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For those scholars centrally concerned with studying American politics and government from outside the United States, the year 1986 contained two significant landmarks: the 150th anniversary of Alexis de Tocqueville's evergreen classic, *Democracy in America*, and the untimely death in his 50th year of John David Lees, who did so much to invigorate and sustain American political studies in the United Kingdom. This essay, dedicated to the memory of John Lees, is a meditation upon a theme that occupied him, and Tocqueville, and all the other students from abroad that the American political system has attracted since its beginning two hundred years ago. It recognizes the fundamental tendency of observers to seek analogies between their foreign object of study and the more familiar domestic life around them and attempts to explore obstacles that the American political system as a foreign object of study places in the path of analogical thinking.
about its politics. This is, therefore, in part a discussion of ways in which modern American politics is distinctive and, because of its distinctiveness, troublesome to foreign analysts. And not only to analysts: political leaders abroad, friends, adversaries, clients and allies of the United States must somehow reckon with the American political system and live with the consequences of its often mysterious behavior.

I.

I begin with an anecdote. During a friendly encounter with one of the most successful leaders of a Western European political party in the spring of 1985 I was asked to name the person "in charge of foreign affairs" for the American Democratic Party. This Western European leader remarked that he had known the man with this job - international relations - at the Democratic National Committee during the recent chairmanship of Charles Manatt, but since Manatt's departure as Democratic National Committee Chairman, the Western European leader assumed that a new person had come on board to head up foreign policy for the Democrats.
This was, to me, a most illuminating question. I should say at once that it came from a political leader who was - and is - highly intelligent, well educated, well informed about American politics in general, indeed a frequent and a welcome visitor to America, and favorably disposed to the United States. I have no doubt at all that as non-American politicians go, this leader's sympathetic acquaintance with American politics and political figures is nearly unequalled in all the world. Yet the question and the conversation surrounding it also left no doubt that there were structural features of the American political system that either had not come to his attention or that he had completely misunderstood. It may or may not be a well known feature of political science textbooks the world around to say that American political parties are different from European parties, and separation of powers regimes different from parliamentary regimes. No person of practical affairs has time, even if he or she has at one point read and grasped the texts, to draw each and every warrantable inference from these differences, especially in light of all that we have been hearing in the meantime about changes in the American parties -- even an inference as commonplace to Americans as that the Democratic National Committee has no standing
whatever as an influence on Democratic policy in foreign affairs.

So this was far from a silly question: it was a diagnostically valuable communication about how very difficult it is to understand American politics for someone embedded in a different political system.

In studying two bad moments in modern Anglo-American relations—Skybolt and Suez—Richard E. Neustadt came to much the same conclusion. Leaders in each country had misunderstood leaders in the other, he found. The bases for the misunderstandings were certainly not ill-will or suspicion or all the difficulties that cloud adversarial misperceptions, but rather false analogies of the leaders on both sides. He reported: "...these men dredged their perceptions of the other side's constraints out of their own heads. They reasoned by analogy and drew conclusions for the other side, and thereupon perceived what they projected...".

I offer a final set of observations—these more casual—in aid of the proposition that American politics poses great difficulties for foreign observers. Among the Tocqueville sesquicentennial celebrations at American universities a few included foreign commentators—usually persons of very great distinction—who were
asked to follow in Tocqueville's footsteps and to give their observations about democracy in America today. I was present at two of these panels on opposite sides of the country and was impressed by the frequency with which our foreign friends expressed annoyance with fundamental features of our constitutional order -- especially the separation of powers and consequent policy differences between Congress and President. "It is representative government", I heard a most intelligent Canadian panelist say, summing up much that had been said by others around him, "but is it a government?"

I came away from this meeting wondering whether our friendly outside commentators had grasped the fact that changes required to meet their objections would not be cosmetic in character, but would attack the very foundations of a political system they also professed in some respects to admire. There is no particular reason to think from internal evidence that they did grasp this point. And we must bear in mind that Americans who speak in the same vein seldom do much better. But Americans have readily to hand most of what it takes to inform themselves about the complexities and the routines of the American political system. Foreigners, reasoning so frequently from analogies about what constitutes "a
government" or "a party program" in the democratic systems with which they are most familiar, have far greater obstacles to overcome.

II.

So it will be my purpose here to catalogue some of these obstacles and to show, if possible, how some of the more obvious differences between the American and other political systems, differences with which school children are allegedly familiar, lead onward to subtler and less obvious or at least to more differences. It is a commonplace to remark on the extent to which the constitutional form of the American government departs from the global norm for liberal democracies, but it may nevertheless not be fully appreciated that formal differences have cumulative as well as individual effects.

I begin, therefore, with the separation of powers. Foreign observers are familiar enough with the fact that before international treaties are binding upon the United States they must be ratified by the U.S. Senate. This scarcely tells them enough of what they need to know about the U.S. Senate, or indeed about the Congress of the United States. It does not disclose, for example, that
the American Congress has no counterpart anywhere in the world in the autonomous power that it exercises as a collective entity. For those foreign observers who have grasped that Congress is an institution of enormous power, there is still difficulty in measuring the influence on that genuinely bicameral body of any particular member thereof. And so, frequently enough, overseas observers oscillate between weighing too heavily the public statements of a single Senator or Member of Congress, and dismissing too readily the rumblings they may discern from Capitol Hill.

