

1960

## Foundations of American Political Theory

C. L. Rossiter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Rossiter, C. L. (1960) "Foundations of American Political Theory," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 13 : No. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol13/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## **FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL THEORY**

A lecture delivered  
at the Naval War College  
on 12 October 1959 by  
*Professor C. L. Rossiter*

When we are dead and buried, and our children and grandchildren as well, historians will look back to the decade upon which we are about to enter and will describe it, I am certain, as an age of impending crisis. What now comes through only darkly to us will then be transparently clear to them: that the American people in the 1960's faced a situation no less ominous, and at the same time no less hopeful, than that of the 1760's or 1850's or 1920's or 1930's — each of these a decade in which we drifted, angrily or amiably, into dangers we refused to recognize until we had been cast among them.

If I may anticipate history and the historians by talking about our situation in the present tense, we are fast being caught up in a whole series of appalling crises — a crisis in technology, a crisis in education, a crisis in foreign policy, a crisis in race relations, a crisis in culture, a crisis in morals. And the total crisis compounded of all these crises, any one of which may soon be big and nasty enough to tax all our purposes and ingenuity for the next quarter-century, looms even bigger and nastier because we have thus far refused to trust the evidence of our eyes and label it for what it is.

We have refused to do this because, in a word, we are Americans, because there is little or nothing in the ideas by which we live that teaches us either to recognize the warning signals of a genuine crisis or, if we do recognize them, to move against it with solutions that mobilize the energies and talents of the whole nation of preventive action — and for the long haul. In the crises of the past we relied on war, luck, or opportunism to provide a workable solution, but war is no longer tolerable, our luck is no longer running, and opportunism is far too feeble a pattern of action in the fact

of the social and physical forces that Darwin, Einstein, Ford, Freud, and Marx have let loose all around us.

No small part of the crisis of our time arises out of the bland assumption that we already have the tools at hand to deal with it; and that assumption, it seems clear, is a result of ideas for which we are so grateful to our ancestors that we cannot bear to examine them for signs of wear and tear. The fact is that this mounting crisis is, as much as any social crisis can ever be, a crisis of ideas. I do not mean to say that we have been led into our present discontents by wrong ideas, or even by the wrong application of right ideas. I must leave it to others to explain more fully why we are where we are, limiting myself to the observation that, all things considered, we deserve to be there. I do say that certain delusions, I would say self-delusions, in the pattern of our working ideas are contributing more than their share to the deteriorating state of the nation by making it much more difficult to recognize, to analyze, and to attack the problems that increasingly beset us.

I would like to deal in this speech with the most important single aspect of the mounting crisis in American ideas: the crisis in our ways of thinking about politics — a word I use in the broad Aristotelian sense — in what I, following the lead of other men, have called the American Political Tradition. And my thesis is simply that many of the ideas by which we have lived freely and wrought successfully in this realm of politics are, to be blunt about it, obsolescent; that they are irrelevant to the problems of the kind of world in which we live and certainly are going to live; and that we must rethink them boldly if we are to leave to our children an America even half as free and pleasant as the one we inherited from our fathers.

In order to argue this thesis properly, I must first describe the American tradition in words that most of my readers will understand and accept; and that, I know from experience, is no easy thing to do. It is far more pleasant and less controversial to cherish the American tradition than it is to describe it. No Ameri-

can yet has made an authoritative statement of its essentials, and no American is ever likely to. We have no Marx, no Teacher identified and venerated as the First Source; we have no Engels or Lenin or Stalin to restate and, if necessary to recreate the lessons of the Teacher. One of the delights of the tradition is pluralism, which means that each of its children is encouraged to make his own interpretation of its principles; and it is, after all, the product of centuries of trial and error and prescriptive growth rather than of a few years of imperious dogmatizing. The implacable hostility of the American political tradition to either monism or dogmatism must always frustrate even the most well-meaning, self-effacing efforts to describe it in words that most Americans will accept as conclusive. The best I can hope to do is to state what I like to think have been our commonly accepted beliefs about politics, and to leave it to my readers to restate them as they see fit.

Let me group the ideas that make up our tradition under four main headings: the nature of man, the pattern of society, the structure and purpose of government, the place of man in society and under government. The results will be, as best I can state them, the essentials of our common tradition.

