Naval War College Review

Volume 14
Number 9 *December*

Article 3

1961

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THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF INTEREST GROUPS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
9 October 1961

by

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As you are well aware, the subject of today's lecture is a very broad and complex one, and it occurred to me that it might best be approached by resorting to a series of questions and answers, or at least attempted answers, which in my estimation pertain significantly to the character and impact of pressure groups in a democratic society. In this way perhaps we shall be able to develop our thinking on this subject into some sort of meaningful focus. First, however, in deference to the political scientists in the audience, let me apologize in advance for a conscious transgression. I understand that it is the fashion today among professionals in the field to make some subtle distinctions between the "interest group" and the "pressure group." For our broad and hurried purposes today, however, I see no compelling reason not to use the two terms interchangeably. Forgive me if I have sinned.

Obviously, the first question concerning this topic that comes to mind is: What is an interest group? And my answer to this would be that an interest group is a number of individuals who hold in common certain values, ideas, or aspirations which they endeavor to promote. There are, of course, many different sorts, shapes, and sizes of interest groups. Some are organized to a greater or lesser degree; some are not. Political scientists sometimes refer to the American public as a great unorganized interest group, although it's not always clear to me what properties or goals its members have in common. Some pressure groups are broadly based, either in the nature of the interests they wish to promote or in the composition of their membership, or both. The Americans for Democratic Action, for example, is an organization that is motivated, to a large extent, by long-range, abiding ideological interests, and includes in its membership representatives of all classes, parties, and religions. At the other end of the spectrum are those groups, such as the Anti-Saloon League, whose aims and attitudes are so narrow that they seem trivial to many people, and whose membership could hardly be called cosmopolitan. Some pressure groups are doggedly aggressive in their attempts to bring about change. Such a group is the National Education Association, which is reported to have spent nearly a quarter of a million dollars in support of President Kennedy's public education bill. Other interest groups, such as the American Medical Association, are just as doggedly engaged in attempting to prevent the government from effecting certain changes. Some interest groups, certainly most of them, are composed largely of American elements. Some, however, clearly receive their inspiration and much of their money from abroad. The China Lobby, for example, could hardly be considered a native growth.

Bearing in mind, then, that these groups vary widely in a number of respects, and that consequently there are bound to be at least a few exceptions to practically any general statement we make about them, let's consider for a moment the second question on our list: What place does an interest group occupy in our democratic way of life? To this I would say—apparently a very secure and fundamental place. In fact, the pressure group complex has been called the warp and woof of our political system. It was, of course, clearly envisaged by the founding fathers, or at least by some of them. As you know, James Madison wrote at some length and with great penetration on this matter in the Federalist Papers, especially in Federalist #10. As seen by Madison the type of political pluralism inherent in the pressure group approach to governmental process would prove to be the people's best guarantee against the emergence of despotism. What he saw in the future was a balanced clash of interests, a many-sided battle in which pressure groups would act and react upon one another, often in coalition, to prevent the unchallenged ascendancy of any one element. On the whole, things have worked out pretty much as Madison predicted they would, and tyranny has, as a result, been thwarted. We would, in fact, probably be justified in stating that the interaction of interest groups has constituted a central theme in the development of our political apparatus. By performing the twofold function of providing a vehicle for political aspirations and achievement and of safeguarding our liberties, the pressure-group system has served democracy well in this country. The fact should not be overlooked, however, that we in America have often had to pay a large price to support and maintain this "tug-of-war" approach to government, for the pressure group system by its very character is anything but a model of efficiency and thrift. I am reminded here of a remark made by Fisher Ames, one of the old New England aristocrats, who as a Senator saw service in the nation's first Congress. Himself temperamentally hostile to popular government, Ames likened monarchy to a fine, sleek sailing ship on which passengers and crew ride in comfort and beauty until suddenly the ship hits a rock and goes down. Democracy, on the other hand, Ames pointed out rather perceptively, is like a raft—sturdy, solid, and safe. "You may not sink, but damn it, your feet are always wet."

