

Ambition and American Public Life

(アメリカの公選職と野心)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE : 政治上の野心と公選職 (ambition) は、アメリカ合衆国の憲法にもられた概念から今日の社会政治上の制度にみられる具体的表現にいたるまで、アメリカにおいて不可欠な価値を保持し続けてきた。

しかしながら、この ambition に関する意味やその示すものの期待の中味、有用性や必要条件といったものは時代にもなって、大きく変容を遂げてきた。この論文は、そのような変化の中味を考究し、はたしてさまざまな変化が意味のあったものであったかどうかを問うものである。また、本論文は今日的諸制度の持つ意義と、もともと意図された政治・社会制度のあいだに生まれているものとの、くいちがいにも光をあてようとする。そして、そのような新旧制度上の違いが現代政治や国民生活のうえで、いかなる意味をもつかを述べようとする。

Abstract

From its constitutional origins to its modern forms, ambition has been a staple value in American public life. However, the meaning, the understandings, expectations, uses and requirements associated with it have changed greatly over time. This paper considers such changes and asks whether or not they have been constructive, highlighting the emergent discontinuities between the modern manifestations of the value and the political machinery as originally contemplated. It

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concludes by considering the implications of such discontinuity for both contemporary governance and public life.

Introduction

It is a paradox of American society that while its instantiating values have remained constant over time, the interpretations, understandings, expectations and social forms associated with them have not. For instance, despite an enduring commitment to liberalism (e.g. Boorstin 1953; Ketcham 1987a) there has been a sea change in the conception and use of this founding value. The Jeffersonian dualism of active citizen/minimal state has been transformed into the Rooseveltian dynamic of passive citizen/megastate. The citizen of a liberal society has been converted, to use Lowi's (1979) words, into an "administre." Above all, this has meant a profound alteration over time in the notion of an individual's place in and function as a member of the public world.

The reviews are mixed as to just what this development means. Some (e.g. Wolin 1987; Savas 1982) interpret the alienation of authority as an enlargement of state power, while others (e.g. Sharfshansky 1979) view it as an enhancement of social autonomy. Many argue that greater autonomy has been attended with increased self-concern, an increase which has stimulated the enshrinement of the private domain and a withdrawal from the shared realm. Such a development has been captured from a number of perspectives, ranging from economics (e.g. Thurow 1981; Olson 1982; Reich 1983), and public policy (e.g. Wootton 1985; Berry 1984) to political theory (e.g. Barber 1984; Sullivan 1982; Frug 1980). In different ways, all make clear the belief that it is modern liberalism that has worked to colonize, fragment and destabilize the public realm (see also Unger 1983; Bellah et al. 1985).

In this essay we consider a companion value to liberalism; one I believe to be both product and producer of this change in liberalism. The value is ambition. Understood at one time as a central public value in America, ambition has come to be regarded as a key private

value. Once perceived by moral theorists such as David Hume and Adam Smith as centrally servicing the collective, ambition has come to be viewed as almost exclusively benefitting the individual (but cf. Friedman and Friedman 1979). This is a significant amendment. The larger (public) conception of ambition was deemed by the Founders as an essential ingredient in their constitutional scheme. Now that the value has become more narrowly defined, profound implications arise for the conduct of social and political life in America. Ambition is no less pervasive today than at the founding. It is only differentially drawn, leading to different interpretations, uses and effects.

In seeking to document such change and flesh through its implications, this paper follows two contemporary academic currents. The first is the recent heated debate among intellectual historians about the role of language and context. My focus here on the mutability of meaning attached to central cultural values gives substance to the view articulated by linguistic relativists that political issues, ideas and practices derive from ever-changing socio political contexts (e.g. Skinner 1969; Pocock 1973; Wood 1969). The second line of intersection is with the proliferating literature on civic consciousness (e.g. Barber 1984; Ketcham 1987b; Sullivan 1983; Tussman 1987; and Mathews 1983): herein documenting the invisible impacts that shifts in a seminal cultural value can exert over American public life.

