

An Occasional Paper

Number 7

1998

Politics as a Calling

Joseph L. Allen



SMU®

CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR
ETHICS & PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, not for the gatekeepers in political science, but for princes. Today, however, we have largely lost the Renaissance tradition of the public essay. In a modest effort to recover and encourage the tradition of public discourse, the Maguire Center has inaugurated its Scholars Program. The Center will commission scholars at Southern Methodist University and other institutions to give public presentations on topics of ethical import. Each scholar will follow his or her presentation with a finished manuscript that might be shared with a wider audience. We are delighted to publish this occasional paper by Professor Allen titled “Politics as a Calling.”

William F. May
Founding Director

Joseph L. Allen

Professor Joseph L. Allen received his Ph.D. at Yale University and has been a member of the faculty of Perkins School of Theology in the field of ethics since 1957. In his scholarship and his teaching, he has given special attention to issues of ethics and politics. Among other works, he is the author of *Love and Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics* (1984), *War: A Primer for Christians* (1991), and “Power and Political Community” (1993). From 1980 to 1984 he was executive secretary of the Society of Christian Ethics, the academic society for this field in the United States and Canada. He was president of the Society in 1992-1993.

Information regarding orders of additional copies of this paper or other occasional papers published by the Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility can be found on the inside back cover of this publication.

Copyright 1998, Joseph L. Allen. All rights reserved.

Politics as a Calling

A deep ambivalence characterizes the American public's attitude toward politics. On the one hand, the profession of politician ranks among those held in lowest esteem today. In a book that Professor William F. May is currently writing, he will refer to politics as a "despised profession."¹ And so it is, by many. They wouldn't want a son or daughter to go into that dirty business; they "wouldn't buy a used car from that person." But however low the general public's view of politicians may be, we know we need them. We may speak of politics as a necessary evil and compare it to cleaning up after your dog. Yet, when conditions in society are bad and we deeply need for something to be done about it, we see that politicians are necessary. We may disdain them, but we can't do without them. Politics can become a life-preserver thrown to a drowning populace.

The necessity of politics raises the question whether, theologically speaking, it can be a calling, and if so, in what ways. Theologically, to have a calling involves both an outer and an inner dimension.² Outwardly a calling is a certain kind of station or office in life. As Luther saw it, in order for any role or work to be a calling, it must be one that can be helpful to others if it is followed.³ Through it God calls one to serve the need and benefit of the neighbor,⁴ which is our duty in all of life's relationships. Moreover, a calling is an office whose presence serves the common good, the well-being of the whole community, and not only of individuals within it. This outer sense of a calling has a certain objectivity, in that whether an office can serve the good of others depends on how it is related to people's needs, and not only on what any particular individual thinks about it.

Internally, whether an office is a calling depends upon the motivation with which one pursues it. Inwardly, then, one has a calling when she understands that God has called her to this position, this work, specifically as a way of serving the need of the neighbor. If I hold a position that can outwardly speaking be a calling, and yet do not subjectively understand it as a calling, then I shall not pursue it as such. For me it is simply a job.

Of these two dimensions, the outward is my primary concern here. Is politics the kind of work that can *be* a calling? Is it a role that by its

nature can be helpful to others—can serve the common good—if it is followed? And if it is, what kind of activity is the political practitioner called to carry on? What *is* the calling of the politician?

I shall explore this question in three steps. First, I shall identify some essential features of politics in order to ask what politics and politicians can contribute to human life. Next, I shall discuss one image of the politician that, even though it may describe how some politicians go about their work, is not an image that could be one's calling. Third, in contrast to this inadequate image, I shall sketch out two visions of the politician—two out of many possibilities—either of which can be a calling. One vision follows the principle of remedying some serious injustice or injustices; the other exalts the principle of conciliation as an alternative to violence in the midst of political conflict. My thesis is that, though each of these two can validly be seen as a calling, there is a continuing tension between them—between the effort to resolve an injustice and the effort to conciliate, and therefore to compromise, between politicians whose views of justice stand in conflict. Either of the two can be an adequate vision only if it recognizes the validity of the other one.

What Politics Can Contribute to Human Life

I want to begin by offering an interpretation of what political life is most basically like, as a basis for identifying what the work of a politician can contribute to human life. Several enduring conditions of human life in society provide the framework within which politicians go about their work. I shall identify four of these enduring conditions—features that I believe characterize every political community, and thus conditions with which politics and politicians must always deal. Without any one of them politics as we experience it would not occur. If you resist efforts to identify enduring and universal human conditions, then you might take this list as a challenge and try to name some community somewhere that has politics but lacks one or another of these four features. That would not be an easy challenge to meet.