Our view of man, the raw stuff of politics, has always been pleasantly clouded. We have never been able to laugh off entirely the Augustinian warning that all men are miserable sinners; we have always been tempted by the Pelagian dream that all men can be made perfect. We cling even today to a mixed view of man's nature and capacities; yet, except for the deep suspicion we entertain of man in power, the mixture is made up largely of the ingredients of hope. If the American tradition is not perfectibilist, it is certainly meliorist. It makes more of man's benevolence than of his wickedness, more of his educability than of his perversity, more of his urge to be free than his need to submit, more of his sense of justice than of his capacity for injustice; and it plainly lacks any secular counterpart to the doctrine of Original Sin. If we have been entertained but not impressed by the old line of revivalists, we have been excited but not convinced by the new breed of psychol-

ogists. The man of the American political tradition is a *rational* man, one who, when given half a chance, will make political decisions calmly and thoughtfully with the aid of Aristotelian reason — reason tempered by experience.

One thing we are sure about man — and I mean real man, not man in the abstract: He is a precious child of God and is thus, in a visible as well as mystical sense, the equal or potential equal of all other men. Whatever postures of superiority we may adopt toward one another in real life, we adopt them in defiance of one of the essentials of our tradition, which translates the pious hope that all men are created equal into a practical insistence upon equality of political voice, equality of opportunity, equality before the law, equality of consideration, and equality in constitutional rights. Ours has been a harsh kind of equality — prompting Americans to say “I’m as good as you” rather than “You’re as good as me” — but it is equality with precious few reservations. The weight of our tradition of equality has made it hard for us to think in terms of class, order, hierarchy, aristocracy, *expertise*. The common man is still the only man with an unchallenged place in the American dream.

Our thoughts about society have been few and casual, as befits a people that has made a fetish of individualism. In the American political tradition there is little room for the community, even less for the natural and voluntary groups that, in the opinion of many sociologists, give it an essentially cellular rather than atomistic structure. We have been lectured at repeatedly by social thinkers from Madison to Riesman about the vital role of groups in society and thus in politics, yet we still find it hard to admit that the American community is anything more than a loose aggregate of individuals.

The tradition makes even less room for the concept of class — and no room at all for the class struggle. The best of all classes in our classless society is, of course, the middle class. Indeed, it is the only class that really counts politically or culturally, and the performance of any institution is to be judged in terms of how

well it serves to expand or strengthen or reward this class. We resolve the obvious contradiction between our tradition of classlessness and our preference for the middle class by defining the latter in such a way as to encompass most of the American people. The aristocracy, which is to be envied rather than trusted, is an accidental, unstable by-product of the social process; the proletariat, which is a dirty word, does not exist. Whatever "classes" or "levels" or "strata" we may display in our society, the natural relationship among them is one of harmonious interdependence.

And whatever the structure of the society, it is and should be marked by constant change. We turn instinctively to words like "mobility," "flexibility," "fluidity," and "dynamism" to describe American society at any point of time, and to words like "progress," "expansion," "growth," and "advance" to describe its course from point to point. "Everyone on the move; everything on the way up" — this is the picture of society we carry in our minds.

The American political tradition has a formula for government compounded of three elements: populism, constitutionalism, and skepticism. By populism I mean the heavy emphasis we place on the central role of the people in the twin processes of electing and directing those officials who make the policies by which we live. The basis of government is the freely given consent of the people; the object of government is to secure their liberties and advance their interests. The wisest of political oracles ever devised is a clear majority of the American people.

The structure of our government is based upon a double-barrelled assumption: that such a majority may well be too easy rather than too hard to muster, and that it cannot always be counted on to be wise and benevolent. More than that, all men however good and rational they may be, are uniquely susceptible to the temptations of power. Therefore, whether it be to cool off the whimsical majority or frustrate the headstrong official, the pattern of government must be made thoroughly constitutional. The spirit of constitutionalism pervades the American tradition, and is made visible in a Constitution that is both the instrument and symbol

of our national purpose. Through this charter and those of all our other political communities the total authority of the people is divided, dispersed, restrained, and on occasion even fragmented. The great services of arrangements such as federalism, the separation of powers, the party system, checks and balances, staggered elections, and representation are that they force men to think, talk, and bargain before they act, and that they institutionalize the procedures through which public policy is made, administered, and enforced. The rule of the majority must prevail, but it must prove itself persistent and undoubted on all occasions and extraordinary on extraordinary occasions, and it must recognize that there are some things it cannot do by right of might. In the American political tradition majority rule is both means and menace.

