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THE STATE AS A PROVIDER OF SYMBOLIC OUTPUTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the social psychological processes through which governmental actions shape public beliefs, perceptions and behavior. It focuses upon the structuring of perceptions of threat and reassurance and upon classifications of people according to levels of merit and competence. These processes systematically reinforce status and income differentials, for they legitimize the authority and privileges of high status groups and evoke perceptions of the poor as inadequate, deviant, or undeserving. Such cognitions are internalized both by those who benefit from them and by those they stigmatize.

The implications of symbolic political responses for governmental regulation of business, for the work of the helping professions, for political leadership, and for political conflict are considered.

The State as a Provider of Symbolic Outputs

Government not only reflects the will of some of the people; it also
creates public wants, beliefs, and demands. In recent years political
scientists have begun to pay increasing attention to this latter aspect
of the political process, for it has a powerful impact upon who gets what.
If some of the most important demands and beliefs of mass publics are evoked
by what the government itself does and by what public officials say, then
responsiveness to the will of the people means rather less than meets the
eye.

Governmental actions and rhetoric can reassure people and make them
apathetic; or it can arouse them to militant action; and the messages that
reassure or arouse can be either accurate or misleading. Because contro-
versial policies always hurt some people, the temptation is strong for
public officials to be reassuring; for officials are naturally eager to
be reassured themselves and to believe that what they do is in the public
interest. Even if political symbols are misleading, therefore, they need
not be deliberately deceptive. Indeed, the most powerful political symbols
are disseminated by those who believe in them themselves.

Public officials can win mass support for actions that would elicit
protest and resistance if private groups did the same thing, for these
actions evoke different and reassuring beliefs. If private gas and electric
companies could raise their rates whenever they pleased without any pretence
of governmental supervision, any company that substantially raised its rates
every year or two would certainly evoke massive protests and demands for
public ownership or tight regulation;[1] but people accept it, and few protest

publicly, when state public utilities commissions permit precisely the
same rate rises. The blessing of a government agency reassures consumers
and wins support for what would otherwise be resented.

If the wealthy, as private individuals, forced the poor or the middle
class to give them a substantial part of their earnings, resistance would
soon appear; yet governmental tax and subsidy policies that have exactly
this effect are perceived as reasonable, even though particular taxes or
subsidies are criticized by scattered interests. If private individuals
forced millions of young men to leave home, submit to strict discipline in
their everyday lives, kill others, and be killed themselves, such "slavery"
would be regarded as intolerable; but when legitimized by duly enacted draft
laws, it is not only tolerated by most, but regarded as highly desirable
and even necessary.

Official governmental acts and statements are rarely simple in their
impacts or in their meanings; almost never are their consequences clear
and certain. Economists conclude that public utility laws typically do
little to keep gas or electricity rates low; but it still seems reasonable
to most people that the rates would be even higher without the government
regulation. Low tax rates to oil producers force other taxpayers to sub-
sidize an affluent group, but the subsidy is justified on the ground that
it enlarges a vital national resource, and it probably does. In such cases
the financial costs to large numbers of people are high (though they are
largely or completely hidden), the method of calculating them is complex,
and their fairness is hard to judge. The symbolic benefits--protection of
the consumer, promotion of national security--are easy to see and to understand
even though they often turn out to be trivial, misleading, or nonexistent when
carefully studied.

The legitimacy of government, the belief that public officials represent the will of the people, therefore confers a mystique that can reassure people even when they have reason to be wary or alarmed; and it can arouse people to endure severe sacrifices, from wars or regressive taxes, even when they have little to gain from them. In such cases the facts are hard to know or analyze, and anxious people want very much to believe that the government knows how to handle the economic, military, and other threats they fear but cannot cope with as individuals.

Not all public policy is symbolic or based upon deliberate or unintended mystification, of course. The impacts of many governmental acts upon people's everyday lives are so clear that there is little question when they help and when they hurt. The people in a slum neighborhood who want a playground or a traffic light know when they are getting what they need. The farm corporation that gets several hundred thousand dollars in "price support" subsidies knows precisely how public policy boosts its profits (though to the taxpayer this same public policy may be invisible or be perceived as an aid to the small family farmer or as a desirable way of enriching the nation's food production).

The political analyst, then, must ask under what conditions the acts of government become symbolic and help create beliefs, wants, and demands in mass publics. The question is both a highly practical one for the citizen or lobbyist and an intriguing one for the student of government; for public policies have symbolic effects under conditions that we can identify, at least within rough limits. Because political symbolism is a systematic phenomenon, we can learn to understand it.

The Larger Importance of the Study of Political Symbolism

The symbolic perspective allows the student of politics both to see some things that are not otherwise obvious and to evaluate or judge what he sees in a rather different way. He now recognizes that how satisfied or dissatisfied people are with government does not depend only on how much they get; it depends even more on what society, and especially the government itself, cues them to expect, to want, and to believe they deserve. Corporate farm interests made rich by a farm price support program are often still dissatisfied if they do not also get tax breaks, such as rapid depreciation allowances. Most of the poor, taught by schools, welfare workers, and governmental policies to feel inadequate for not having made money in a "land of equal opportunity," are docile as they accept meagre welfare benefits along with sometimes degrading "counseling" on how to live their lives; and they often feel lucky if their benefits are raised ten dollars a month. In both these examples it is people's expectations that chiefly influence how satisfied and how demanding they are; it is not how much they get. In both examples, and in thousands of others that could easily be cited, government helps shape the expectations rather than simply responding to them. Indeed, government maintains its tie to "the voice of the people" largely by influencing what the voice says.