To meet its task, this paper must attend to two things: the American policy machinery and the place in that apparatus of the seminal value, ambition. More, it must examine their relationship through time. This generates a three-step methodology. The first move is to consider what I call the "founding political technology."¹ Such a "machine" is a major determinant in the shape and activity of the policy context--what some (e.g. Foucault 1972; 1980) might call the "structure of discourse." The second maneuver is to consider the dependence of the Publian machinery upon ambition. As we shall learn, this value was not only viewed as a linch-pin in the political machine but, significantly, has detached itself, assuming a life of its own as an enduring cultural value.² The third stratagem is to consider the companion historic development of the value relative to the

machine. For, we find that while mechanical (or formatic) persistence can be documented, intellectual (content) constancy cannot. One answer to why the change in content--hence, differential policy outcome--has occurred, lies in the shift in the meaning and uses of this seminal socio-cultural value.

The Political Machine

Publius' greatest aim in contriving a government was to allow the most-extensive amount of liberty possible while maintaining stability and order. Liberty for the citizens (e.g. Letter 10, 49) and liberty for the various parts of government (e.g. Letters 19, 39 and 51). His mechanism for securing this end was variegated and complex. Much of the material for this vision is contained in Letter 10. There we learn that it consisted of at least four elements. The "genius of the people" (Letter 39), being republican, demanded a scheme of representation. In order to ensure that the representatives selected would be "proper guardians of the public weal" (Letter 10 1961: 82), a number of precautions were suggested. The first: size of the representative body--"in order to guard against the cabals of a few" (Letter 10 1961: 82; but cf. Letter 58). The second: an extensive territory by which to secure that proper size of the legislative body. This "geographic solution," as I call it, served another purpose as well. In Publius' words: "Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens" (Letter 10 1961: 83).

As we will consider later, pluralist theorists--such as Schattschneider (1960) and Dahl (1953)--interpreted this as an invitation to factions to enter the political fray and engage in a Hobbesian war of all against all. In such an engagement, pluralists apparently rely upon the dictum articulated in Letter 51: of ambition counteracting ambition. I will suggest in short order, however, that there is reason to read the pluralist version skeptically; that warfare spurred by narrow ambition was not what Publius had in mind at all. This belief is

founded in part on a third prophylactic found in Letter 10 and throughout the Federalist Papers: the virtuous impulse. Of course, one of the major features of the Publian machine was the principle of separated powers. This was the fourth protective of the founding design. In many ways, it served also as a precaution against representatives--the most suspect of all constitutional officers. The founders' idea was to contrive a system in which power was partitioned both horizontally and vertically. Doing so would ensure that the components of government and their objects--the people--would be better insulated from incursion. This concept of contrivance was derived from the hallowed Grecian methodology of antithesis and correlation (Wills 1981). It also reflected notions of the combination of balance and harmony specifically derived from Polybius (Wills 1981: 98).

Above all, however, Publius' product conformed to a design articulated first by Aristotle (see *The Politics*, Book IV, i 1289aII; Book I ii. 3). Taken together, Publius' monument can be seen as embodying the Greek perspective on constitutions in two respects: in its approach to design and in the design itself.

Both aspects (i.e. approach and design) reflect a rationality. Publius thought would overcome the vagaries and disharmonies which spring from any poorly configured constitution. On such a view, ill-crafted constitutions have the capacity to unleash passions in human constituents. Their failure inures from an inability to promote or secure the operation of reason both in the inanimate and human components. We see evidence of such a view in Publius' Letter 49. There, speaking of parties engaged by legislative action, he declares:

(When) public decision... (is) pronounced by the very men who had been agents in, or opponents of, the measures to which the decision would relate... the passions... not the reason, of the public... sit in judgement. But it is reason, alone, of the public, that ought to control and regulate the government. The passions ought to be controlled and regulated by the government (1961: 317; emphasis in original).

Publius crafted a rational device--a government--in recognition and in hopes of disciplining passion. But this is not to say that passions were to be avoided. Wills has argued that Publius was heavily influenced by Hume. The latter's political philosophy was founded in large measure upon a psychology of human action. This psychology posited that passion is what sets people in motion as moral agents. But even absent the Humian connection, the passion/motion thesis was not uncommon in the British tradition. It can be found throughout Hobbes' *Leviathan* (e.g. MacPherson 1977), a prominent work in the consciousness of the founders (e.g. see letter 10).