First, politics presupposes *plurality*—that is, a number of people with somewhat diverse qualities. Aristotle argued that without diversity a political community would not even exist; it would become more like a single individual. “It is,” he said, “as if you were to turn

harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat.”⁵ Of course, people are not only different; they are also alike in some ways. Otherwise, they could not even communicate.⁶ Even so, politics presupposes plurality.

Second, politics presupposes moral agents acting within limits—*finite freedom*. A moral agent is one who can envision a desirable state of affairs and exercise choice in pursuing it. The capacity for vision and choice are essential ingredients of freedom. Without them, a group of people would not be a community, but a set of building blocks. If people had no freedom to decide this or that, politics would be impossible. Even so, we exercise our freedom only within limits: limited possessions, limited time, limited space. If moral agents were not finite, they would not need to deliberate; politics would be unnecessary. Politics is unimaginable without finite freedom.

Now combine the first two conditions, plurality and finite freedom. Because the finite and free members of a community are numerous, they not only depend on the world around them. They also depend on one another; they are *interdependent*. Each is to some extent at the mercy of what all the others do. Each is able to influence others’ decisions but not completely control them. Therefore, the members resort to politics, the process of deliberating and deciding about the community’s life.

A third enduring feature of politics is that human life is *a mixture of conflict and harmony* among the community’s members.⁷ With a plurality of agents there will always be some conflict—not necessarily violence, but struggle of some sort. Given limited resources, people will have partially conflicting interests, so that what is beneficial to some is harmful to others. They will also have conflicting visions of what is good for the community, as well as different ideas about how to achieve it. Out of conflicts of interests and conflicting visions arises conflict as struggle, whether in the form of debate, elections, economic competition, or violence. This does not mean that there is no harmony. Indeed, no conflict arises unless the disputing parties agree on something, such as the importance of what they are arguing about. Conflict and harmony are always present, in myriad mixtures. With harmony alone there would be no need for politics; with conflict

alone politics would be impossible. With a mixture of the two we need to deliberate about our common life, and we can.

A fourth underlying condition of politics is *incomplete trustworthiness* among the community's members. Untrustworthiness is an expression of sin—the refusal to acknowledge the ultimate as ultimate and the refusal to cherish one's fellow creatures. When we think some other people don't really matter, we become untrustworthy toward them—disposed to betray them. Politics is a realm of mixed trustworthiness and untrustworthiness, not simply one or the other. It is an arena of faithfulness to some and unfaithfulness to others, faithfulness in some things but not in others, acts of moral strength and acts of moral weakness. Politics is always this mixture, a mix that discredits both the cynics, who think nobody is ever trustworthy, and idealists, who think we ought always trust one another.

Here then are four enduring features: plurality, finite freedom, a mix of conflict and harmony, and a mix of trustworthiness and untrustworthiness. These conditions together create the need for the members of a community to determine the shape of its common life. This is what politics most basically is: *the process of deliberating and deciding about the shape of a community's life*.⁸ The most important thing to say about politics is not that it is a struggle for power; it *is* that, but people seek power in order to use it for their purposes—in order to shape their lives together in certain ways. And politics is not simply another word for governing—i.e., for deciding about a community's life and carrying out those decisions. A tyrant might do that, but it would not be politics in the sense in which I am discussing it.⁹ Politics is the process by which a number of people deliberate about what to decide. It is the process of give-and-take among people as they decide about a community's life. This give-and-take is not something that only goes on in a small group operating behind the scenes. Much political discussion *is* behind the scenes, but eventually what is discussed in private must also be discussed in public, if we want people to support it. Bernard Crick has expressed it well: “The unique character of political activity lies . . . in its publicity.”¹⁰ Politics goes on when members of the community bring different concerns and interests to consider together in the public arena. This deliberation and decision about the shape of a community's life is the central con-

tribution that politics can make to human life. To embark upon politics as a *calling* is to set out to make this contribution.