Finally, we still cling to the skeptical attitude of most of our ancestors toward political power. We assume that it can do great evil, but we are not at all sure it can do great good. Government serves several important purposes for the men who have consented to its authority, but the most numerous and important of their purposes are achieved through other devices, the most effective of which is the free play of each man's ambition and talents. And even in its proper areas of operation it cannot be entirely, much less consistently successful. The inherent inefficiency of government and the inherent tenacity of the social fabric combine to frustrate the aspirations of those men who imagine they can do great things, even or especially great and good things, with political authority.

The American political tradition has a simple, even simple-minded answer to the eternal question of man's place in society and under government, and the answer, in one word, is "individualism." Believing as we must that the rights of man are sacred and unalienable, insisting as we do that social progress results from the efforts of self-reliant men rather than from the directions of government, denying as we always have that a community can be anything more or greater than the men who make it up, we have become almost doctrinaire in our emphasis upon the primacy of

the individual in our political calculations. Whether competitive, cooperative, or downright abrasive, individualism is the natural condition of all men and the reliable goad of most progress.

I could go on indefinitely describing the essentials of the American political tradition, especially since such ideas as constitutionalism and individualism can be framed in a dozen different and equally valid ways. I ought to say something about certain American principles that are not primarily political yet help form the larger context in which this tradition has been shaped — our confidence in a just God, our happy view of history, our expectation of inevitable progress, our insistence that a higher morality governs the strivings of men. I ought to call attention to the “American temper,” to the unique cast of mind — optimistic, pragmatic, idealistic, moralizing — that flavors all our thoughts about politics. I ought also to rummage through other fields — education, for we must take note of our profound faith in the instruments of learning; religion, for we must not overlook the importance of the doctrine of the separation of church and state; law, for in our attitude toward it we find that same yearning for precision and predictability that inspires the spirit of constitutionalism; and science, for from it we draw a spirit and a method that we wish we could apply more consistently in the area of politics. But I trust that I have said enough to reveal at least the solid substance, if not every delicate detail, of our common political tradition.

And I trust, too, that I have said enough to indicate its provenance. If I may sum up several centuries of intellectual history in a few inadequate words, the American political tradition is a natural fruit of three famous stocks, the Christian heritage of justice and virtue, the English pattern of law and liberty, and science, for from it we draw a spirit and a method that we wish we could apply more consistently in the area of politics. These stocks were crossed in England to produce a new and more productive stock, and it was then carried to America, there to grow in fertile grandeur in a physical and social environment unique in the history of man, an environment conspicuous for its bigness, richness, diversity, good fortune, and immunity from the diseases of the en-



vironment from which the stock had been brought. The fruit is characteristically American, but it is also undeniably Western. It is, indeed, simply the most highly developed variety of the dominant faith of the North Atlantic community — Liberalism — which means that, viewed in a larger perspective, the crisis of the political tradition in America is simply one aspect of the crisis of Liberalism all over the West. The nature of the greater crisis, of which ours is one of the least recognized but most advanced phases, is most clearly understood as a steadily widening, now almost intolerable gap between ideal and reality, between the noble hopes and promises of the Liberal dream and the sorry wreckage of the world it helped all unwittingly to make.

It is not easy for us to admit that some of the most cherished principles of our tradition are in a state of disrepair and even decay, and to look with a clear eye at the widening gap between ideal and reality in our own national existence. For one thing, it *is* a tradition, a heritage from a glorious past, and to men who have full reason to take pride in their ancestry such an admission seems to border upon subversion. For another, it has served us well for almost two centuries, and one could argue persuasively that our most precious single possession as Americans has been this tradition of hope and liberty. And for a third, what kind of men could live, or would want to live, in a society in which the reach of the ideal did not exceed the grasp of reality by a healthy margin? One of the great functions of a tradition is to inspire the men who cherish it, and I do not see how it could perform this function at all if it did not depart from reality in the direction of the ideal. This is equally true of a less glorious but no less essential function, that of comforting its adherents, which it accomplishes principally by helping them to rationalize their interests — whether vested or merely hoped for.