Passions were not necessarily bad. After all, virtue--the life-blood intended to flow through the founding machinery--was a passion. Passions were impulses. Impulses ran the risk of threatening the constitutional order because they became concretized in unmediated action. But, passions could be controlled, civilized, and socialized, or so the founders believed. We see such a view in Hamilton's June 18th speech to the Philadelphia Convention. *The New Yorker*, as captured in Madison's notes, asserted that passions--most notably ambition--must be brought into the service of government. It is essential that citizens' emotions become attached to the state; their impulses disciplined to respect the Federalist design. Under his Publian guise Hamilton deemed such a prospect highly probable. As he ventured in letter 17, citizens would have "an active sentiment of attachment" to those governments to which they were most proximate (1961: 120).

The Scope of Ambition

It is in this light that we should consider the famous phrase from Letter 51. When Publius intones "ambition must be made to counteract ambition," he intends ambition as a positive passion, an impulse of constructive activation and attachment, rather than destructive disengagement. But a thorny question is thus broached: the passage from which the quote is taken pertains mostly to leaders--in particular legislators. It was not private (non-governmental) ambition that

Publius was speaking of. By contrast, Letter 10 speaks of (and to a degree stands as a defense of) the presence and power of private passions. Thus in order to evaluate the modern growth and uses of ambition, the analyst must consider how Publius is to be read. Should analysis be confined to government, as Letter 51 would have it? Or, should the role of private passions be considered, as Letter 10 would have it? In short, what was the audience for ambition?

If ambition was not intended to be a universally obtainable value--i. e. to stand for the benefit and use of leaders, alone--then this design should have profound implications for the conduct and course of contemporary public life. For, as it shall be explained below modern developments have witnessed the pervasive extension of ambition into private (non-public) hands, with significant impacts on public life. Thus, let us spend contemplate the audience for ambition.

The elitist dimension can be located quite easily. For instance, in Letter 72 Publius seeks to combine governing system and governors' "genius":

...the best security for the fidelity of mankind is to make (leaders') interest coincide with their duty. Even the love of fame, the ruling passion of the noblest minds, ...would prompt a man to plan and undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit... (1961 : 437).

The strains of the virtuous masses can also be located in *the Federalist*. But, it is a complicated, oft-contradictory, conception. It is comprised in equal measure of contempt for the citizen's capacity for dispassion (that is, a belief in the commoner's susceptibility to passions such as selfish ambition), and faith in his ultimate morality. This paradoxical blend can be observed in Letter 15, where Publius writes :

Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraint. Has it been found that bodies of men act with more rectitude or greater disinterestedness than

individuals? The contrary of this has been inferred by all accurate observers of the conduct of mankind... A spirit of faction, which is apt to mingle its poison in the deliberation of all bodies of men, will often hurry the persons of whom they are composed into improprieties and excesses for which they would blush in a private capacity (1961: 110-111; emphasis added).

There is, in this passage, the notion that citizens have the ability to act virtuously, if only their passions--often unleashed in collective experience--can be controlled. This is the rationale, then, for instituting government.

The Federalist offers many other indicators that the average citizen is capable of virtue. For example, one can read it in the belief that the genius of the people is suited for republican government. As Letter 55 (1961: 346) puts it: "republican government assumes the existence of (esteem and confidence in the citizen) in a higher degree than any other form (of government)." Moreover, according to Wills, one can discern the presumption of virtue because that is what is to be refined in the Publian system. It is virtue that is passed from an impure state--mingled as it is with private interest and local bias--at the level of citizen, through the representative filter (Wills 1981: 226).

If virtue is present, then the citizen possesses the capacity for expressing and acting on ambition in its positive incarnation. This is important, for a compound republic--comprised as it is of local state and national levels of political organization--cannot long survive without all citizens understanding and acting from a conception of public good. Coupled with the earlier view that Publius sought ambition (in the form of attachment to the State), we can thus conclude that the Publian conception of ambition was, and has always been, as crucial for the commoner as for the leader, an essential element in the conduct of public life.

But, it was a particular kind of ambition that Publius contemplated for private parties. In this critical point, the key to stable governance, he seemed to allege, lay in getting the people to override their

personal interests : to attach their sentiments to the government. In so doing, their ambition was desirable. It could work in service of the state. However, this raises two questions, both of which are problematic. The first has to do with how realistic, given the current moral climate, the prospect is that any attachment (much less the kind contemplated by Publius) will form. The second has to do with what actions would be necessary to forge such an attachment. The authoritarian implications of imposing the virtuous impulse to override private interest are considerable.