But who is a politician? A politician is anyone who participates actively and directly in this process of deliberation and decision. If this is the most basic characteristic of a politician, then the term does not necessarily carry overtones of moral disapproval. “Politician” connotes most directly, not “one who makes shady deals behind the scenes,” but “one who deliberates publicly about the shape of our common life as a people.” If so, that makes many if not most of us politicians. This is one of our many roles in life, in that most of us engage publicly at some time or other in discussing governmental policies, and in ways that might affect the outcome, if only by affecting how people vote. In this sense nearly everyone is called to be a politician.

But my interest here is especially in those who are *professional* politicians. They include two main categories. One is those who hold, or are seeking to hold, some policy-making public office—national, state, or local, either by election or appointment. The other category is those who work in politics without holding a formal governmental position, such as political party leaders, close advisers to public officials, and leaders of nongovernmental groups trying to influence government policies. These all are professional politicians, whether they like the label or not. My question is what it would mean for people like these to pursue the role of politician as a calling, theologically understood.

Politicians are not all called to go about their work in the same way or with the same vision. Different visions of this calling can still be legitimate for different politicians. Yet some visions of the work of the politician are inappropriate as callings. I want to turn now to one such inappropriate vision.

The Politician as Opportunist

Politicians are often criticized for doing whatever it takes to enhance their own power and gain, with no regard for principles. We must be careful here. If a politician promises “no new taxes” but then supports a new tax rather than allow a large deficit, it is not easy to

tell whether he is being opportunistic or being responsible in the face of a change in circumstances.

An opportunist is one who always decides on the basis of what is likely to be to his own advantage. The opportunist is the Machiavellian in politics: preferring what is expedient as a means to his own power and benefit. Among recent American politicians, it was Richard Nixon whose actions most readily invited this charge. His tactics in politics repeatedly seemed to be guided by one goal—whatever would help him win office or remain in office. Whether that was true of him or not, many thought it was; and so he serves as at least a hypothetical example of a political opportunist.

Because an opportunist always puts his own advantage above the common good, then, though there can be opportunists in politics, there cannot be a calling to be “a politician as opportunist.” If one’s calling in politics is “to serve the neighbor,” to benefit the common good, then a politician must seek the guidance of some principle or set of principles beyond mere self-advancement. Even when a politician does act to protect the self and its interests, and she must do that to some extent or else she doesn’t survive, she might be doing that at least in part to enhance her capacity to pursue the common good.

In this picture of the opportunist we see the source of much of the disrepute into which politicians fall. When people perceive politicians as sheer opportunists, when they conclude that only opportunists seek careers in politics, obviously they will have no respect for the profession. There is ample experience to suggest that this simple perception is false, that many career politicians are of a different ilk—are at least a mixture of selfish and other-regarding motives. Yet the perception persists, and cynics abound among the voters.

It is another thing to realize that many a politician is under severe pressure when his own political survival is threatened. Many are tempted to bend their convictions in order to win. Yet bending one’s convictions on occasion does not an opportunist make, and the one who succumbs to the temptation may well regret it at that very moment. Even when political survival is at stake, there are famous instances of politicians standing by their convictions. John F. Kennedy’s book, *Profiles in Courage*, describes a number of just such acts.¹¹

Opportunism helps us to see that whatever forms politics can justifiably take, one who follows politics as a calling must be committed, however imperfectly or inconsistently, to some conception of the public good over and beyond personal benefit. Opportunism in politics, however often it appears, is not adequate as a calling.

Two Competing Visions of a Politician's Calling

In contrast, a valid vision of a political calling requires commitment to some kind of political principle or principles. There are various valid political visions. One might be called to the vision of greater social peace and security; or the vision of devising policies that enable a complex society to respond more effectively to its problems; or the vision of improving the conditions under which people live and work; or the vision of opposing this or that injustice. All these can be valid callings and valid visions, but they compete with one another. One politician cannot pursue them all, and no society can pursue them all simultaneously. These visions compete for a society's, and for a politician's, time, attention, and resources. This leads to one of the central problems of politics: what are we to do when valid visions compete? But more on that in a moment. What I want to do now is to concentrate on two among the many possible valid visions, either of which might be the organizing center for a politician's calling.

1. The first is the vision of the politician as *fighter against social injustices*. Some politicians pursue their calling primarily in terms of this vision. Rather than simply trying to help the political process to work, or mainly seeking benefits for those who elected them, they devote their energy to righting wrongs done to particular groups or categories of people. Sometimes the public comes to associate a politician's name closely with the group for which he or she has been the advocate: as Congressman Claude Pepper was an advocate for the elderly, and as Marian Wright Edelman—a nonelected politician—has been an advocate for children.