The third question is this: What is the relationship of democracy's basic unit, the individual, to the interest group? Well, it would seem safe to say that every individual who is at all politically alive is an active member of at least one pressure group. Perhaps he supports it with money; perhaps he writes letters to promote its cause; or perhaps he just talks about it to his neighbors. Actually, the individual is much more a member of a pressure group than he is of a political party, and when he goes to the polls he votes principally, whether he realizes it or not, in accord with what he believes to be his own interests when he votes for one party or another. It is, therefore, through the interest group that the voice of the citizen is heard. He may not have thought of the situation in this way, but our political parties are nothing more or less than coalitions of pressure groups. And this has always been true in this country, with the exception, of course, of the mid-nineteenth century when political parties ceased temporarily to be aligned according to interest and became aligned instead according to geography, thereby making sectional war all but inevitable.

So, generally speaking, political parties have represented, and still do, combinations of pressure groups banded together, sometimes rather tenuously, for purposes of strength and strategy. The combination that we call today the Republican Party generally speaks for those interests in our society that tend to support the status quo. The Democratic Party generally speaks for those who, to a greater or lesser degree, would attempt to bring about change. But, of course, there is in our society a wide twilight zone. There are many groups who under one set of conditions and at one given time prefer one course of action, whereas under different conditions or at a different time they prefer another. As a consequence, the composition of our parties is far from constant, and there is a considerable amount of party hedge-hopping by pressure groups. In fact, what a great deal of the wheeling and dealing of our party contests amounts to, when you come right down to it, is an attempt on the part of one party to detach some of those more unstable or vacillating interest groups from the other party. The Negro vote, for instance, and the Jewish vote, were considered by both Nixon and Kennedy in the 1960 campaign as being within the twilight zone—detachable.

So the great contest goes on between our parties—to court, to woo successfully these more vacillating interest groups. Of course, some of these elements are so irrevocably committed to one side or the other that it is folly even to think about detaching them. Big business, for instance, is not about to be detached during the foreseeable future from the Republican Party, and I think it's pretty safe to say that unskilled labor is going to remain pretty loyal to the Democratic Party, barring some major political aberration. Astute politicians are, of course, very much aware of the presence and importance of detachable elements in our political spectrum. They really have to be; their political lives depend upon it.

The next question is this: What is the aim of the interest group? Well, obviously the primary, overriding aim is to promote the general and specific interests of the group, either directly or indirectly. This usually means the strengthening of the position of one's own group, or, as is frequently the case, the weakening of a rival group. You are all aware of the long, historic tug-of-war that has gone on, and is still going on, between business and labor. In this struggle it has often been true that what conduces to the advantage of one group, conduces to the disadvantage of the other, or at least so the situation is viewed by the forces involved. In assessing the aims of pressure groups it would be naivē of us to suppose that many of these groups are, or could be, self-sacrificing enough to subordinate their own interests over the long haul to the interests of the nation except, of course, in cases of national emergency, and not always even then. Essentially the interest group is egocentric and selfish. It usually pays lip service to the idea of the national welfare, and I think that many members are actually quite successful in persuading themselves that the interests of their own special group and the best interests of the country are one and the same; hence, the expression: "What's good for General Motors is good for the country"; or, "What's good for the AFofL, etc." But a realistic assessment reveals that the pressure group is constructed upon a hard core of self-interest, in most instances transcendent self-interest. That our political system recognizes this fact and has erected effective safeguards against the ultimate triumph of rampant self-interest is, in my estimation, one of the greatest achievements of our society. Madison read the situation wisely and well when he stated in his Federalist #10 that free institutions can be preserved only by counterbalancing the selfishness of one group with the selfishness of another, thereby reducing the sum total of these group pressures to a sort of resultant vector, which might well be labeled "democratic compromise." And herein is found the essence of democratic process—decision or resolution by compromise, an arrangement which, although seldom geared to the total satisfaction of any single group, nevertheless has the great merit of providing a general acceptability or "livability."

On occasion, of course, the system gets out of balance, as it did in the late 19th century when one complex of interests (big business in this case) reached a dominant position and was actually able to oppress other interest groups. Now, this is very dangerous, indeed, for democracy. When this sort of thing happens, democracy is not well served, and measures must be taken to restore the balance. That we have done precisely this in the past is not the least important reason for the continued survival of our free institutions. Recall, for instance, those depression days of the early 1930's, when the organized labor interests of this country were very hard put, badly demoralized, and generally unable to help themselves. One wonders what might have happened to the character of our society if the government had not stepped forward to alleviate this dangerous imbalance in our system by legislating labor into a position of greater strength. Briefly stated, our political system is based upon a conflict of appetites, most of them quite voracious, and if we treasure our institutions it behooves us, I think, to see to it that a balance is maintained among these appetites. If we fail to maintain the balance, then we fail to maintain democracy, and we enter instead into some sort of class or clique despotism.