The study of political symbolism necessarily focuses upon change and the conditions of change in attitudes and in behavior. Symbols evoke either change or reinforcement of what people already believe and perceive. A poll may show that virtually all Americans are convinced that the Chinese People's Republic is their eternal enemy and its people enslaved and hostile. To

the student of political symbolism those poll results reflect a response to
particular stimuli and not necessarily a stable state of affairs. He is less
interested in such a snapshot poll than in how the results will change after
the President of the United States visits China and the television networks
broadcast pictures of beautiful Chinese cities and friendly looking people.
He is less interested in statistics on support or opposition to the President
than in what kinds of change in support will take place if unemployment rises
or prices decline. Statistics on attitudes, in short, are not regarded as
"hard data" or important in themselves. They are, rather, a way of learning
how governments and other social groupings evoke changes in the direction,
the intensity, or the stability of attitudes. The symbolic perspective is
a dynamic one.

Every mode of observing and interpreting the political scene has
normative implications; it crudely or subtly suggests that the system, and
particular aspects of it, are good or bad, right or wrong. Here too the
symbolic perspective makes a difference. The conventional view of the
political process sees public policy as reflecting what the people want--
as expressed in their votes and the response to electoral choice by legisla-
tures and by administrators and judges who carry out legislative policy.
Systems theory, the most fashionable recent metaphor for explaining govern-
ment, portrays public demands and support as the "inputs" of the system and
legislative, executive, and judicial policy as the "outputs." Both systems
theory and the older view of "the people" as the source of policy are highly
reassuring and justify the status quo, for they tell us that what government
does reflects what the people want.

The student of symbolism knows that this is often true; but he does not avoid the less reassuring side of the political process: the fact that government often can shape people's wants before it reflects them. This focus has quite different implications for what is right or wrong; for whether public policies deserve support, skepticism, or opposition. To the extent that governmental actions create popular beliefs and wants the political process is not democratic, but potentially antidemocratic, for policies are not always based upon the people's will even when they seem to be. It is tempting to take the appearance for the reality. This is true whether the manipulation of public opinion by governmental officials is unintentional or is deliberate. For this reason the symbolic perspective is likely to raise questions about the legitimacy of political regimes, about the obligation to support them, and about the desirability of their policies.

Some Characteristics of Symbols

How is it that on controversial public issues people come to hold conflicting views of the facts, the nature of the problem, and the proper course of action to solve it? Will antiballistic missile installations increase national security or actually decrease it by intensifying the international arms race? Will bussing to desegregated public schools improve the quality of education or ruin the schools? Does a wage-price freeze help stop inflation or allow employers to keep the additional money they would otherwise pay their employees?

All of these have been hotly fought issues in America in recent years, and both sides manifestly cannot be right on the facts and on the impacts of proposed policies. The first step in understanding this kind of conflict

is to notice that on such questions the facts and the policy impacts cannot
be fully known; there is a large element of ambiguity. Whenever ambiguity
exists about matters that concern or threaten large numbers of people,
public policies become "symbolic" in the sense that they evoke intense
feelings and beliefs about a range of issues that may be quite different
from the one that is publicly debated. Support for the ABM (antiballistic
missile) may be based, perhaps subconsciously, upon deep-lying inclinations
to be toughminded with enemies or upon strong fears of unemployment for
people in the aerospace industry; but both fears are expressed as concern
for protection against foreign enemies. To its opponents, on the other hand,
the ABM may evoke strong emotion not only because they think it unnecessary
and economically wasteful but because it symbolizes a violent or aggressive
posture they find repulsive. Such symbols are called "condensation symbols"
because they condense into one event or act a whole range of anxieties,
patriotism, remembrances of past victories or defeats, expectations of
future glories or catastrophes: some one of these or all of them. In the
measure that anything serves as a condensation symbol, reactions to it are
not based upon facts that are observed and that can be verified or falsified.
Responses are based, rather, upon social suggestion: upon what others cue
us to believe. They may still turn out to be perfectly reasonable and
appropriate responses, but often they are not.

Not all political acts, terms or events are condensation symbols; or
they may be only partly symbolic. We react to many political events as
observable reality: as part of our everyday lives with which we realistically
cope. In that case they are "referential symbols." Often, a political event

is dealt with both as part of the factual world and as an expressive

symbol. It may serve both functions for the same person or it may be chiefly

referential for some people and chiefly expressive for others; and it may

express quite different things to different groups of people.

When social workers refuse to give destitute people their welfare checks

unless they agree to come for "counseling" on how to spend their money,

raise their children, and run their homes, the social workers see the counsel-

ing as help to the unfortunate; they refer to themselves as a "helping

profession." To many of their clients, the "counseling" is seen as the opposite

of helpful: as demeaning and repressive interference in their private lives

and as coercion to make them live by middle-class standards and values. The

same action symbolizes very different things to the two groups most directly

involved with it.

What counseling symbolizes determines who has power, status, and public

support in this interaction. Because social workers have been able to get

their perspective on this issue widely accepted by the general public, it

is they who wield the greater power; while their clients are generally

perceived as people who have much more wrong with them than lack of money.