I have labelled this calling fighting against injustice rather than fighting for justice. Glenn Tinder has argued¹² that “a perfectly just society is not a feasible human project.” For one thing, the standards of justice are themselves in conflict with one another. Treating people according to their equal human worth can be in tension with giving to

each what has been promised, and so on. Furthermore, even if we could conceive of a perfectly just society, people would neither agree that it is just nor agree to support it, for we are fallen. So Tinder writes, “To be fallen is to be in some measure captured by injustice—to be unable to see what justice requires, to be unwilling to perform what it requires.”¹³ Every vision of perfect justice is therefore prone in one way or another to favor one’s own group.

Instead, Tinder continues, we are called to fight against injustice, and that is a feasible project. If we cannot envision what is perfectly just, we can still sometimes rightly perceive an injustice and can work to alleviate it. If we do not know what the perfectly just society would look like, we can know that it is unjust to deny people’s equal worth because of their skin color, their supposed race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their age, or, for that matter, their grievous offenses against society. Striving against injustice will demand all one’s insight and all one’s energies.

In such a way Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for one, has given much of his political career to trying to remedy injustices against the poor. He has done this even though I assume that, like everybody else, he has done it from some mixture of motives. As a social scientist he has sought to understand the roots of their poverty, and as a public official he has pursued two key strategies to help them: to strengthen their families and to provide them with good work. Anyone who persists in opposing injustices accumulates adversaries, if not enemies. Moynihan has had his share, including some of those he has tried to help, along with many who have had a stake in continuing the injustice. Over the years, though, this cause has been the center of his efforts as a politician.¹⁴

The calling to work against injustice has its characteristic dangers, even so. One danger is being so focused on one cause that no other issues matter. This is a special danger of the nongovernmental activist, who in the valid awareness of one human need may lose sight of other equally important needs. Another is the danger of self-righteousness. The campaigner against a serious injustice can easily slip into scorn for opponents, thinking them morally inferior because they resist her efforts, while they may find her similarly insensitive to the

causes they espouse. We would often rather deal with an opportunist than with people who never doubt the righteousness of their cause.

A third serious danger for the fighter against injustice is to turn into a fighter for the privileges of a particular group. It is one thing to oppose society's unfairness toward a mistreated group, society's refusal to grant them what is their due. It is a very different thing to devote oneself unceasingly to seeking more and more benefits for those who are becoming increasingly well-off. The courageous opponent of unfairness may over time become so closely wedded to one group that he constantly seeks their special advantage. Opposition to injustice thus mutates into pursuit of special privilege.

This distortion is similar to that of the legislator whose chief goal is to gain benefits for his district or state. He does everything he can to get pork barrel projects for his district, regardless of its effect on the national budget. It is a measure of voters' self-centeredness that they so often reward their representatives for being good at this kind of myopia instead of working for the wider public good.

But it appears also in the pursuit of less parochial causes, as with the efforts of Congressman Pepper. Not content with winning for the elderly a raise in the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70, he kept working until he had eliminated any mandatory retirement age at all for the ordinary worker—a potential injustice to younger people in need of jobs. However unjustly a group may have been treated, its advocates are tempted to pursue its interests inordinately against other groups.

Though every vision of a political calling has its dangers, this does not invalidate the vision. Rather, it requires politicians to be constantly vigilant: discerning where the serious injustices lie, knowing that their own moral judgment is fallible, not becoming too beholden to the opinions and desires of any group, and never losing sight of the central aim of any political calling—to serve the common good.

2. A second valid vision of the politician's calling, a contrasting vision, is as *conciliator among conflicting interests*. In the view of Bernard Crick, politics "can be simply defined as the activity by which different interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated...." This process does not honor any particular "doctrine," he says, but rather seeks "particular and workable solutions to this perpetual and

shifty problem of conciliation.” The need for conciliation arises from the pluralism of politics. The argument is that because there are many participants, and because the interests of those many will always be in some degree of conflict, then if the chief aim of politics is “reasonable stability and order,” politicians should work to conciliate those interests. Crick asks why this has to be done. He answers that it doesn’t. But, he says, politics goes on where conciliation occurs; politics is “that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion.” Conciliation is the only way to rule a conflictual society “without undue violence.”¹⁵

I agree with Crick that conciliation is a necessary work of politics, a work without which the peaceful ordering of a society cannot proceed. If so, some politicians are especially called to be skillful conciliators. In the midst of divisive debate they may be able to formulate a middle ground on which the conflicting parties can agree. Where no motion commands a majority, they are adept at persuading a few advocates of both sides to give a little in order to break a deadlock.