But a great tradition must do something more if it is to deserve acceptance and veneration. It must guide as well as inspire; it must explain as well as explain away. Our ideals are first of all ideas, and as such they must be operative, or be cast on the scrapheap of

oblivion. The gap between principles of our tradition and the facts of our condition must be wide enough to encourage us, but not so wide as to paralyze us; wide enough to give us a bad conscience, but not so wide as to leave us with no conscience at all. How far the ideal should depart from reality in the well-ordered society is one of those questions that make a mockery of the pretensions of political science to be a science. It cannot be answered exactly, and I for one am glad. All we can say for certain is that there is a fairly long patch on the road from reality to ideal, which begins well beyond the cynicism of those men who deal only in facts and ends well short of the fecklessness of those who deal only in dreams, and, further, that a tradition functions properly as a tradition only within its limits.

It is my contention that our own tradition has come dangerously close to the outer boundary of the stretch within which we can expect it to operate effectively. In part, this situation arises out of the fact that amid these blessed surroundings we always did make too much of the promises of Liberalism, in part out of the fact that the reality of American life has changed more rapidly and radically than we have hitherto been willing to recognize. However, we may care to explain this situation, the nasty truth is that our political tradition is in serious danger of becoming, in the worst (or Marxist) sense of the word, an *ideology* — a collection of rank illusions that serves no purpose higher than to rock all of us together contentedly, the disinherited as well as the established, in the same cradle — a tolerable situation except that cradle may come down with one great crash. And we are in serious danger of attempting to solve the great problems of our time with the aid of ideas that may lead us to make the wrong decisions or, as is more likely, deaden our will to make any decisions at all.

Let me now turn to examine those principles of our tradition which, in my opinion, have drifted farthest away from reality or, to be more exact, have lagged farthest behind the onward rush of the American people into new ways of living. Before I do this I want to make clear my own admiration, and indeed veneration, for the American tradition. I am certainly one of those who look

upon it as our most precious possession. If we were ever to reshape it in such a way as to deny the primacy of liberty, the dignity of the person, the importance of morality, or the necessity of constitutionalism, I would say that we had ceased to be good Americans or even good men. With neither the essence of the American tradition, liberty and justice, nor with the aspiration, liberty and justice for all, can we have any serious argument. My argument is with some of the principles and assumptions — let us call them secondary or instrumental — through which its great ends have hitherto been pursued. Without further resort to that great American tradition, the filibuster, I go straight to the point by calling for the amendment or even abandonment of at least five ideals.

In the first place, I do not see how we can continue to delude ourselves much longer with the Liberal view of man's nature and destiny. This gentle, well-meaning, confident view has now had a full two centuries to prove itself in the test of events, and the result of the test is the sad truth that man is not one bit more admirable and his destiny a good deal less alluring than they appeared even to such doubting well-wishers as John Adams and Abraham Lincoln. We were led by our commitment to Liberalism to expect a steady improvement in the behavior of men in both their personal and political capacities; but the naked reality of our age, as it has been an only ill-concealed reality of all history, is that even the most favored men are driven by urges and fears that can be diverted but never tamed by learning or security or morality or appeals to reason. Our natures are a battleground over which sociability and selfishness, decency and depravity, love and hate, reason and unreason struggle without rest. Our destiny is to find no genuine release from pain, fear, and doubt this side of the grave. This is a lesson taught by history, especially current history, just as it is taught by our theologians and psychologists; and it is high time we made it an open part of our political tradition.

We must not rush shamefacedly to embrace the savage, cynical view of human nature. I doubt that any of us would care

to live in a society where Hobbes had slain Locks and chopped him into little pieces. But we are going to be pushed into such a view against our better instincts, among which I list the saving instinct of love, if we do not settle down fairly soon in a moderate position that mixes hope and caution in a more sober-minded view than we have hitherto had the courage to adopt. We have been told repeatedly by Reinhold Niebuhr of "the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all human configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all virtue;" and yet we would still rather listen to the high priest of "the cult of reassurance," Norman Vincent Peale. If we go on listening, if we choose reassurance over reality, we are letting ourselves in for a bout of disillusionment in which the only certain winner would be the forces of autocracy. What we must fear and forestall is a failure of faith, for that will shortly be followed by a "failure of nerve" — and that will be for us, as it was for the Greeks, the end of the free society.