That they need counseling evokes a view of the poor as personally inadequate

and incompetent, unable to cope with life in the way other people do, requiring

guidance and even coercion to behave well. To most people, counseling

is not even perceived as a political issue, so completely are they socialized

to see social work as a helping profession. Indeed, the ability to get the

public to perceive the exercise of authority and the allocation of values

as a "professional" rather than a political issue is one of the most common

and one of the most effective political techniques in contemporary society for it discourages and weakens political criticism.

It is therefore the meanings of governmental actions and rhetoric that are important to the analyst of political symbolism, not actions and rhetoric as sense data. He is interested in how acts and words come to mean different things to different people and in different situations. He is also concerned with the impact of such meanings upon the distribution of power; the inclination of people to be militant, aroused, or violent; or their willingness to accept governmental action with satisfaction, apathy, or quiescence.

How Politics Evokes Quiescence

Why is there so little resistance and such overwhelming support from all strata of the population for a political system that yields substantial inequalities in wealth, power, status, and sacrifice?[2] Support for the system and belief in its legitimacy is all the more striking in view of the fact that Americans are taught early that all men are created equal and that they live in a land of equal opportunity.

Many governmental processes inculcate support for the political system generally and acquiescence in particular policies. Such processes are symbolic in character, for they create meanings and influence states of mind. They sometimes also allocate values, in which case they are both symbolic and instrumental.

The political symbols that most powerfully inculacate support for the political system itself are those institutions we are taught to think of as the core of the democratic state: those that give the people control over the government. Probably the most reassuring of these are elections.

Americans learn early in life to doubt that any state can be democratic
without free elections. Whatever else they accomplish, the holding of
elections helps create a belief in the reality of popular participation
in government and popular control over basic policy directions. For the
individual voter elections also create a sense of personal participation
and influence in government.

The belief is crucial whether or not it is accurate. There is evidence
that much of the electorate is not especially interested in the issues or
informed about them and that votes are often cast on the basis of such
other considerations as the candidate's personality or very vague and often
inaccurate opinions about what will serve group interests.[3] On the other
hand, issues apparently do sometimes make a difference.[4] But if elections
powerfully legitimize the political system and the regime whether or not
they are responsive to people's wants and demands, the realistic political
analyst must recognize such legitimation as one of their functions, and
sometimes their major function.

Similarly, the other institutions we are socialized early to see as
fundamental to democracy help inculcate broad support for the system and
acquiescence in policies, even from those who do not like them. The pub-
licized functioning of legislatures and courts keeps alive widespread
confidence that the public will is reflected in the laws which are applied
expertly and impartially to people who may have violated them. Here again,
there is evidence that the belief is often not warranted: that legislative
bodies chiefly reflect the needs of organized interest and strong pressure

groups and that courts are more sensitive to the interests of some groups

than others regardless of the "mandate" of the voters in the last election.[5]

Besides legitimizing the political system governmental actions also

create support for particular policies or acquiescence in them. A wide

range of devices evoke such support or quiescence for controversial govern-

mental acts. It is a challenging exercise to identify them and learn to

recognize new ones, for the analyst usually has to overcome his own

identification with their popular or conventional meanings in order to

recognize their symbolic functions.

Some types of governmental action create the belief in a mass public

that government is providing effective protection against threats that are

widely feared or against undesirable developments. One policy area in which

this effect is especially dramatic is the field of government regulation of

business to protect the consumer against high prices. There are antitrust

laws to make sure businesses compete with each other rather than entering

into arrangements that concentrate economic power and allow sellers to

charge what the traffic will bear. There are many laws to prevent corpora-

tions enjoying a monopoly or special license from using their economic power

to gouge the consumer through high prices or shoddy service. Antitrust

actions are frequently in the news, as are actions of public utility

commissions; and politicians often declare their zeal to increase the effec-

tiveness of protective legislation of this sort. Yet for many decades studies

by economists and political scientists have shown that these laws and the

agencies that administer them typically offer very little protection. They

are usually highly sensitive to the economic interests of the businesses

they "regulate" rather than to the interests of consumers; and the studies conclude that they become captives of these businesses, supplying rationalizations for giving them the rate increases they want while still ostensibly protecting the consumer.

If the regulatory laws and commissions come close to performing the opposite of the economic function they are established to perform, why are they not abolished? They clearly do serve political and psychological functions both for politicians and for the mass public even if they do not achieve their formal economic goal, for politicians find that support for them or for strengthening them still brings in votes. Those who fear the concentration of economic power are reassured when the government responds to their anxiety by setting up an agency to keep prices fair or regulate product quality. It is rarely clear to consumers just which price ceilings and which product standards protect them and which exploit them. In short, the issues are ambiguous and complex. This combination of ambiguity and widespread public anxiety is precisely the climate in which people are eager for reassurance that they are being protected and therefore eager to believe that publicized governmental actions have the effects they are supposed to have.

In many other fields of governmental action the same conditions prevail and public policies are partly, often chiefly, symbolic in character. New civil rights laws reassure liberals that there is progress; but policemen and courts can still ignore the laws or interpret them to permit the very denials of civil liberties they were intended to prevent; and the poor and the black typically lack the knowledge and the legal counsel to assert their

rights. The civil rights laws serve as reassuring symbols for the affluent liberals, whose own civil rights are fairly well protected; but for the black or the radical who is beaten up after he is arrested on false charges there is no ambiguity and no symbolic reassurance. For those who are worried about ecological catastrophe, the passage of laws against water and air pollution brings reassurance and a sense of victory, but it is usually far from clear that they provide the money or the will to enforce the laws against influential industrial and governmental polluters. Nonetheless the enactment of the statutes and widely touted clean-up, paint-up and anti-litter campaigns reassure many who would otherwise be aroused. Tokenism is a classic device for taking advantage of ambiguity and for conveying a false sense of reassurance.