Such questions are germane here in large part because the Publian project seems so remote from what has transpired in the last 200 years. For example, we have considered how, in Publius' mind, differences of interest and opinion could be tolerated. They were not regarded as likely to overwhelm a suitably socialized passion--say the impulse for virtuous human activity or the love of government. Of course, problems would arise were such socialization to break down. Particularly, this would occur if: (a) ambitions were to come to mean something else and/or (b) the rationalizing mechanisms of the state lost their capacity to discipline subjects properly. Such breakdowns could occur either because of changes in social conditions or alterations in the constitutional machinery, or both.⁴

In the remainder of this analysis we consider the former. Above all, we are concerned with how ambition has changed and what the effects have been. For example, if ambition was to be such an integral part of the policy machinery, what have the implications of its change been? At a deeper level, if ambition was once one thing and now it is another, what does that mean for the goals of, possibilities in, and prospects for democratic society?

The Changing Meaning of Ambition

Publius considered ambition the passion capable of motivating citizens to respect government and, thereby, ensure order. This perspective of virtuous passion resonates throughout *the Federalist* and can be located in what, to a 20th-century mind, might appear a

cryptic conclusion to Letter 10. It states that according to the degree of pleasure and pride we feel in being republicans ought to be our zeal in cherishing the spirit and supporting the character of federalists (1961 : 84). This is not the modern understanding of ambition that we tend to operate with. It is now no longer pride in our attachments that characterizes American attitudes toward political institutions. Quite the contrary. Since the late 1960s, there has been a rise in the number of Americans who believe that the political mechanism is inept, prejudicial and/or untrustworthy. For example, in their widely-distributed work, Milton and Rose Friedman (1979) trumpeted the belief that government was comprised of laggards who cared little for those they were hired to serve. These so-called "Neoconservatives" came to attach blame for the failure of the Vietnam war on insulated elites (e.g. Bell 1976) and the "welfare shift" (Steinfels 1980)--both elements of current governance. A generalized "malaise" was engendered--what Jimmy Carter termed "a crisis of confidence in the political process and the future of the nation." The result, according to Carter confidant, Pat Caddell, has been :

a pervasive pessimism... and the result of this pessimism is alienation. Americans increasingly feel that the system will not work. They are uncertain about what is happening to them and untrusting of the basic institutions to solve their problems (in Broder 1980 : 411).

Such distrust and disrespect was certainly not what the founders intended. What would likely strike the earlier mind as most incongruous, though, would be the groundswell of genuine distaste for political involvement that Bellah and his group uncovered in their study of contemporary American values (1985). This motive, these researchers discovered, stems from the belief that great impasses must inevitably result from the clash of antagonistic interests. In the wake of such impasses, respondents indicated, political coercion or fraud will assuredly emerge (Bellah et al. 1985 : 203). The preferred alternative for many is to turn inward. This can either be effected in the isolation of the personal life space or in the relatively insular

institutions that frame most citizens' existence. These propensities are quite real and pervasive in modern American society, as many have begun to recognize (cf. Coleman 1974, 1982; Louv 1983; Wolin 1987).

The condition in which all citizens come to be bound and within which all their interactions transpire is institutional. Such a "Neo-symmetric Society" contributes to the derogation of government. Indeed, one prominent activist has dubbed this condition the "anti-political system." By this he intends "the network of large corporations that controls most of the wealth of the country, that employs a large percentage of our people, but disparages politics and tries to insulate itself against governmental control," (Edward Schwartz, as quoted by Bellah et al. 1985: 214). Often, such institutions employ their personnel, who are citizens of the public world, to effect that insulation and disparagement through letter-writing campaigns, PAC contributions, and coordinated votes (see Edsall 1984: 115).