I do not expect any sharp improvement in our affairs to result from widespread adoption of a sober view of man's nature and capacities, but I do think we will be in a far better spiritual and intellectual position to deal with a world of pain and sorrow and frustration. A new recognition of the irrationality of political man might well give us a saner, more active politics at home. A new rejection of what Niebuhr calls "the regnant modern theory of potentially innocent men and nations" — that is, Americans and America — might well lead us to a sharper, more successful policy abroad.

This is not an easy exercise that I am counseling, for many Americans will read it as an invitation to men to stop loving one another. To them I would give one reminder and pose one question: The essence of life is charity, and charity has a far greater role to play in the sober than in the innocent view of man. And does anyone seriously think that Dr. Niebuhr loves men any less warmly than does Dr. Peale?

I confess that I am not half so certain about what we might do to readjust our commitment to equality; for though it needs

readjustment, it also needs reaffirmation. This is one instance in which the intolerable gap between ideal and reality might be most effectively closed by bringing the latter into closer conformity with the former. Equality is not much less central than liberty to our tradition, and we challenge our whole meaning as a people in history when we challenge this splendid principle. It might be less dangerous, and certainly would be more ennobling, if we were to apply a little more force and a lot more reason to reducing the glaring inequalities in some areas of American life, principally by persuading men to treat their neighbors like men. We are not likely to persuade them at all successfully if we water down our belief in equality.

At the same time, there is no longer any point in blinking the fact that one of the essential characteristics of an advanced industrial civilization is an almost hierarchical pattern of inequalities in status, power, knowledge, skill, security, compensation, and even privilege. We have the fascinating example of the Soviet Union before our eyes, and there is nothing in our own example that would lead us to think that we are exempt over the long run from the pressures that have forced a new pattern of stratification on Russian society in such a short time. There is another fact about the industrial society, however, that serves as a powerful countervailing force in behalf of equality as an operative ideal: the insatiable need for skilled, responsible, creative men and women, which can be filled only if the entire society serves as a pool of talent.

Our commitment to populism is a close corollary of our commitment to equality, and it is not surprising that here, too, we stumble across a principle in visible need of modification. An uncritical faith in the wisdom of the people, whether maintained for coldly political or warmly spiritual reasons, can lead a complex society into trouble even in the most happy times; in times like ours it can lead us to disaster. For what we fail to recognize is that the obverse of too glad a devotion to the dual principles of equality and populism is a neglect of the compelling problem of leadership.

Is it not as clear as such things can be that the future of our civilization — politically, economically, culturally, and even spiritually — depends upon its capacity to generate and support skilled and prudent leaders at every level and in every corner of American society? And is it not equally clear that one of the necessary ingredients of this capacity is a much more central place in the American tradition for the concept of leadership that really leads and, as a corollary, an *expertise* that is really expert?

We have already suffered badly from the lack of such a concept in our kit of operative ideals. We can shrug off the phenomenon of the Congressman from Ohio or California who is forever polling his constituency in defiance of the Burkean principle of representation. He, unlike Burke, has no other constituency to which he can flee in defeat and have a second chance at victory. But what can we say of the experts in Brooklyn or Chicago who make no conscious effort to introduce and maintain natural leaders in public housing projects? It is these experts we should blame for the blight that soon begins to eat away at many projects, or the climate of ideas in which, like the rest of us, they must work up their plans? The point that I am trying to make is that in our present climate it would have been a most unusual thing for them to have given purposeful consideration to constructing a pattern of leadership within the project itself. This, it seems to me, is much too large a price to pay for the jolly feeling that, whatever else we may be, we are staunch democrats.

The climate of social and political purpose must, I suggest, be changed. Our tradition must make a larger place for leadership, and we must turn our attention more openly to the problem of how to strengthen the position of our leaders in all areas of life without cutting them loose from their final responsibility to the American people. Can we have it both ways — leadership *and* democracy? I think we can, as we have certainly proved consistently through the operation of that amazing instrument of democratic leadership, the American Presidency.

It will be objected — I would be troubled if it were not — that I am advocating the forced injection of the principle of elitism

into the American political tradition. To this I can answer only that "elitism," like "privilege" or "force" or "bureaucracy" or "vested interest" — is simply a dirty word with which men can cut off discussion but not the existence of various inevitable and, to be sure, unpleasant arrangements and institutions of organized society, and especially of the modern industrial society. I can answer, further, that there are elites and elites, and that ours, which I am certainly willing to call by some other name, is no less different in nature and method from the elites of the totalitarian or authoritarian states than, say, the Congress of the United States is from the Supreme Soviet, the University of Michigan from the University of Moscow, or the *New York Times* from *Pravda*. Our instruments of leadership are a reflection of our whole society, and if it is "democratic," they will be, too.