Another way in which governmental or elite actions reassure people about worrisome conditions is to evoke a conviction that the deprived deserve their fate and are personally benefiting from it. It is comforting to believe that those who are denied the good things of life suffer from personal pathology, deviance, or delinquency and that they must be controlled, guided or incarcerated as a form of "correction" or "rehabilitation." Such a rehabilitative and psychiatric ideology has increasingly dominated the laws, the rhetoric, and the bureaucracies of all the public institutions that have the power to impose severe penalties upon the wayward and the dependent: prisons, mental hospitals, schools, and welfare departments. This ideology is a "liberal" view, but its effects have been severely repressive, especially for the poor.[6] In this view the person who steals is reacting not to poverty or alienating institutions but to psychopathic tendencies. The child who resists submission to the school bureaucracy and its rules and shows independence is "hostile" and must be taught "insight" by learning how inadequate he is. The person

who is depressed or not playing conventional roles in life is a psychopath

or schizophrenic who must be controlled and possibly locked up until he learns

to behave in conventional ways. The welfare recipient is suffering less from

lack of money than from personal inadequacies for which he needs counseling

and control. Because the staffs of these institutions enjoy wide discretion

in defining deviance, the tendency is strong to perceive any behavior they

dislike or any behavior uncommon in their own social circles as pathological

and calling for "correction." Many people are indeed mildly or severely

unhappy or maladjusted; the problem lies in assuming that they themselves,

rather than social institutions, are at fault.

For elites, this way of defining the behavior of the poor and the

unconventional has many advantages. It diverts attention from social and

economic problems. It justifies repression of those who deviate from middle-

class standards of behavior. It defines such repression as "rehabilitation,"

thereby enhancing the self-conceptions of conservatives, liberals, profes-

sionals, and administrative staff, who see themselves as altruistic. Finally,

this ideology is accepted by many of the deprived themselves, making them

docile and submissive; for docility and submission to authority are generously

rewarded in schools, prisons, mental hospitals, and welfare agencies, while

independence, insistence on personal dignity, and imagination are usually

penalized, often severely.

The creation of a widespread belief that the deprived are less deserving

than others and must be controlled for their own good is a more common, more

potent, and more degrading form of symbolic political action than is generally

realized. Only recently have social scientists begun to recognize that such

labeling becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, subtly and also coercively

requiring people to act in the way they are defined[7] and making it more
likely that they will become recidivists: fall back into the behavior that
got them into trouble in the first place. In a society in which economic
and social rewards are very uneven such social-psychological control is a
pervasive supplement to the use of coercive police powers and more effective
than naked coercion in maintaining quiescence; for it minimizes resistance,
maximizes support from the general public, and allays people's consciences.

The confusion between what is psychologically helpful and what is
politically repressive that is characteristic of this whole field of the
definition and treatment of "deviance" takes still another form that has
even more far-reaching political consequences. Sociologists who study
deviance recognize that the person who is labeled an offender against
common morality or ways of living is sometimes more useful to society as
a deviant (sick, delinquent, psychopathic, etc.) than as a nondeviant; for
he then serves as a reference point or benchmark to define what behavior is
acceptable and what is unacceptable and also to make it clear that the deviant
are segregated and penalized. Consequently institutions that keep people
deviant by labeling them and then forcing them to stay in a pathological role
are doing what many demand they do to preserve the common conventions.[8]
Repression of a large and conspicuous group of people in the name of "help,"
"rehabilitation," or "correction," in this way powerfully shapes the beliefs
and the behavior of mass publics.

The research on labeling theory suggests the possiblity of a more
pervasive form of symbolic governmental output. Studies of status politics
demonstrate that governmental actions can elevate the status of large groups

of people and lower the status of others.[9] To legitimize the values of some
groups and devalue others is to establish generally shared expectations of
dominance and deference: to people and to norms. Coercion can never be the
chief determinant of public behavior or of compliance with law. Public
acceptance or rejection of norms must always be the paramount influence. In
an important sense, then, the status labeling and the legitimizing of norms
that are subtle and often unintended consequences of governmental acts
constitute fundamental influences upon political behavior. Labeling becomes
a self-fulfilling prophecy for the socially exalted just as it does for the
socially degraded.

The Dynamics of Political Arousal

The symbols that evoke quiescence create perceptions that people are
being protected from the threats they fear or a belief that those who behave
unconventionally need to be restrained or punished for their own good and
the good of society; protection of the public is the key symbolic theme in
either case. The symbols that arouse mass publics to protest or violence
evoke the opposite expectations: that a widely feared threat to their
interests is growing more ominous, that those who pose that threat are
malevolent, and that these enemies must be resisted or, sometimes, extermi-
nated. In the face of such a threat people are led to set aside the lesser
conflicts that ordinarily divide them and fight together against what they
now perceive as the more serious hazard to their common interests.

It might seem that the explanation for resort to political protest
or militance is more easily found: that those who get the least of what
there is to get, those who are oppressed, those who are put down by superior

force will be driven to violence to try to better their condition. There is certainly a large element of truth in this view. It is largely the poor and the manifestly oppressed who do protest and engage in violence; but a little thought should quickly convince a student of politics that this view is inadequate and distorting.