The anti-political system constitutes a sea-change in politics. It transforms the citizen's impulse from attachment to detachment; a desire to remove oneself from the stream of a fully public life. I have argued elsewhere (Holden 1986) that this process of detachment has been panhistoric in the west; that private forms of organization have undergirded collective life for centuries. Such a claim finds support in the work of others (e.g. Weber 1958; Mumford 1961; Frug 1980; Hale 1984). Applied to American public life, this organizational attitude has influenced the political and moral configuration of society. Its inherent insularity forces distinctions to be made and boundaries to be drawn between groups. These distinctions get transposed to the political arena, where allocation decisions must be made regarding scarce resources. Privatized ambition leads to a "beggar-thy-neighbor" morality (Reich 1982). Those perceived as outside one's personal orbit become treated as combatants. The result is the fabrication of zero-sum engagements with all others (e.g. Thurow 1981).

Such a conception of public life prompts the most destructive forms of passion from a Publian perspective: avarice, selfishness, ambition for private reward. The citizen's sole aim becomes the desire to see personal values validated by the political system. Read in such a

way, we can see that the meaning of ambition has changed entirely. Intended initially to be an essential humour of the constitutional corpus, ambition now produces the converse effect. As modernly interpreted, ambition works to degrade the constitutional mechanism and render more remote the prospect of securing a fully public life.

Ambition in Contemporary Society

That Publius wished all members of the polity to nurture and wield virtuous ambition is all well and good, but as we have just seen, this can not be regarded as the condition that presently prevails. This is underscored by the recent film, "Wall Street," where a corporate raider intones :

The point is, ladies and gentlemen, greed is good. Greed works, greed is right. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms, greed for life, money, love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind--and greed, mark my words, will save not only (the targeted corporation) but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A... (Lippper 1988 : 175 ; emphasis in original) .

If the virtuous impulse does not course through the veins of the average citizen today, what are the impacts upon and implications for society ? The answer is compound, and we thus divide the matter of effects into two distinct groups : the private and public realms.

The Private Realm

We have already mentioned the privatizing impulse. This has led, as I have argued elsewhere (1987b), to policy systems predicated upon personal, informal social networks where the individual is the focus of all societal activity. The collective consequences of such a

trend can be quite severe, and far afield from the intentions of the founders.

To take one example, there has been a steady drive of late to privatize economic activity (see, most notably, Savas 1982, 1987). The threat of such a policy lies, above all, in rendering questions of legitimacy, responsibility and justice invisible (see Rainey et al. 1976). Beyond this, private economic arrangements possess the power to (a) deny citizens of "developmental freedom" (e.g. MacPherson 1977), and (b) alienate us from essential relationships. As Magill (1983: 27) explains, privatism makes us "unaware of the ties that bind us together as human beings; unaware of our mutual dependence on one another and the implications of that dependence to our common endeavors."

The ambition to be let alone is very strong in contemporary society. But, such "lifestyle" privatization (e.g. Bellah et al. 1985) can prove a dangerous passion. The effect of carving up space, of creating defensible areas that exclude other social groups, can prove a stifling parochialism (See FitzGerald 1981). Louv (1983) has labeled the physical products, "walled communities." But the danger is not only to the excluded. It is to the self-seeker and the larger society, as well. This is for a number of reasons: because the privatizer becomes wholly dependent upon other structures to grant him his autonomy; because he deprives the rest of the social world of the resources which, if shared, could produce a measure of autonomy for all; because the structures that are exploited to secure separateness institutionalize segmentation as the dominant form of social organization; and because the privacy-seeker can become wholly dependent upon other structures for continued maintenance. In short, the retreat into self-enclosure can result in a debilitating isolation for the individual and deleterious style of relation for the collective.

The Public Realm

To appreciate the latter two outcomes, the second side of social privatization must be considered. Whereas the first type of such

privatization seeks personal security informally (i.e. within the private realm), the second type does it formally (i.e. in the public realm). By casting our gaze to the public sphere, we witness the interjection of individual-centered, self-based concerns in the arenas of public life. The policy context becomes riven with the articulation of group demands. It is this development to which Lowi (1979) has attached the moniker, "interest group liberalism." Such demands translate into a quest for such political resources as rights, regulations, grants. This quest becomes the ultimate end of ambition.

This modern form of ambition threatens the integrity of the founding mechanism. Indeed, viability is called into question because a virtueless ambition changes the terms of political discourse. From a dialogue of commitment in which the "true" public good is sought, a game is substituted in which personally defined ambitions give rise to engagements over private entitlement. This perhaps explains why we have witnessed a move by the state toward technocracy (see Tribe 1985, on this trend in the Supreme Court). It reflects an attempt by the political machinery to find a rationalizing mechanism capable of replacing virtue. Under such a view, technique becomes the moral counterweight that virtue once played in a passionate political system.