Their weapons are not mainly threats or enticements, though they may use these, but the capacity to persuade—to show that the alternatives to compromise are all worse. “If you could get your own way on this bill,” they might argue, “that would only promote among your opponents a disrespect for the law and an undermining of public order.” Or, they might say, “Give this middle ground a chance, and you will find that what you are most concerned about is not threatened.”

The political philosopher Martin Benjamin has distinguished two kinds of compromises. One he calls a “compromise in the standard sense,” in which the opposing parties continue to disagree and try to make the best of a bad situation. The other he calls compromise in “a loose sense,” in which the opposing parties “come to regard a third position . . . as superior to both initial positions and then embrace it.”¹⁶ In this second sense, the conciliator points to a more creative alternative than either side had considered—one that incorporates the main concerns of each side. Though the politician as conciliator may seek compromise in either sense, it is the “standard sense” in which I am most interested here—compromise that is making the best of a bad situation. In seeking this kind of compromise, the conciliator is one

who in the midst of deep conflict—in a political crisis—offers half a loaf to politicians on both sides who can't get the whole loaf. Neither side is happy with the outcome, but both sides prefer it to the available alternatives. So, in the crisis the political process continues; otherwise, it grinds to a halt. Surely some politicians who see themselves called to serve the common good are especially called to be conciliators.

A classic instance of the conciliator in the history of United States politics was Henry Clay. That was not his only political aim, by any means. He was an ambitious and vain man who badly wanted to be president, wanted to be known as a great man, and wanted to serve his Kentucky constituency. But he is probably best remembered as “the Great Compromiser,” or as some called him, “the Great Pacificator.” It was Clay whose imagination and skill produced the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which broke an impasse between the slave states and the free states and avoided, for a while, the dire threat that the Union would be dissolved. Again in 1833, it was Clay who worked a compromise between North and South over the issue of the tariff. And finally in 1850, it was Clay who imagined, proposed, and helped bring to reality another compromise between North and South, this time over several issues, including slavery in new states and in the territories, and the slave trade in the District of Columbia.

A recent biographer has written of Clay's efforts in 1833, “the Kentuckian was never rigid in his ideological thinking. Like any intelligent politician, he understood that politics is not about ideological purity or moral self-righteousness. It is about governing, and if a politician cannot compromise, he cannot govern effectively. And Henry Clay knew that only a true compromise—one in which both sides sacrifice something to achieve a greater benefit—could win over the nullifiers and draw them back from a determined course of self-destruction.”¹⁷

Even if one admires the skill of Clay the conciliator, doubts press in. Was slavery an interest with which anyone should have compromised? Even though Clay was a slaveholder, he insisted that he hated, he abominated slavery.¹⁸ Then what was he doing compromising with it? In the 1830s, in contrast to Clay's conciliating, John Quincy Adams pursued a different calling. He chose to fight against slavery.

After his term as president, Adams won election to the House of Representatives. In that office, among other pursuits, he carried on a sustained campaign to abolish slavery in the territories and in the District of Columbia. An account of that campaign is to be found in William Lee Miller's recent book, *Arguing About Slavery*.¹⁹ Adams and his allies in the Congress believed that the slavery interest deserved, not conciliation, but forthright opposition. Was Adams's campaign against the injustice of slavery a higher calling for a politician?

To be sure, efforts like Adams's helped lead eventually to the Civil War—to the violence that Clay labored to avoid. Clay's recent biographer writes this: "The Compromise of 1850 postponed secession and civil war by ten years, and many historians have argued that had secession and war occurred in 1850, the South would undoubtedly have won its independence. By giving the North ten years to develop its enormous industrial potential and 'find' Abraham Lincoln to lead the nation, the Compromise of 1850 did, in a very real sense, prevent the permanent separation of the Union—thanks to Henry Clay."²⁰ Of course, neither Clay nor anyone else in 1850 could know that this would be the outcome. Clay was seeking to maintain the Union, even if it was a Union that permitted slavery; he sought to prevent disunion and the war that would ensue.