First, those who are most deprived are often quiescent. The occasional slave rebellions in the pre-Civil War South were atypical; the great majority of slaves lived out their lives without participating in any such movement. Only a small fraction of the poor ever engaged in mass riots or join revolutionary movements. The "untouchables," the lowest Hindu caste in India, long accepted their miserable condition as a fact of the divine order. Clearly, deprivation does not by itself produce political conflict or escalate it.

Second, people who are relatively well-off sometimes do engage in a politics of protest and violence. Some affluent middle class college students did so in massive numbers in the late 1960s. Revolutions typically occur after there has been substantial improvement in the condition of the deprived classes, not when they are most destitute.

Denial of the things people value is a major reason for political conflict; but the meaning of the deprivation is critical. Is it seen as natural or devinely ordained or is it seen as unnecessary and unfairly imposed by the privileged? Is it seen as temporary, as stable, or as growing worse? These interpretations of deprivation are influenced by symbols, and the interpretations are critical in influencing behavior.

How do people come to believe it is necessary to resort to protest or violence, outside the channels of conventional politics? How do large groups come to believe that those they fear are unrestrained by established governmental

routines and represent an escalating threat that must be met by escalating counteraction?

The key condition is evidence that a group believed to be hostile is winning wider public support and preparing to attack or to intensify attacks already in progress. Nothing helps American hawks win support for larger military budgets and for incursions into foreign countries as much as allegations that hawkish sentiment and action is growing in foreign countries believed to be hostile. It is therefore hardly surprising that hawks in rival countries are careful to observe, to publicize, and to exaggerate the militaristic actions and talk of their adversaries. As they observe and exaggerate their enemies' alleged escalations, rival hawks serve each others' interests for they win added public support for their opponents as well as for themselves. Nothing so powerfully contributes to antipolice sentiment and behavior in American cities or on college campuses as allegations or evidence that the police are arbitrarily harassing, beating, or arresting the poor, the black, or the ideologically unconventional. Political conflicts of these kinds involve more people and more intense passions on both sides as each adversary group comes to see the other as its enemy, bent upon its repression or its extermination. A new and sudden step-up in harassment typically serves as the trigger that sets off widespread fears and support for escalation on the other side. This is the general pattern of escalating political conflict on any issue.

Another way to see this process is to recognize that people who are caught up in an escalating political conflict are likely to fit what they hear and what they see about the conflict into a mythic form. A myth is

a widely held belief based upon social cues rather than upon observation of the world. Myth subtly but powerfully shapes the meaning of events. Political conflict myths fall into a small number of archetypical patterns. One of these is the myth of an enemy plotting against one's own group or nation who therefore needs to be suppressed or exterminated. Another is the myth of a leader-hero-savior who represents a social order ordained by God or sanctioned by the people; he must be followed and obeyed, and sacrifice or suffering in his behalf are seen as ennobling.

Political conflicts often escalate to the point that the costs and the suffering are extremely high. Political history is largely a chronicle of mass violence in the form of wars, massacres, revolutions, and genocidal operations. To understand how men and women can become willing and even anxious to kill and to die for political causes, we must examine some perceptions of the enemy and of the self that recur whenever political conflict escalates.

A central feature of this process is the personification of adversaries. Hostile or potentially hostile groups or nations are not seen as consisting of different factions or as internally divided, even though this is bound to be true to a significant degree of every formal organization or nation. Instead, the enemy is seen as monolithic and resolute: as a solid following of the alien leader or oligarchy symbolizing the evil to be fought. This view simplifies the situation, substituting a vision of malevolent people for the more realistic recognition that there is a large measure of drift in policy-making, that people change their positions from time to time, that their behavior is largely shaped by economic and political institutions, and that political leaders must respond to contending groups within their own

countries in order to retain their positions. The simplification promotes
solidarity against the enemy and eagerness to escalate attacks upon him.

Those who are caught up as participants in an escalating political
conflict come to hold a characteristic view both of themselves and of their
adversaries. To believe that they must defend their lives, their honor,
their most vital interests, or their country against hostile outsiders is
to take on a well defined political role: that of fighter in a noble
cause. Such a role gives their lives meaning, and it is cherished--not
lightly abandoned, even in the face of evidence that might cast doubt upon
its validity. The cause, and the belief in its righteousness or its
necessity, come to be part of the person's self-conception, reinforcing his
zeal and his willingness to sacrifice, to hurt, or to kill. Political beliefs,
social movements, and self-conceptions are not as separate from each other
in real life as they are in analytic thought. When a person becomes
emotionally involved in a political cause, he takes on a particular view
of his own identity and of his political role.

In these ways, then, people involved in escalating political conflict
develop particular beliefs and perceptions of the world and of themselves
that may be distortions of what is there; yet they hold them tenaciously
and emotionally, and they interpret new developments so as to be consistent
with them and reinforce them.

Symbols and Reality

Fortunately, beliefs and perceptions about the world and ourselves
are also often realistic and based upon accurate observation. When a person
is directly and critically affected by political events that are readily

observable right around him, he is likely to be in touch with reality and
to base his beliefs upon what he sees rather than upon symbolic cues. The
poor in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe rioted when food shortages
appeared.[10]   Peasants in Southeast Asia today riot or rebel against their
patrons when the patron stops providing them with at least a subsistence
level of food, clothing, and shelter.[11]   Blacks in American urban ghettos
typically base their beliefs about progress toward racial equality upon
what happens to them in their daily lives, not upon news of the enactment
of civil rights laws.[12]   In none of these cases is there much doubt or
uncertainty about what is happening, and those most affected are realistic,
even though others may not be.