Ambition in the Modern Policy Context

This moves us squarely into consideration of the implications for the political machinery of this modern, self-centered conception of ambition. Above all, the transformation of the value has prodded the redefinition of public life in terms of a zero-sum game. Accordingly, ambition is now reflected by: (1) the pursuit by private interest, which (2) utilizes government as both forum and guarantor. More than an attitudinal shift, palpable effects on governmental structure have been registered. First, privately defined ambition has not been isolated; it has crept into all corners of the policy context. The result is that there are now multiple "points of access" (Truman 1951) where ambition can achieve expression. As an example, blacks--who experienced initial difficulty in getting legislatures to recognize

their claims for equal rights--proved much more successful in gaining the favor of the federal courts (Handler 1978 ; Scheingold 1974). Or consider the nuclear power industry. Despite a great deal of popular (local) resistance, it has been very successful in convincing the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to favor its rate and safety claims (Tolchin and Tolchin 1983). Consider finally the regulatory process generically. It was once quite common for business as a class to receive favorable rulings under the "iron triangle" arrangement--a system of institutional interlinkage involving industry, federal agencies and Congressional committee chairmen (Berry 1984).

The situs of activity is instructive because it demonstrates the manner and ends of private interest once it has penetrated the public machinery. Not only does the state become the context within which private interest gets played out, it comes to adopt a comparable logic. Thus, we see public forms enacting what can only be called "modern senses of ambition." For example, the rhetoric of antagonism between the executive and legislative branches at the national level bears remote relation to the kind of dispassionate ambition that Publius called for. Such battles, modernly conducted between components of the state, can be considered expressions of what I term "horizontal" and "vertical ambition." The former is captured by the example above. The latter is denoted clearly by the state/citizen relationship, where we find considerable contemporary aggrandizement of state authority and cowing of the citizen (for more on this claim, see Wolin 1987).

The changes the policy context has undergone in the face of this transformation in ambition leads to some important insights. First, in deciphering the modern meaning of ambition, one must distinguish between two actors and their disparate, often antithetical interests: the selfish interest of the public authority and the selfish interest of the private citizen. Second, understanding the implications of change in ambition requires both an historical and comparative perspective. Each actor (private citizen and public authority) had a role to play in the Publian outline, and each continues to play a role under the modern system. The difference lies in the fact that the Publian sense of ambition meant attachment to the state by citizens and acts in

furtherance of the public interest by leaders. By contrast, the modern sense of ambition means attempts by citizens' groups to secure benefits in the form of delegations of public power, and efforts by the public authority (leaders) to extract conformity from private groups to its directives for the purposes of its own aggrandizement. The older sense was positive insofar as it was supportive of the system. It was more communal in ends; more nurturing in means. The modern sense is negative insofar as it is subversive. It is personal in ends; extractive in means.

We have considered the former at some length. With regard to the latter consider these three points. First, the Publian scheme did seek public conformity. However, the aim was never (as it has commonly become today) for the private enrichment of leadership. Second, it was state-directed unity of impulse and opinion that activated Publius' staunch opposition to government control and motivated his justly famous analogy of fire and air in Letter 10. As paradoxical as it might today seem, this builder of government penned a passionate defense of a classical liberal climate. Third, it is difficult to locate in recent history public pronouncements by Presidents Reagan and Bush which do not weave tales of American patriotism, a plea for "freedom fighters," an example of the resilience of immigrants, courage, conviction and vision. State ambition--if only in the noble desire to preserve itself--is ubiquitous and often loses sight of the costs associated with securing those personal ambitions.

Conclusion :

Assessing the Shift in the Meaning of Ambition

To summarize, this analysis has suggested a number of things. First, that Publius' two-sided schema (of physical machinery buttressed by moral imagination) was appropriate for the world of virtue and the world of limited, but identifiable governmental presence. Second, it does not appear to work as well for a world of privatized relationships which increasingly blur the distinction between society

and polity. As the policy milieu--the realm of public life--has moved beyond the bounds originally contemplated by Publius, the fine balance initially effected between morality and machinery has been rendered less relevant and less possible. Thus, whether Publius was ever correct in his estimation that ambition could serve as a principle for balancing government, we have seen that the requisite vigilance on the part of citizens and leaders was long ago eschewed.