Martin Benjamin's Argument for Compromise with Integrity

Therein lies the issue. Is it better to conciliate, even when this would perpetuate a vast, indescribable injustice, rather than to turn to violence? Are there limits to justifiable conciliation?

Because the evil of slavery is so reprehensible, it is difficult for us today to comprehend Clay's drive for conciliation rather than war, with all of its evils. We might comprehend better a contemporary debate that likewise evokes intense feelings and has tended to polarize opinion: the debate over abortion. For many at two poles of the abortion issue today, matters of the deepest injustice are at stake, though the adversaries disagree about the nature of the injustice. On one side, the injustice is seen as the fact that the laws sanction the killing of an unborn human being; at the other pole, it is seen as the existence of laws that would prohibit a pregnant woman from decid-

ing whether to have an abortion. In this conflict many people hold to a third view—that the politicians should arrive at some kind of compromise between these two poles, as an alternative to bringing the legislative process to a halt and inviting violence.

We can state the issue this way: when two sides have opposing, unquestioned conceptions of justice, what is to be done? Might compromise be morally justifiable?

Martin Benjamin has examined this question with great care. The question, he explains, is not whether one should compromise one's moral integrity. Is it possible, he asks, to compromise over policy without compromising one's integrity?²¹ The question arises where two conditions are present: (1) two sides are committed to opposing positions, but (2) one way or another, a decision must be made. In this situation a compromise is a way of splitting the difference, figuratively speaking—making the best of a bad situation.

Consider this kind of circumstance in which a politician may find herself. "I believe," she says to herself, "that it is always wrong to have an abortion. If there were laws prohibiting all abortions, this would express that moral conviction. But," she continues, "I live in a society in which many people have moral convictions to the contrary. We have to make some kind of decision about this, and we have to continue life together in society. If neither side can convince the other, we need to see whether we can find some middle ground."²²

Her reflections express what Martin Benjamin has in mind when he says that "the politician's identity and integrity are essentially dialectical." "The vocation of politics," he writes, ". . . requires a creative blend of commitment to particular positions and tolerance of opposing positions." He extols the politician "who manages to retain an independent moral identity while also, in the interests of the integrity of the community as a whole, acknowledging the positions of those whose world views point in a different direction." In his view, politicians "obsessed with a single issue at the expense of all other issues," or who follow the will of some single-issue movement, "are not genuine politicians. Their position denies the mediating and communal nature of politics as a social institution."²³

The Continuing Tension Between These Two Visions

Martin Benjamin's argument is a strong one, and yet it does not settle the issue. It is predicated on the assumption—Bernard Crick's assumption—that it is better to preserve a community's political process in the face of radical moral disagreement than to bring that process to a halt.

I believe that most of the time that assumption is justifiable. Usually the politician who will not give an inch, will not split the difference, and thinks himself morally superior for this stance, fails to recognize the inevitable plurality of politics. He refuses to take seriously the moral conscience of the other as well as one's own, and he fails to recognize that plurality and conflicting views are enduring conditions. This is an arrogant conception, one that in its self-righteousness scorns its opponents as moral degenerates. It is a stance that is immeasurably destructive of the common good.

Yet there are limits to justifiable conciliation. There come times when a politician, even one who is concerned for the community as a whole, or better, precisely one who is concerned for the community as a whole, must refuse to split the difference. The problem is discerning when that is. With some injustices, bad though they are, it is less destructive for the community to work to remove them over time rather than try to erase them in a day. Other injustices are intolerable even for a moment. Surely Hitler's persecution of the Jews was an evil with which no one could rightly compromise. In the face of such an evil, resorting to violence is not the worst outcome. Are there not circumstances—rare though they may be—when those called to be politicians on behalf of the common good must say, "At this point we draw the line. Let violence come, rather than that we would approve of this atrocity."²⁴

Yet this too is a dangerous argument. It tempts some politicians to see every moral cause as like the Holocaust. It tempts them to have done prematurely with deliberation and to turn too easily to violence, when with more patience they might remedy an evil that is not the supreme evil. Politicians should be extremely cautious about concluding that a certain policy is so bad that it ought never to be conciliated, even to prevent civil war. Politicians must distinguish between what is morally wrong and what is supremely evil.