It is in ambiguous situations that evoke strong fears or hopes that
symbolism becomes a powerful influence upon what people believe and what
they think is happening. Governmental acts then become especially power-
ful symbols; but every political belief involves some mix of direct
observation and symbolic cuing, though in greatly varying proportions.
The hungry food rioter is close to the realistic end of the scale. Close
to the other end of the scale was the Nazi in the 1930s who followed and
obeyed Hitler because he believed the dictator's claim that the Nazis were
creating a glorious thousand year empire.

Even this picture understates the marvelous complexity of the human
mind. The same person rarely retains exactly the same beliefs about a
political issue over time; he responds to new events and new cues. In
the wake of news of a particularly brutal crime he may take the position
that fewer civil rights and longer prison terms for criminal offenders are

necessary to reduce the crime rate. Shortly afterward he may read a study
of the effects of imprisonment persuasively arguing that prisons rarely
"rehabilitate," that they often force the person who has violated the law
once into adopting crime as a way of life, that they therefore create more
criminals than they cure. On this issue, as on most controversial political
issues, many people are ambivalent and their beliefs and perceptions often
quite unstable.

Organization and Conflict Escalation

The central theme of all symbolic analysis of politics is the gap
between perceptions or beliefs about what is happening on the one hand
and actual gains or losses in money, power, status, or tangible goods on
the other hand. As political conflict escalates, this gap becomes wider.

The winner of symbolic victories may not be the winner of tangible
victories. As an international war or "police action" escalates, the low
and middle income citizens of the country that is victorious on the battle-
field may find their taxes far more burdensome, their lives more regimented,
their sons and relatives killed or wounded; but they are "the winners." The
defenders of civil rights who win a court decision guaranteeing that accused
persons be provided with lawyers and information about their procedural rights
may learn before long that actual practices in the station house have changed
little or not at all. The citizens whose outcries against arbitrary rate
increases and poor service by a public utility bring legislation directing
a regulatory commission to protect consumer interests have won a symbolic
victory; but this form of political triumph rarely brings lower rates or
better service for long. The regulatory agency often makes it easier to
raise rates.

Other disparities between people's perceptions and real changes in value allocations regularly appear as political conflict widens and grows more intense. Benefits often come to be perceived as deprivations and vice versa. As international conflict grows hotter, the armed forces gain larger appropriations for weapons, new powers to draft soldiers, higher status in society, and more influence in governmental decisions, but it is the poor and the lower middle class whose sons are chiefly drafted to fight, whose incomes are disproportionately taxed, and whose influence in governmental decisions is lowest. Rather than being perceived as real benefits and losses for a specific group of people, however, these changes are perceived and publicized as "costs" of defense: sacrifices the nation as a whole must valiantly assume to cope with its enemies.

Even beliefs about who are enemies and who are allies become confused and uncertain and may fail to correspond with what observably happens as conflict escalates. Such confusion is not accidental, but a consistent and systematic aspect of political conflict; for it is important to create perceptions that induce people to fight and to sacrifice if necessary to serve a noble cause and defeat an evil one.

As civil rights conflict escalates, the same ambiguities appear. The contending groups see themselves as believers in the rights of minorities on the one side and believers in law and order on the other. These symbols unite people on both sides and so bolster political support. At the same time, there are tangible gains and losses for both the supporters and the opponents of civil rights that do not correspond with the symbolic definition of the situation. As civil rights conflict grows more intense, the more militant groups on both sides win tangible benefits and the less

militant ones lose. White supremacists and civil libertarians win follow-
ings and money as public opinion is polarized. The police get larger
appropriations for men and weapons, higher status and more influence for
top police officials, and greater authority over others. The more militant
black groups like the Panthers gain moral and financial support at the
expense of the Urban League and white liberal types. To make this point is
to recognize both that there is competition for tangible benefits within
groups symbolically aligned with each other as allies and also that
escalation means more benefits for the militants and detente more benefits
for the moderates and the compromisers. There is then, a systematic link
between symbol and fact; but it is a link that readily conceals or distorts
the facts and so can evoke political support for self-defeating policies.

Most political conflict is ritualistic. It is held within narrow
limits, carried on through mutually accepted routines, and more nearly
serves to justify outcomes than to determine them; for they are largely
predetermined by long standing differences in bargaining resources.
Election campaigns (especially where there is a two party system), the
procedures of regulatory administrative agencies, most union-management
bargaining, and most international arms and trade negotiations are examples
of such ritualized conflict. In the minor degree that they make policy
changes, their functions are generally recognized and reported in the news.
In the major degree that the conflict serves to win wide public acceptance
of leaders and of policy outcomes (i.e., in the degree that they serve
symbolic functions) the news reports typically miss their significance.

Political leaders retain a following (which is, of course, what makes
them leaders) through a number of devices that are basically symbolic in

character. We ordinarily think of the leader as the man who points the way for others to follow through his unusual abilities, wisdom, courage, or the force of his personality. But leaders can often retain their positions regardless of whether they have these qualities by creating in their followers a belief in their ability to cope, whether or not the belief is justified. As just noted, ritualized conflict creates such a belief in followers. Other common political actions do so as well. The leader who is resolute and forceful and seems confident in the face of a dilemma that makes most people anxious and uncertain reassures the public and creates a following, whether his actions prove successful or fail; for those who are bewildered want very much to believe that their political leaders can cope. Both Kennedy's seemingly resolute action in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and Nixon's dramatic though inconclusive visits to China and Russia in 1971 and 1972 illustrate the point. Survey data show that presidential popularity consistently rises after such dramatic actions, whether they succeed, fail, or, as in most cases, are ambiguous in their consequences. Clearly, it is less the leader's skills, courage or effectiveness that bring political success in such cases, than his dramaturgy and the anxieties of mass publics.