The next question is this: From what sources do pressure groups attempt to receive gratification? In other words, what are the targets that the pressure groups customarily aim at? Well, the source of gratification is determined to a great extent, of course, by the aspirations of the group involved. In the great majority of cases interest groups aim ultimately at the constituted policy-making machinery of the government in order to gain the support of the legitimate forces of control, authority, and coercion in our society. Now, the United States political system is particularly vulnerable to pressure group activity. It's true that in many other countries—England, for instance—there are as many interest groups, or nearly as many, as we have here. But we have in this country what political scientists refer to as a multiple access for interest groups, and if you ponder the matter for a moment you'll realize that in our decentralized society there are, indeed, opportunities galore for the interest group to insinuate pressure or influence of one sort or another. The city council, the country board of supervisors, the state legislature, Congress, the courts, governmental agencies and committees at all levels—all of these can provide satisfaction for the interest group. In England, on the other hand, the sources of authority and decision are less scattered and therefore offer a more limited access for pressure groups to take advantage of.

The United States, then, is particularly vulnerable to interest groups because of the many targets it offers, and the eternal struggle among groups is correspondingly chaotic. Actually, the end of the line for this sort of political tug-of-war—the ultimate triumph for pressure-groupism—would be a complete welfare state, in which every pressure group would get everything it wanted from the government. This is a point that is often overlooked, especially by those who cry out in anguish against big government. Many elements of the business community moan and groan about big government, about increased government spending, etc., but at the same time support the idea of tariff protection, of government subsidies to business, government contracts to private manufacturing concerns, tax write-offs, etc. Actually, it would appear that they are not really opposed to either government interference or government spending. They are merely opposed to activities of this sort that do not conduce to the advantage of the particular interests they represent. And much the same may be said about big labor, or the farmer, or for that matter the military. For the government to throw its weight around, to spend money like the proverbial drunken Indian, is very, very bad indeed, unless one's own group happens to be a principal beneficiary.

The next question is: What are the instruments used by these interest groups? Well, as you know, they are of various shapes and sizes, but they are all instruments designed primarily for exerting pressure in the right place at the right time. This pressure might be applied by an after-dinner speech, a letter, a newspaper campaign, a bonus march on Washington, or a lobbyist in the statehouse. All of these instruments and techniques, however, have as an ultimate target the influencing of governmental policy, and in our society this means the influencing of our elective and appointive public officers.

Since decisions pertaining to foreign policy, the area that we're particularly interested in today, are made almost without exception on the national level rather than the state or local, the pressures involved in helping to shape these decisions are eventually focused on Washington. By far the most effective instrument for applying these pressures on the Washington scene is the paid lobbyist. There are over five thousand of these fellows at work today in Washington, engaged in a billion dollar enterprise with one single purpose in mind, and this is the purpose of influencing decisions. Although the other branches of our government receive attention in good measure from the lobbyists, it is Congress which receives the brunt of the lobbyists' attacks—Congress, which, even in foreign policy matters, is still the great master-cylinder of our decision-making process, and which, because of its size, its function, and its heterogeneous character, is especially vulnerable to the insinuations of pressure.

And now, getting to the meat and marrow of today's lecture—To what extent and in what way do interest groups influence the course of American foreign policy? To this question I must answer that I simply don't know. We are dealing here with abstractions and intangibles that really don't lend themselves to either qualitative or quantitative assessment. We don't know, for instance, even with the advantage of hindsight, how influential the so-called yellow press of the 1890's was in bringing about our war with Spain. We can't know the *ifs* or the *might-have-beens* of any given situation, past or present. It's certainly possible that this nation might have gone to war with Spain in 1898 if there had been no Joseph Pulitzer or William Randolph Hearst. On matters such as this, we can only guess at the results. We can, however, identify with some degree of assurance, the nature and aspirations of the groups that promote and direct many of the major pressures that are brought to bear upon the formulation and implementation of United States foreign policy.

