

PART I

Compromise and Reform

The essays in this first section deal with the structure of the American political system and how the unfolding of two different and opposed logics affects the most essential and characteristic feature of the system, its extreme formal decentralization.

The intention of the principal figures among the Founders was to establish a strong and stable government based upon the consent of the people. This was impossible if, as most of the Founders believed, men were both rational and self-interested. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes had pointed out more than a century before, unless such men stood in fear of coercion they would renege upon their agreement (a constitution, for example) whenever they thought it to their advantage to do so. Although none seems to have had Hobbes's warning in mind, some of the Founders—certainly Madison—saw very clearly that it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to construct a government that would guarantee freedom while at the same time allowing its exercise.

Ingenious as were the efforts of Madison and others to cope with the Hobbesian dilemma, they failed. "Federalism and the Dilemma of Popular Government" shows that the Founders themselves reneged on the terms of their agreement almost at once, and it traces the subsequent ending of the Great Compromise by the terms of which the powers of the national government were to be "few and defined." The paper concludes that however much one may deplore it, there is indeed a tendency in popular government to exceed whatever limits are constitutionally set upon its sphere.

It may be objected that the Hobbesian logic applies only insofar as the members of a public are radically self-interested. In fact, modern

theorists believe—as did the Founders—that people acting in large groups generally do act in this way (see the citations in Footnote 17 of the essay), and some have pointed out that even a society of altruists would be incapable of acting in the general interest in certain circumstances (see the discussion of “the problem of assurance” in John Rawls).¹

The other two essays in the section deal with an element of the political system that the Founders did not contemplate but that has nevertheless long been one of its principal components: the political party. Here again the argument is that the unfolding of a certain logic tends to undermine and destroy the institutions that support, albeit imperfectly, the value premise upon which the logic depends. But whereas in the first essay the problem arose from the prevalence of radical self-interestedness, here it arises from something almost its opposite: commitment to an ideal of democracy that deems all power illegitimate except that that arises from reasonable discussion about the common good in which all participate.

“In Defense of the American Party System,” written in 1960, contends that the logic of this ideal of democracy requires “reform” to eliminate all forms of power—for example, corruption, log rolling, the exercise of charm or charisma—that do not arise from reasonable discussion about the common good in which all participate. The efforts of party reformers, accordingly, are to eliminate the many features of party organization and practice that are irreconcilable with the democratic ideal. Unfortunately, these very features are indispensable to the functioning of the party system and thus also to the maintenance of a political system that has been a bulwark of civilization. Government deriving its power solely from reasonable discussion is impossible, but reformers inspired by the ideal of democracy will be impelled to make reforms nevertheless until the eventual culmination of their efforts: the destruction of the imperfect democracy that they are endeavoring to bring into accord with the impossible ideal.

The third essay, written some twenty years later, describes changes that have been made, or have occurred, in the party system in the interim. While acknowledging that the reforms of these years (mostly in the Democratic party) were motivated in part by the special interests of candidates and constituencies, the author shows that the most important reforms were justified on the grounds that they would make the party more democratic. In fact, the essay argues, the reforms seriously weakened the parties without really making them more democratic.

¹John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

In essence, the retrospective look at the parties says, "I told you so." In further retrospect—that of the summer of 1984—some third thoughts are called for. The reforms that enabled George McGovern and Jimmy Carter to be nominated were reversed by the Democratic party after 1976 sufficiently to enable Walter Mondale, a product of the old-style "back room" professionals, to defeat Senator Gary Hart, who won more primaries than Mondale. Obviously the logic of the democratic ideal does not have quite the imperative force that the essays claim. But the end is not yet. (For another and up-to-date account of party reform, the reader may wish to consult Nelson Polsby.²)

²Nelson Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).