing impact of immigration could have been controlled by simple limitation of numbers. But not only was there little or no restriction on immigration as such until the 1920s, there was almost equally little resistance to the enjoyment by the immigrant, once arrived, of the full rights of citizenship. True, for most of the period of high immigration, a five-year probation period was required for naturalization. But this had little political significance. Under the Constitution naturalization was a federal perquisite, but the granting of voting rights was a matter for the states, and many of the states, particularly those that wished to attract immigrants, granted the vote to new settlers upon a simple declaration of intention to take out papers. Moreover in the cities in particular the political machines regarded the immigrant as so much voting fodder. On the eve of elections the suffrage regulations were blatantly violated to enable the registration and purchase of ignorant, often illiterate voters. In such a setting the immigrant might not want to vote, but he could often not avoid being voted. To quote

Bryce again,

> Incompetent to give an intelligent vote, but soon finding that their vote has a value, they fall into the hands of the party organisations whose officers enrol them in their lists and undertake to fetch them to the polls. I was taken to watch the process of citizen-making in New York. Droves of squalid men, who looked as if they had just emerged from our immigrant ships and perhaps had done so only a few weeks before—for the law prescribing a certain term of residence is frequently violated, were brought up to the magistrate by the ward agent of the party which had captured them, declared their allegiance to the United States, and were forthwith placed on the roll.

To say this is not of course to imply that a more restrictive policy would have served the United States better, or indeed that such a policy would have been conceivable at all, having regard to the nation's self-assumed posture of the Open Door. Nor must it be thought that such a posture, despite twentieth-century restrictions, is a thing wholly of the past. Throughout the 1980s immigrants have been entering the country at a rate of at least 500,000 a year. And although the principle of controlling and supervising immigration is now almost universally accepted, 'open door' psychology still permeates American life even when it, so to speak, escapes its own notice—witness John J. McCloy, no radical or one-worlder, giving evidence on the nomination of J. Robert Oppenheimer to lead the atomic bomb project in World War II: 'Oppenheimer was the only American physicist fully qualified for the job; there were plenty of refugees of course, but everyone agreed Oppenheimer was the only American who was up to it in every way.' And Oppenheimer was the son of a first-generation immigrant from *Germany*. From such an attitude of mind—almost, one might say, of the unconscious mind—certain consequences flow, consequences which other countries have escaped, especially when, as repeatedly happened, they literally exported their problems, human and political, across the Atlantic.

The most obvious political effect of the presence in America of large, imperfectly assimilated, immigrant or ex-immigrant groups has been on foreign policy, *Caelum, non animum, mutant*. . . . In attitudes to other countries the elements of the melting pot will remain discrete long after they have been fused in their domestic relations. To an Englishman the most obvious example would no doubt be the Irish in America, whose Anglophobia so long affected foreign policy via the ballot-box. The application of the principle of 'self-determination' in

Woodrow Wilson's peace-making owed something to the pressures of Americans whose European homelands now for the first time looked like acquiring a full national identity. Of such groups the classic exemplar in our time is, of course, the Jews, with their concern for the Zionist cause and the electoral leverage derived from their concentration in key states, particularly New York. Truman's Palestine policy in the 1940s may serve as the *locus classicus* of this kind of immigrant pressure. Since the 1970s we have seen a variant of the same phenomenon with the rising concern of American blacks for the newly emergent and would-be emergent black states of Africa.

It would be hard to prove in any one of these instances that the pressure of ethnic groups resulted in shifts in American policy that were at variance with what the national interest would have dictated. But of their potency and persistence there can be no doubt. And indeed it is arguable that the main effect of America's conglomerate electorate on her foreign policy has been not in the determination of particular issues so much as in the infusion of a special emotionalism into its formulation. The inescapable clash of loyalties of such groups, their *odi et amo* proclivities, their pro-European and anti-European sentiments, have disposed them to an excessive ambivalence and excitability; they have been too readily propagandized, too lacking in a firm, instinctive basis of action. This has been seen in such phenomena as the oscillation between McCarthyism and a sentimental pro-Communism, or the precedent debate between isolationists and interventionists, or the expectations and disillusionments attendant upon peace-making after the Great War.

Over the broad field of politics, however, it is probable that the most pervasive effect of immigration has been its contribution to the rise and power of the political machine—the unideological politics of organization. At various moments in America's history conservatives have been alarmed that immigrants were menacing the institutions of the republic by the importation of alien doctrines and practices—'radicalism', socialism, anarchism, communism, etc. Instances indeed have not been lacking in which immigrants, as individuals or groups, have challenged the American consensus with imported criticisms or prescriptions. Nevertheless the main thrust of immigration has been in the opposite direction, towards conservatism, conformity, adjustment, and passivity. The individual immigrant's combination of helplessness and *incivisme* has made him the prey much less of the agitator than of the boss. By filling some of the void

left by a *laissez-faire* policy the boss was able to make the immigrant his client; he could then go on to build up his structure of organization politics upon the immigrant's combination of loyalty and indifference. From this developed the whole apparatus of machine politics from the ward to the national committee.