The first of these groups—not necessarily in order of importance—is big business. Let me insert here parenthetically that there is always danger of distortion in gathering together people or groups, especially in this country, pinning labels on them, such as "Liberal," "Methodist," or "Big Business," and then proceeding to treat them as monolithic entities. The fact of the matter is that in the United States most of us are, to a large extent, pluralistic in our attitudes and behavior. Few of us are all conservative, or all liberal, or all Negro. Few of us are all big business or all big labor. We are beset by a multitude of pressures acting upon us, and we react in diverse ways to diverse situations. We shall, then, be guilty this morning of some degree of distortion when for the sake of emphasis and simplicity we shall resort to an overly neat categorization and homogenization of the various pressure elements we'll be dealing with. For example, big business does not always act as a single-purposed entity. Not infrequently merchants and manufacturers differ widely on matters of public policy, and occasionally bankers find themselves opposed to both. Thus, when we treat big business as a monolithic influence in our society we are certainly presenting a somewhat distorted picture. And what we have said here of big business could be applied with greater or lesser validity to big labor, religious groups, the military, etc. On the whole, however, by ignoring the exceptions and aberrations, and by judging each group by its norm, we'll not, I believe, be straying too dangerously far from the truth in most cases.

Again concerning big business, here is an interest group or coalition of groups that throughout our history has been most emphatic in its attempts to shape American foreign policy. To what extent these attempts have been responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies favorable to big business we can only guess, but in some instances, at least, it would, in my estimation, be exceedingly safe to assume that our national policy in the world arena has, to a large degree, resulted from pressures brought to bear, directly or indirectly, upon the government by business interests. Our tariff policy since the Civil War offers a good example of this. Beginning midway through the Civil War, American tariff rates began to rise. By the last decade of the century they had reached a point of rapid and substantial increase. By the late 1920's, thanks largely, we may assume, to agitation by business interests, American tariff rates had reached a ridiculous high. This high degree of tariff protection naturally had a significant influence upon our relations with foreign countries, and was in no small way responsible for much of the antagonism felt toward "Uncle Shylock" by many foreign nations during the decade following the end of World War I. Indeed, the fact that high American tariff rates made it practically impossible for European nations to carry on trade with the United States during the 1920's, at a time when Europe was desperately in need of American markets, might well be considered a major cause of the world depression of the 1930's, and the consequent political upheavals abroad—events which would subsequently have a profound effect upon the direction of United States foreign policy.

Other examples of business influence could be cited. The list is certainly a long one: The role of the American banking community and munitions-makers in bringing about our entry into World War I; the influence of manufacturing and shipping interests in shaping our trade policy with Japan during the 1930's; and, of course, the part played by business elements in this country in persuading our government to recognize the Soviet Union in 1934. As I've said, the list is long, and it is becoming longer every day. We are now on the threshold of a major political debate on our tariff policy; it will be interesting to see how big business handles itself in this matter.

Labor, organized and unorganized, certainly deserves mention as an interest group that has had, and continues to have, influence on American foreign policy. We need only consider the pressures applied by labor in behalf of immigration restriction to conclude that labor has, on occasion, made its voice clearly heard by those involved in directing our foreign policy. The Chinese Exclusion Act of the 1880's; the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan in 1907-08; and the Johnson Act of 1924 which cut immigration to a trickle—all of these reflect a very firm and historic determination on the part of American labor to cut down the influx of foreign workmen into this country, and it is probably not too far-fetched to assume that without the incessant protests of this increasingly powerful interest group, our immigration legislation would have been slower in arriving upon the scene. Currently, the voice of labor is rather mute insofar as major foreign policy decisions are concerned, but let the right issue arise and it will certainly be heard again.

Ethnic groups also constitute sources of pressure, and here, of course, the situation is a very heterogeneous one. There are more ethnic groups in this country than you can shake a stick at, and many of them are quite active and noisy. The so-called "hyphenated Americans"—Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Jewish-Americans, etc.—along with our Negroes and American Indians, have frequently loomed large in the arena of American foreign policy, and still do. In 1919, for example, some of the most dogged opposition to this country's entry into the League of Nations stemmed from the Irish-Americans. Senator Hiram Johnson of California (no friend of the League) reminded the Irish in this country that under Article 10 of the League covenant, the British Empire could demand American blood to subdue Ireland, and you can well imagine how kindly our Irish citizens took to that idea. "Truckling to the shamrock" has, in fact, long been common practice among our politicians in matters pertaining to American foreign policy—and why not? After all, we have more than twelve million Americans of Irish descent, and that figure can represent a lot of democracy in action when the occasion so demands.