One important means of having both stronger leadership and stronger democracy is, as I have suggested, a reaffirmation and readjustment of the splendid principle of equality. Let us reaffirm equality in constitutional rights, equality before the law and equality of consideration. Let us reaffirm equality of political voice, even if we do recognize that the chorus of all our voices is not so well-trained and finely-tuned as our tradition would have it. Most important, let us put equality of opportunity back in first place among all our operative ideals, but this time let us mean it and not, like the American disciples of Herbert Spencer, use it as an ideological smokescreen for rank inequalities of power and possession and privilege. A full application of this concept to our affairs, especially to our system of education, would do more than any other single factor to counter-balance any lowering of esteem for democracy that might result from a new emphasis upon the importance of leadership. What could be more healthy for the spiritual state of American democracy than a widespread assumption that our leaders have earned their places, and what could bring more support to such an assumption than a genuine attempt to throw open the gates of opportunity to the children of the oppressed and disinherited?

Here, then, are two further amendments that I would suggest solemnly for the American political tradition: a new emphasis upon the role of leadership in the free society, at the expense of an admirable but naive faith in the vigilance and wisdom of the people; a renewed emphasis on equality of opportunity, at the expense of nothing by prejudices and fears and vested interests of which we should be ashamed.

Another element of the tradition that has probably outlived its usefulness is our skeptical attitude toward the uses of political power. All through American history men who really knew better have let their distrust of specific groups or parties in authority carry them into a position of doctrinaire anti-statism. Jefferson got us into this habit, and I am not sure that we can blame him. He shared most of the radical prejudices of his day, and no prejudice was more deeply ingrained in the minds of American, English, and French radicals than the assumption that government was inherently corrupt, oppressive, and malevolent. For centuries ordinary men had looked upon political authority as a tool of the rich, as a means for perpetuating privilege and legalizing inequality. When government intervened in the labor market, it was to keep hours up and wages down; when it intervened in commerce and finance, it was to grant favors and privileges to the few already on top of the heap. Active government was something associated with the likes of Alexander Hamilton, and agrarian democrats, who sought nothing more than a fair shake, and had every reason to fear it. Like most men, they went farther than necessary in generalizing from their fears and ended up as advocates of a theory of political authority that has served us both well and ill in the course of American history — well because it has doubtless saved us from a great deal of addle-pated legislation, ill because it has several times helped vested interests to block reforms desperately needed in the larger interest of a just society. Where Jefferson and Jackson left off, Sumner, Carnegie, Field, Sutherland, Hoover, and the American Liberty League picked up, and who can blame them for making the essence of Americanism a belief in the evil-doing but not good-



doing capacities of popular government, indeed of any kind of government?

All that, it seems to me, is now a thing of the past. If we should not put the credulous trust in the efficacy of merely political power displayed by socialists and other extreme reformers, we also should not despise the only weapon now available to us in many areas of American life. The time has surely come to free ourselves from the fears and slogans of the past and to recognize that prudent government under democratic control is necessary to solve the problems and improve the state of American democracy. We should not hope too much — I am quite willing to change that “solve” to “alleviate” — but we should also not expect too little. In a society of automation and atomic energy, a vacuum of power can be more dangerous than an overdose of it; in a world of crumbling empires and rising imperiums, power is the price of freedom and survival alike. With more than one tear in my own eyes, I pronounce the Jeffersonian theory of political power dead. And the cause: dangerous irrelevance.

While I am about it, I might as well be thoroughly impudent and call into question the sacred doctrine of individualism. This doctrine has, all things considered, served us well. Except in the distorted form of rugged individualism, in which it more often than not has provided a cover for some of the most anti-individualistic tendencies in American life, it has expressed one of the meaningful aspirations and realities of our great experiment in democracy. We should turn a deaf ear to those who propose that, since it is just about dead anyway, we should lay it firmly aside. I am certainly not making any such proposal. Individualism is not dead, neither as a fact nor as a faith. But it is in trouble, and a good part of the trouble is, as it were, of its own making. It has been much too appealing and useful a doctrine, and we have worked it so hard that we have turned it from a doctrine into a fetish. We no longer own and use American individualism; it owns and uses us.