In some circumstances "leaders" are created chiefly by the enemies of the groups they are supposed to be guiding. This has quite consistently been true of crowds or mobs of discontented people who riot. The incident setting off a riot is often an unpopular police action: one that is regarded as brutal, unfair, or racist. It may be some other event symbolizing oppression of a disadvantaged group.

Law enforcement officials and the privileged who feel threatened look for riot leaders, for the myth of the outside agitator creating disorder among an otherwise happy or a passive population is reassuring to those who oppose change, and such a myth regularly appears, regardless of the facts. Police therefore perceive as "ringleaders" rioters who are especially lively or visible even if they have not "led" anybody. Even more commonly they pick out well-known people who have been active in earlier protest movements. In a very realistic sense, then, it is the opponents of the rioters who create their leaders; but the rioters themselves also feel reassured if they believe they have some leadership. In spontaneous protest and riot situations, therefore, leaders serve a political function for police and elites, evoking public support for punishing "ringleaders" or "agitators;" and they also serve a symbolic or expressive function for the protesters. Here again is a rather common kind of political situation in which appearances and beliefs diverge from reality; symbolic functions become the important ones.

The choice or creation of political enemies can often be understood as a way of widening political support and as a symbolic act, rather than as protection against a real threat. Some political enemies are real enough. The migrant fruit picker whose employer houses him and his family in a shanty without sanitary facilities, underpays him, and overcharges him for necessities has a real adversary; so does the prisoner arbitrarily thrown into solitary confinement because he displeases a guard. Jews in Nazi Germany had little doubt about who their enemies were. Those who are confronted with real enemies benefit from their elimination, so that they themselves will not be hurt or destroyed.

There is another kind of political enemy, however, who <u>helps</u> his adversary politically by giving him a purpose, a cherished self-conception, and political support. For the Nazis, the Jews served as a politically useful enemy. Hitler represented the Jews to the German people as the satanic force he had to fight to preserve the country. Without this enemy to arouse their passions, help them forget their internal differences, and unite them behind him, Hitler could hardly have achieved power or maintained it as long as he did. The Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese similarly served useful functions for each other in marshalling political support during the cold war years. Without native radical movements, the FBI would win far less public support and far lower budgetary appropriations than it has done. In cases like these the enemy is partly or entirely symbolic. He looks the same to his adversaries as real enemies do; but he helps them as much or more than he hurts them. It is not in the interest of such enemies to eliminate each other, but rather to perpetuate each other—and to create a popular belief in the enemy's great strength and aggressive plans rather than in his vulnerability.

Belief in real enemies is based upon empirical evidence and is relatively noncontroversial. Belief in symbolic enemies is based upon rumor and social suggestion and is often highly controversial. Such beliefs tell us more about the believers than about the ostensible enemies, for they bring political and status benefits to those who hold them. For that reason they are not easily destroyed by observations incompatible with them. A group that is eager to marshall political support for its cause is likely to define as the enemy whatever adversary will most potently create and mobilize allies. A foreign country that has long been regarded as hostile, the heretics among

true believers in a religion, the anarchists in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Communists after the Russian Revolution (the capitalists in the Soviet Union), the yellow peril, the blacks—all these have served such a political purpose.

Groups perceived as the enemy are consistently defined in ways that dehumanize them. They are seen as alien, strange, or subhuman; or some one feature or alleged mode of behavior is emphasized: their color, their alleged lack of intelligence (or uncanny shrewdness), their clannishness, and so on. This is politically effective because people can deliberately hurt or kill only those they do not see as sharing their own human qualities.

Political Symbol Creation: Language and Information

This paper focuses upon some of the circumstances in which people accept and hold fast to political beliefs regardless of whether they are valid (or can be proved valid). Manifestly, not all political beliefs are of this kind. People do observe the world realistically and base their opinions on evidence when they have no special economic or emotional interest in believing otherwise and when they have an incentive to act rationally and achieve specific goals.

People underestimate the pervasiveness of political symbols partly because they are largely shaped and maintained unconsciously—through the very language used to describe events and through unconscious emphasis of some kinds of information and the screening out of other kinds.

The student of symbolism must analyze the nonobvious meanings of everyday activities. This feature of symbolic analysis is nowhere more striking than in the analysis of the subtle meanings of the language we

speak, hear, and read every day. Language subtly shapes political thought
through the metaphors we use, usually unconsciously, to describe political
events and issues. A metaphor describes the unknown by comparing it to
something that is well known, and in doing so it always highlights some
features and conceals others. "A crusade for freedom" and "legalized
murder" are two metaphoric descriptions of war which place it in quite
different perspectives. A wage control program can be viewed either as
a "battle against inflation" or as "a subsidy to employers." Every con-
troversial political development is described and perceived through
conflicting metaphors, not necessarily because of a deliberate effort to
influence or to mislead (though that happens too), but because we cannot
speak or think about any complex matter without resort to metaphor. It
permeates our language whether or not we are aware of it.