As argued elsewhere (Holden 1987a) the Publian machinery has undergone constant alteration as a result of the operation of generations. In this paper we have witnessed how a shift in the meaning of a word critical to the maintenance of that apparatus has rendered the theory that gave meaning to the apparatus itself, less defensible. In effect, the theory, once correct, no longer fit the frame. Like Latin, virtue was a political language that once made a great deal of sense, but time and events rendered it virtually unintelligible. The need for some language to explain and guide political life resulted not so much in the development of a new language, as creation of new definitions to fit words of a now-archaic tongue. These new definitions, formed in response to shifting values, came in the form of new institutions and practices. In the face of such changes, the Publian language became antiquated. It simply was no longer adequate to describe the prevailing political and social conditions. As a consequence, much of the world of our experience could not be dealt with, the problems could not be understood--much less solved--given reliance upon Publian vocabulary and grammar.

The problem, of course, is that the Publian foundations persist. It is their invisible content, rather than their visible form, which has been altered. Because the form persists, the Publian terminology is utilized under contemporary conditions, despite being bereft of its original meaning. This has significant consequences. At least implicitly, specific originating words, such as ambition, become key weapons in many an actor's bag of policy tricks. They underwrite many actors' policy agendas. It is in such way that ambition has remained a continuous element in the American policy milieu. However, to say that it has remained constant as an operative value--while technically correct--only captures a portion of the story.

Ambition persists, but in a highly spatiotemporal form. If it has been continuous, its constancy can only be discerned in the grossest terms; by glossing over multiple incarnations, generated within highly specific, severable epochs.

The Meaning of Shifts in Definition

The founders worried about the fuzziness of language; about the danger that words would obscure meaning (e.g. Letter 37). In effect, words would serve as unchanging shells, while their inner fleshy matter would metamorphosize. As Diggins summarizes, "the meaning of political ideas changes while the language remains the same" (1984: 364). In a word, that is the message of this analysis. While a value like ambition may be continuous, its definition and the way that definition is applied may not be.

Why is this important? By attending to the evolution of meaning associated with words, we can learn innumerable things. For one, we can chart changes in policies as a function of shifts in values. We can also learn, significantly, how operational definitions in the world of shared objects can be transformed by practices. Further, we can better appreciate that reconstructions of ideas and representations of them to one another can exert a powerful impact over the shape of, activity and outcome in public life in ways not originally contemplated. As such, temporal shifts in the meanings associated with words can prove significant in evaluating the integrity of mechanisms of governance.

Prospects for Public Life

There is a graver, more urgent message. American public life is comprised of a few simple values: liberty, equality, individuality, participation, representation. The essential point of this essay has been that if we fail to recognize the shifting meanings of words and, instead, seek to utilize old meanings within contemporary policy

frameworks, we shall be consigned to a course with grave policy consequences. To assume that the presence of a word in two distinct historical contexts means that the word will service both in a similar fashion is to deny context. This would be a methodological fallacy, and an egregious error, if implemented in policy. The greatest danger is to deny the importance of shifting populations, ideas, and practices in the shape and conduct of public life. As variation on the hackneyed truism: "those who fail to understand history are doomed to repeat it," we might say "those who fail to appreciate the changes wrought in the course of history are doomed to be defeated by them." In the specific case dealt with on these pages, failure to recognize and correct for the profound historical shift in the meaning of ambition is to derail the prospect of securing a truly public life.

Notes

- 1 See the author's "Technologies of Decision: Constitutional Consistency in Technical Times" (1987a).
- 2 For those such as Weber (1958) this value was rooted in the culture and, thus, had a life all its own prior to any specific political institution.
- 3 Elsewhere (1987a), the author has detailed this design and termed it a "four-dimensional technology."
- 4 The author has argued the occurrence of the former in his paper, "Informal Public Policy: Micro-foundations, Macro-explanations" (1987b). The second is addressed in the author's "Technologies of Decision: Constitutional Consistency in Technical Times" (1987a).