The most fortunate result — and it is exactly here that I would suggest a major readjustment in our thinking — is the

blight it has cast upon the sense of community in the American political tradition. Our zealous participation in the rituals of the cult of individualism has left us almost insensitive to the immense debt every man owes to the groups of which he is always a member, from the family at one end of the spectrum to the United States of America at the other. We have forgotten the lesson of history — that we stand on the shoulders of uncounted generations. We have neglected a fundamental of our ethics — that every right of the individual bespeaks a duty and every privilege a responsibility. We have ignored the plainest fact of social science — that what keeps us from sliding all together into anarchy and thence into tyranny are the institutions of the community: families, neighborhoods, churches, schools, colleges, libraries, corporations, partnerships, unions, associations, cooperatives, courts, police, even or especially the agencies that make laws and collect taxes. Hardly one of these institutions has escaped damage in the rush of all good Americans to lay their offerings on the altar of individualism. This, it seems to me, is a situation we cannot tolerate much longer, for the future of this country — and of all the individuals in it, except perhaps our hermits and outlaws — calls for a strengthening of these institutions, especially those that are arms of the state.

It would not take too much intellectual effort on our part to undo most of the damage to most of our institutions with just a small twist here and there in the pattern of priorities within the American tradition. But it is going to take a healthy twist to convert our celebration of individualism and closely related skepticism of political power from a monkey-wrench to a cog in the machinery of public action. We could afford to celebrate individualism and deride government in an age when self-reliant individuals solved most problems of society in solving their own. But that age is dead, and a new age is here — one in which problems that are insoluble by private action fall more thickly upon us with each new census, each new invention, each new gratification of individual taste and ambition. Indeed, it is hard to think of a single major need we now feel — and soon will be feeling a hundred times more sharply — that can be filled, directly or indirectly, by private initia-

tive. The blight of the cities, the shortage of water and power and open space, the neglect of education, the crowding of the roads, the decay of the railroads, the ugliness of the sullied landscape, the pollution of the air we breathe — these are problems that have arisen to beset us not least because our minds have been geared neither to anticipate them nor, once they have been forced upon our consciousness, to move against them boldly with the only weapon equal to the task: community action in which government, be it federal or state or local or regional, plays the leading part. We will solve these problems or we will soon be passing our lives in secure little fortresses, our homes, surrounded by decayed jungles, our communities.

We will not even begin to solve them, I insist, until our minds are permeated by a heightened sense of the community, and the first step is surely to put individualism back where it belongs in the American tradition — as one cherished value among several rather than a compulsive value that devours all others. Again I would warn against giving up on individualism completely. The free individual is still the glorious ideal of the American tradition, and we abandon this ideal at peril of renouncing our claim to be a unique civilization. But if we continue to concentrate on it to the exclusion of all others, if we assume that we can honor it only by besmirching the community and its political agents, if we ask it to solve problems for which it has no solution, then we are condemning those who come after us to life either in a madhouse of anarchy or, when men have grown weary of anarchy, a prison house of tyranny. The free individual *within*, not against the community — is not this the twist we must make in our political thinking? Is not this the only spirit in which free men can ever hope to meet the mounting problems in what has been called “the public sector” of American life?

Let me now sum up my thoughts on the present state of the American political tradition, which I find to be a state of impending crisis: First, this tradition is one of our most precious possessions — because of its character, which reflects the noblest beliefs and

fondest hopes of the human race, and because of its services, which can be measured in the success of the American experiment in democracy. Second, one of the strengths of the tradition is the subtle way in which, over the years, it has partaken of reality and yet risen above it, in which it has been shaped by events and yet helped to shape them. It has been, I insist, a set of *operative* ideas, and we have prospered greatly because we have been able to maintain a tolerable gap between the aspirations of the tradition and the facts of existence. Third, the onward rush of the nation, has in the course of a few years, widened the gap to a point at which some parts of the tradition are now so divorced from reality that they are no longer operative, and we continue to use them at peril of giving way all at once, with one great sigh of frustration, to the problems that fall evermore thickly upon us. And finally, we will solve these problems, or at least keep pace with them, only if we restore our obsolescent ideas to working efficiency, if we meet the crisis of the American political tradition with bold and creative imagination.