Although, since its heyday at the height of the 'new immigration', many factors have reduced both the justification and the opportunity for the machine, the pride and aspirations of ethnic groupings still persist and sustain it. This is most evident—but not exclusively so—in the great urban centres where the construction of an 'ethnically balanced ticket' is still an indispensable political skill. Even at national level both major parties still maintain a 'Nationalities Division' in their campaign organizations. Of such operations the Irish are both the traditional commanders-in-chief and the most conscientious foot-soldiers, but the essential role of the immigrant is the same—to be the cannon fodder of organization politics.

The passivity, the 'idiocy' of the immigrant leads us on to the consideration of the fourth difficulty which the development of American society has presented to the operations of American government—what might be called the *subordinacy of politics*. The immigrant has come to America not primarily for a public purpose but for a private one—to take advantage for himself and his family of the better opportunities offered by the New World. Part of the reason why these opportunities seem 'better' is because he finds himself in a like-minded society, one in which the urge to individual advancement is more widely diffused than in any other in the world. Latter-day critics have sometimes categorized this attitude by describing America as a 'business civilization', but the phrase, with its implication of a society dominated by the profit motive, is misleading. The clue rather is to be found in the relationship between the distinctive American environment and the immigrant character of the whole American experience. The primary task of the immigrant was to settle the continent, to wrest a living from the bare soil of New England or the pine barrens of Virginia. And when this priority was established it was quickly succeeded by another. The land which began as a menace swiftly became an opportunity. The abundance of free land became a magnet drawing the American ever westward, always to the fringe of pre-existing settlement, to what the Americans call, with a usage so significantly different from the European, the 'frontier'. In the traditional European societies men rise, if they rise at all, inside the

society. In America for over 200 years there was an alternative avenue open to the ambitious—on the fringe of society. 'Go west, young man' meant 'Turn your back on the established institutions and seek your fortune where you can make your own way largely by your own rules'.

At either stage, the continent as threat or the continent as opportunity, the role of government was essentially utilitarian— 'government as a service institution', as Daniel Boorstin has well called it. Faced with a menacing wilderness, the settlers might, as their very first action, form a government. Such was the Mayflower Compact. But it was a man-made institution (however divinely blessed), put together to do a job ('for our better ordering and preservation'), not pre-existing by some transcendental potency of its own. So too with the Constitution of the United States itself, ordained and established by the people of the United States 'to form a more perfect union, establish justice, secure domestic tranquillity', etc.—in other words to create the indispensable framework for a newly independent nation with a continent before it, to be settled and exploited.

The artificiality, the circumscribed serviceableness, of such governments marked them out sharply from those of old world societies, remote in their origins, sanctified by history, habit, and tradition. Thus concepts like 'State' or 'Crown', central to so much European thought, have no counterparts in a country where 'state' is simply the label for a conveniently demarcated territorial unit of government and 'crown' is the symbol of a discarded loyalty. And with their absence goes a whole sense of an intrinsic *a priori* authority for government which, whatever its maleficent potential in the hands of a despot, indisputably facilitates the turning of the day-to-day wheels of administration. By contrast in America government has had to demonstrate the validity of its claims, to solicit rather than demand, to serve rather than enjoin. Such a system is slow to entrust government with the task of determining the outcome of private contests for power. Government becomes, for most of its time, a mirror which reflects the interests in society rather than an authority which corrects their imbalances.

In all sorts of simple ways this subordinacy reveals itself. The national capital, for almost all of America's history, was a provincial city, selected indeed for its role because of its detachment from existing metropolitan centres of power. State capitals reflect a similar determination to isolate and neutralize government; many of them have even been denied the modest glamour of continuity (Ohio's had

five successive relocations, Indiana's three). As with capitals, so with rulers. For all the wealth of talent drawn into the service of the nation in its formative years, politics soon lost its primacy as a calling for men of vigour and ability. No small part of the explanation of the Civil War may be found in the poor quality of the nation's leaders in the preceding couple of decades. Territorial expansion and economic development drew off energies which might otherwise have contributed to a peaceful resolution of the slave problem. After the war a generation 'mortgaged to the railroads', as Henry Adams put it, made no secret of preferring the exploitation of America's natural resources to the administration of its public business. The great names cease to be those of Presidents, Senators, or Secretaries of State. They are those of the captains of business and industry—Carnegie, Rockefeller, Leland Stanford, Vanderbilt, Harriman, Morgan. It was only for the benefit of British readers that Bryce felt obliged to explain 'Why the best men do not go into politics'. In the United States of the 1880s ' "Politician" ', as he put it, was 'a term of reproach . . . among the better sort of citizens over the whole Union'. Almost fifty years later the Lynds found much the same in their archetypal mid-American town: 'the "best citizens" were no longer to be found among Middletown's public officials'. A Gallup poll which in 1973 asked people whether they would like to see their sons going into politics elicited a resounding 64 per cent of 'Noes'.

The fifth difficulty which American government has to counter is one that has its roots deep in the nature of the American experience. It is the *anti-governmental cast* of American society, the concept of government as something if not evil in itself at any rate only tolerable so long as human imperfections make it necessary. 'What is government itself', asked James Madison in the fifty-first *Federalist* paper, 'but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?'

America's beginnings are rooted in a protest against government. The immigrant comes to America in order to emancipate himself from the oppressive institutions of his homeland. Then when the institutions, in the form of king, bishop, or tax-gatherer, come after him and seek to control him across 3,000 miles of water, he protests again. This time (unless he lives on the moving frontier) there is no safety in flight. He must organize his emancipation. So after the Declaration of Independence comes the Constitution. This gives to