The particular metaphor which describes a political issue reinforces
the other symbolic processes already analyzed. If a person's job is in
a defense industry and he fears Russian aggression, he is likely to adopt
the political role of defender against a foreign enemy and to see the cold
war as a crusade for freedom; those who call it "legalized murder" will then
look to him either like dupes or like traitors. His beliefs, his self-
conception, and his language reinforce each other and are, in fact, part
of a single pattern of thought and behavior. They can be fully understood
only as aspects of each other; and this is the important function of
political language. It is always a vital part of a larger pattern of
thought and action.

Political metaphors help shape both what we see as fact and how we
evaluate political developments. Some think of abortion as a form of

murder and some think of it as a form of freedom. Whichever metaphor is in a person's mind influences what he imagines when he reads a news story about an abortion clinic or about legalization of abortion; it even more obviously influences whether he favors or opposes legal abortion.

The metaphoric mode in which people perceive complex political issues and events is an obstacle to complete understanding and to changes in perception and belief as new information becomes available; for new information is ordinarily screened so as to fit the metaphor rather than to change it. People with opposing views can read the same news about abortion clinics and the legalization of abortion, but each finds that it confirms his earlier definition of the issue and his earlier opinions. In this way metaphors become self-perpetuating. They define the patterns into which we fit our observations of the world. If army communiques tell of the bombing of "structures" in Southeast Asian villages, people feel better than they would if told that American bombs were destroying houses or huts. For those who want to believe it, the word "structures" evokes a picture of military installations rather than homes. Language forms, beliefs, feelings, and values are integrally tied to each other and reinforce each other.

There is, then, a very strong temptation to accept or invent information that confirms what we already believe, that gives events the meanings we want them to have, and that serves our interests. The tendency to accept myth is sometimes virtually unrestrained. Where the temptation to accept it is less strong, empirical observation and reality-testing balance it or overcome it. Political belief and behavior cannot be understood without

recognizing that there are severe limits on how well the human mind accepts and takes account of pertinent information.

Conclusion

Politics consists only in part of giving and denying people the things they want. Equally important is the generation of beliefs and perceptions through political actions and language. Because this second political function shapes support and opposition to political causes, policies, and candidates, it is basic to all governmental value allocations; and because it depends upon social psychological processes, it is doubtless more systematic and consistent in its functioning than is the allocation of tangible values.

The publicized actions and rhetoric of governmental officials not only respond to what people want but also influence how people think and what they believe. The symbolic function of politics is particularly important in ambiguous situations--when the facts are uncertain. Its result is that the most dramatic and controversial acts of government are often perceived as something more, or less, or far different from, what they actually are. A tax program that enables many of the affluent to escape taxes is perceived as taxation according to ability to pay. An administrative program that enables businessmen to raise prices is perceived as a form of protection for the consumer. A foreign civil war is perceived as the spearhead of worldwide communist encroachment. A welfare program that keeps families at the subsistence level, humiliates them, and requires them to live according to the middle-class norms of their social caseworker is perceived as overly generous, compassionate,

or as coddling the lazy. Such perverse results are not inevitable, and many governmental programs avoid them; but they can and do occur frequently and for systematic reasons.

They do so because people look to politics not only for realistic understanding and control over their worlds but also for reassurance against threats they fear and for assurance that their own political roles are justified and noble; and also because the language we speak and the process by which our minds accept or screen out information lend themselves both to remarkable creative accomplishments and to illusion and misperception.

Notes

[1]This is precisely what happened in the late nineteenth century, giving rise to the state and federal regulatory laws we now have.

[2]For empirical studies demonstrating high levels of support for major American institutions see: Jack Dennis, "Support for the Institution of Elections by the Mass Public," American Political Science Review 64 (September, 1970): 819-835; Jack Dennis, "Support for the Party System by the Mass Public," American Political Science Review 60 (September, 1966): 600-615.

[3]See especially Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, The American Voter (New York: Wiley, 1960); Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David Apter, ed., Ideology and Discontent (New York: Free Press, 1964); Campbell, et. al., Elections and the Political Order (New York: Wiley, 1966).

[4]For a study that tries to specify the conditions in which issues matter and a review of the previous literature see Gerald M. Pomper, "From Confusion to Clarity: Issues and American Voters, 1956-1968," American Political Science Review 56 (June, 1972): 415-428.

[5]For an exposition of the pertinent evidence and theory see David B. Truman, The Governmental Process (New York: Knopf, 1951), Chs. 11-15.

[6]Cf. Struggle for Justices: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America, Prepared for the American Friends Service Committee (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971); August Hollingshead and Frederick C. Redlich, Social Class and Mental Illness (New York: Wiley, 1958); Gideon Sjoberg, Richard A. Brymer, and Buford Farris, "Bureaucracy and the Lower Class," in Dean A. Yarwood, ed., The National Administrative System (New York: Wiley, 1971), pp. 369-377; Aaron Cicourel and John I. Kitsuse, The Educational Decision-Makers (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

[7]Besides the studies cited in footnote 6, see Erving Goffman, Asylums (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1961).

[8]Lewis A. Coser, "Some Functions of Deviant Behavior and Normative Flexibility," American Journal of Sociology 68 (September, 1962): 172-174; Robert A. Dentler and Kai T. Erikson, "The Functions of Deviance in Groups," Social Problems 7 (1959): 98-107.

[9]Joseph R. Gusfield, Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963); Seymour M. Lipset, "The Sources of the Radical Right," in Daniel Bell, ed., The New American Right (New York, 1955), pp. 166-234; Richard Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," ibid., pp. 33-55.