I have suggested that we do this by taking a fresh approach to a full five of our old principles and assumptions. Out of the wreckage of the innocent view of man I propose that we salvage the view that mixes doubt and charity. From the swamp of our obsession with "the wisdom of the people" I propose that we emerge with an appreciation of the importance of genuine leadership, which in turn will give fresh vigor to the principle of equality of opportunity. A new sense of the community, a new respect for political power — these are further adjustments I would propose in our great tradition. In time, we may decide that other parts need overhauling. But I think I am proposing enough intellectual readjustment for one generation of Americans.

I propose them with confidence, and without any feeling of irreverence, for three good reasons. First, not a single one of them is really new at all. They have all been voiced by men of good will and high repute at memorable stages in the course of American history. My own peace with ideas I was not brought up to hold has

been concluded a great deal more easily, I confess, because I knew that they had been there all the time just below the surface of our alluring tradition. I take no small comfort in the thought that I am a disciple of John Adams in my view of man, of Hamilton in my respect for power, of all the founding fathers in my celebration of leadership, of all the men of the New England towns in my sense of community.

Second, not a single one of them can come as a surprise to Americans who have been engaged at all seriously in the rising debate over our present predicament. They all number adherents among men of good will and faith throughout America, and in a sense I am only proposing what cannot, in due course, fail of adoption by the people. My hope is that the process of adoption will be swifter than such processes usually are. The first step to that end is for the men who hold these ideas to stop feeling just a little bit un-American and to express them without apology.

They have every reason to do this because, third, not a single one of these ideas is inconsistent with what I have called the essence and aspiration of the American tradition. The essence is liberty and justice, the aspiration liberty and justice for all; and it is exactly because we glory in this aspiration that we must look for new ways to achieve it. We will not find them, I repeat, unless we make room in our tradition for such compelling ideas as leadership, power, and community. These are, to be sure, favorite words of all the tyrants of our time, just as they were favorite words of all the tyrants we cast off long ago. About them there lingers that faint aura of un-Americanism to which I have just called attention. But that is because we, in the throes of our obsessive affair with Liberalism, turned them out coldly to fend for themselves. Now they are coming home, whether we like it or not, for this is a world in which they are the realities of politics, democratic, autocratic and totalitarian alike. Free men, too, will use power, celebrate leadership, and cherish the community — or surrender abjectly to the worst of all threats to liberty: ignorance, violence, insecurity, and disorder.

If we can match this transit toward realism in our political ideas with a transit toward sobriety in our spiritual mood, we will, I think, be as well armed intellectually to meet the challenge of our time as any generation over the whole sweep of American history. I am well aware of the gravity of the course I am proposing, which involves nothing less, — and I pray nothing more — than a shift from the warm-hearted Liberalism of the sanguine Jefferson to the tough-minded Liberalism of the melancholy Lincoln, from innocence to apprehension, from enthusiasm to skepticism, from glad optimism to grim determination—in our whole approach to the heaven-ordained task of preserving and improving American democracy. The course is grave — and I am praying — because history teaches us that a shift toward skepticism in the way a whole nation thinks can gather momentum and carry it to destruction. If we move away from optimism in the direction I foresee, we may well end up on the far side of pessimism in a state of unmanageable despair. It will take a measure of spiritual stamina we have rarely demonstrated to stand firm over a long period in a posture of skeptical democracy and to keep from collapsing wearily into the waiting arms of despotism. Yet history also teaches us that the way a whole nation thinks will after all, determine the way it acts, and we, who must now act more purposefully than ever before in our history, are left with no real choice but to think soberly.

**BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH**  
**Professor Clinton L. Rossiter**

**Present Position:** Professor, Department of Government, Cornell University.

**Schools:**

Cornell University, A.B. degree, 1939.

Princeton University, A.M. degree, 1941, and Ph.D., 1942.

Princeton University Proctor fellow, 1941-42.

**Career Highlights:**

1942-46 Lieutenant, U. S. Naval Reserve.

1947-49 Assistant Professor, Department of Government, Cornell University.

1949-54 Associate Professor, Department of Government, Cornell University.

1954-59 Professor, Department of Government, Cornell University.

**Miscellaneous:**

Authored *Seedtime of the Republic, Conservation in America, The American Presidency.*