Here then are two contrasting though valid political callings—to relieve injustice and to conciliate intense conflict. There is a constant tension between the two. Each can be justifiable. Often they are compatible, but sometimes they are not. Each has its temptations. The calling to relieve injustice can degenerate into self-righteous intolerance of opponents. The calling to conciliate can submerge moral sensitivity to the desire for “peace in our time.” But each also has its strengths. Without efforts to relieve injustice, government becomes a vast oppression. Without the attempt to conciliate, politics turns into a war of each against all.

Determining in a given instance which is appropriate is a work that is always uncertain and unfinished. For that reason the calling of the politician must include both of these goals—to relieve injustice and to conciliate morally opposed positions. Better that the tension be within each politician, rather than that some refuse ever to compromise and others think that compromise is always the right move.

As we have seen, the presence of conflicting viewpoints is an enduring feature of any political community. Yet its members have to continue living together. Politics is the process of deliberation, negotiation, and often compromise, as a way to moderate conflict as much as possible in pursuit of the common good. The alternative to these political means is stalemate and the resort to violence. Ordinarily the calling of the politician is to continue the deliberation. It requires wisdom and skill both to do that and to recognize when, again for the common good, it is time to draw the line.

Endnotes

- 1 William F. May, *The Beleaguered Rulers* (manuscript in progress).
- 2 Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1062-1063 (book IV, chap. iii, sec. 11).
- 3 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 4.
- 4 This is Luther's characteristic way of indicating what should be the aim of a Christian's action; cf. "Christian Liberty," *Works of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), II, 335; "Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *ibid.*, III, 239.
- 5 *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 51.
- 6 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), pp. 155-156.
- 7 For discussions of conflict in society see Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1956), and Joseph L. Allen, *Love and Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), pp. 82-100.
- 8 Cf. Allen, *Love and Conflict*, p. 255.
- 9 Contrast Max Weber's broader use of the term to refer to leadership of a political association, and in particular, of the state; see his "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), esp. pp. 77-80.
- 10 Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 21.
- 11 John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper, 1956). Consider his chapters on Sam Houston's opposition to secession, Edmund Ross's refusal to vote to convict President Andrew Johnson in his impeachment trial, and George Norris's opposition to the dictatorial powers of Speaker of the House Cannon. Cf. Elizabeth Drew's picture of ten days in the political career of Senator John Culver of Iowa—of the moral seriousness with which he pursued his work: *Senator* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).
- 12 Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 61-68.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 14 For a brief discussion of Moynihan's work on the problem of poverty, see Warren R. Copeland, *And the Poor Get Welfare: The Ethics of Poverty in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 163-167.
- 15 Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, pp. 22, 30, 34.
- 16 Martin Benjamin, *Splitting the Difference: Compromise and Integrity in Ethics and Politics* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1990), pp. 6-7.
- 17 Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 416.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Politics as a Calling

- 19 William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1996).
- 20 Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 762.
- 21 Benjamin, *Splitting the Difference*, pp. 7-8.
- 22 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 140, 146.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 24 It is unclear to me whether Crick would approve of politics that at some point refuses to conciliate further. He quotes with approval an 1858 speech of Lincoln's opposing slavery but at the same time opposing those who "disregard its actual presence among us and the difficulty of getting rid of it suddenly in a satisfactory way" (*In Defence of Politics*, pp. 159-162). But what if no nonviolent "satisfactory way" emerges?

THE CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR ETHICS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

The leaders of Southern Methodist University believe that a university does not fully discharge its responsibility to its students and to the community at large if it hands out knowledge (and the power which that knowledge eventually yields) without posing questions about its responsible uses. Through the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility, SMU strives to foster the moral education and public responsibilities of those whom it empowers by:

- Supporting faculty research, teaching, and writing in ethics that cross disciplinary, professional, racial/cultural, and gender lines;
- Strengthening the ethics component in SMU's undergraduate and professional curriculum;
- Awarding grants to SMU students who wish to study issues in ethics or engage in community service.

SMU also believes that a university and the professions cannot ignore the urban habitat they helped to create and on which they depend. Thus, while not an advocacy group, the Maguire Center seeks to be integrally a part of the Metroplex, attending to the moral quandaries and controversies that beset our common life. To that end, the Center:

- Has created an Ethics Advisory Board of professional and community leaders;
- Organizes local seminars, colloquia, and workshops featuring SMU and visiting scholars;
- Publishes occasional papers and books based on the Center's endeavors that will be of interest to both academics and the general public.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility
Southern Methodist University
PO Box 750316
Dallas TX 75275-0316
214-768-4255
www.smu.edu/~ethics_center