Of a more transcendent and heterogeneous nature (by transcendent I mean transcending party, class, and religion) are the so-called citizens' organizations. The William Allen White Committee, officially known as the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, offers an excellent example of the effect that a citizens' committee can have in marshaling public opinion behind a cause. In this case, of course, the cause being promoted was a closer relationship between this country and the Allied nations then fighting the Axis. I would say that it's pretty safe to assume that without the work done by the White Committee in bringing pressure to bear on our decision-makers, the very important Lend-Lease Act of 1941 would have been longer in coming. At the same time, the America First Committee was acting as spokesman for those conservative isolationist elements in the United States that wanted nothing to do with internationalism. The Citizens' Committee for the Marshall Plan offers a more recent example of an effective citizens' pressure group. On the whole these bi-partisan citizens' groups, organized usually for promoting a single cause or program of a specific nature, are probably the finest and most conspicuous representatives of those rare pressure groups which place the good of the country, or at least what they consider to be such, above their own self-centered desires for personal gain or aggrandizement.

And now, gentlemen, the military! Theoretically, of course, the military shouldn't even be included in a list of pressure groups, because the function of the military in a free society is to serve as an instrument of foreign policy rather than a formulator. And historically, I might add, the record of our military has been a very good one. Nevertheless, it is perhaps understandable that many Americans have traditionally tended to view the military with suspicion and some distrust. After all, the military has the power to destroy our institutions, and might conceivably do so. Such things have happened before in other countries.

Between 1789 and 1917 the United States government spent a total of less than thirty billion dollars for all of its operations and services. During this single year (1961) the military alone will spend almost twice that amount, over fifty billion dollars. In 1913 the per capita cost of maintaining our military establishment was $2.25. Today, with twice as many people in this country, the per capita cost stands at more than $250. Now, the presence of a greatly enlarged military complex, plus the concomitant growth of military influence upon the nation's economy, can pose serious dangers for a free society, some of which President Eisenhower was careful to warn us about before he left office last winter. Increasingly alert to these dangers, many Americans have become particularly sensitive in recent years to "the military menace," and they customarily point in horror to the expanded size of our armed forces as positive proof that the military is well on its way to taking over the country. These fears have been fed from time to time by certain regrettable incidents which would seem to indicate that there are at least some segments of our military leadership that have apparently forgotten or chosen to disregard Woodrow Wilson's famous admonition that in a free society the military should speak only when spoken to.

Despite an occasioned aberration, however, on the whole the military has behaved well in our society. There have been few major attempts to cross over into the area of civilian authority, and in general, even these attempts have been eminently ineffectual and have, in most cases, actually been repudiated by the military itself.

Even in the face of frustration and great provocation, such as in Korea, the military, over a period of nearly two hundred years of service to our democratic institutions, has kept its record free of major blemish. It has never thrown its weight around in a serious attempt to direct or interfere with the regular processes of government, and the mere fact that the military is getting larger and richer is no reason to suspect that it will be any more inclined to deviate from its traditional policy of obedience to the constituted civil authorities of the state. It is true, of course, that our military complex today exerts a significant influence upon the course of policy, especially in the arena of international affairs, but it should be noted that this influence has, with very few exceptions, been exerted by advising, which is a legitimate and valuable function of the military, rather than by pressuring, which is not. All things considered, I see no reason to join those who fear that the military, because of its expanding dimensions, is destined to play an increasingly active role in American pressure politics. I doubt seriously that this will, or could, happen in our society as it is now constituted. If it does, then clearly our free institutions will be in grave danger.

These, then, are a few of the interest groups that, for better or for worse, have been and, in most cases, still are involved, in varying degrees, in attempting to shape our foreign policy. There are, of course, dozens of others, applying pressure here and there, sporadically or continuously, and representing a wide assortment of attitudes and aspirations. Of the pressure groups operating in our society today, especially those that are active in the foreign policy area, we know a great deal, thanks in part to some excellent studies done recently on this subject by a number of professional scholars. We know now the general configuration and character of the membership of most of the major interest groups actively engaged at the present time in attempting to influence decision-making. We know also about many of the tools they use and the special targets and areas of sensitivity that they seek to penetrate. What we don't know, however, at least in most instances, is how effective these groups are in their attempts to influence policy, be it domestic or foreign, and until that unlikely day when it is given us to understand the *ifs* and *might-have-beens*, our knowledge in this area must of necessity remain limited in nature and amount.

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