Only detailed knowledge of the wiring diagram of the American national legislature can possibly resolve uncertainty about how to weigh any particular Congressional manifestation of opinion. For unlike the parliaments with which so many observers are familiar, the Congress has a highly consequential internal structure. And this is true, but true in different ways, for both the House and the Senate. Thus it matters very much -- but differently for each entity -- who sits on which relevant subcommittee, and not only substantive subcommittees but also appropriations subcommittees. Each of these units of the whole has its own political configuration. In some the members are dominated by staff and in some vice versa;
or the chairman counts for more or less than usual; or the most significant alliance runs between the chairman and the ranking minority member rather than between the chairman and members of his own party. Distributions of members on committees and subcommittees by age, by ideology, and by constituency, whether homogeneous or diverse in each dimension, will yield up different patterns of policy-making and indeed different substantive policies from subcommittee to subcommittee and from year to year as these features of the membership evolve and change.

Everyone reads the tea leaves of electoral trends after each biennial Congressional election, but seldom is the analysis carried downward far enough into the committees and subcommittees of Congress so that the running balance sheets of our foreign observers are well informed and up to date, whether they are interested in acid rain or short range nuclear missiles, or trade protection, or tourism, or whatever. Those observers who succeed in doing the necessary analyses are most emphatically not reasoning from analogies with their own system and have understood the singular and significant point that the American Congress is uniquely important among the legislatures of the world.\textsuperscript{5}
It is useful that this realization be at the center rather than at the periphery of the consciousness of our foreign observers. Those who are only peripherally aware of Congress and hence of the system of separation of powers tend to see Congress as a nuisance rather than as a legitimate actor in American policy making, as a factor, therefore, to be taken account of only after the main lines of policy are understood from the perspective of the lead agencies of the executive branch. Given the fact that the executive branch is itself so frequently divided -- even irreconcilably so -- on public policy, this relegation of Congress to the periphery of vision is understandable. But it is a mistake if for no other reason than that executive branch conflicts themselves frequently can be made intelligible by watching the way they are expressed in the Congressional arena.

Thus the first special feature of the American political system to which foreign observers might profitably attend -- the constitutional separation of powers -- has as its most acutely problematic manifestation the powers and activities of the United States Congress.

Let us now consider federalism, also an explicit feature of the American constitutional order. Just as
there are in the world at large nations other than the United States with constitutionally given separations of power, so also there are devolved federal systems other than the American one. Federalism interacts with the separation of powers, as well as making its independent contribution to the confusion of observers. As an independent factor, federalism means at a minimum that separate account must be taken of autonomous centers of power in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Schooling, transportation, and the maintenance of public order are examples of policy domains that can not possibly be understood without a disaggregated look at the activities, policies, decisions and inclinations of the several states.

At more than one point in American history, as is well known, the federal structure of the union served as a theoretical foundation for the shaping of the nation as a whole. In this connection I mention only three such episodes: the adoption of the Connecticut compromise in the constitutional convention which gave the United States a bicameral Congress, one branch of which, the Senate, provides equal representation for each state; attempts at nullification of federal laws by autonomous state action
during the troubled course of the Constitution's first six decades; and the Civil War itself.

More recently, it seems to me that the federal structure of the American political system contributes most importantly to foreign confusion about America because of the way in which federalism interacts with the American party system. Evidently a significant reason that Americans make do with only two major political parties to the great confusion of our much smaller Western European friends, among others, who are accustomed to what they perceive to be a far greater range of partisan choices, is because each of the two American major parties is in most respects a loose coalition of state parties. Americans find it possible to express many aspects of their diversity through politics by virtue of the fact that party structures are based primarily on local authority, and nominations to public office are locally made and sustained. Thus the American political system embraces not a two party system but rather close to a 100-party system. It is necessary to hedge on the exact number because of the anomalies of local political cultures: Nebraska, for example, maintains a state legislature that is not only unicameral but nonpartisan. In some parts of the country, public officials run
unopposed because of the weakness of opposition political parties. On the whole, however, it is possible to speak of Vermont Republicans and Vermont Democrats, and to compare and contrast them with Democrats and Republicans from South Carolina, Montana, New Jersey and so on.

States and regions have their own distinctive political cultures arising from the peculiarities of their original and subsequent settlement, their historic and contemporary economic interests, and the local political institutions that have emerged in their varied climates and soils. These cultures, these institutions, send to Congress widely varying representatives who in turn participate in the system of separation of powers, thus linking two of the exceptional elements of the American political order.

On top of these we have the peculiar institution of judicial review, a process by which judges appointed to serve during good behavior -- that is, until they retire or die or are impeached -- interpret the laws and the constitution and make final determinations about the legality of governmental acts. Opinions differ about the grounds upon which judicial review might be justified. It seems to me reasonably clear, in any event, that the existence of such an institution is unavoidable once a
Bill of Rights comes into being. These first ten amendments to the Constitution, ratified in 1791, contained plain texts mostly prohibiting Congress from acting so as to impair various enumerated rights reserved to inhabitants of the United States or the states. Who but the courts, empowered to hear and settle cases and controversies under the Constitution, were in a position to listen to complaints and adjudicate between differences of opinion on the subject of whether Congress had in any given instance violated these rights?

Thus from my perspective, a Bill of Rights carries with it an entailed structural consequence: It brings into being a strong form of judicial review. This structural feature in turn carries a great deal of baggage in its train. It inflates the importance of judges in the system. It makes of the law suit a preferred method for resolving issues of status -- rights and obligations -- as between government and citizen and citizen and citizen. It empowers lawyers as intermediaries of choice for settling claims.

By 1836 our visitor Tocqueville could exclaim over the richness and the obtrusiveness of the American legal culture, the prevalence of lawyers, and litigation. And so it has remained. Matters that are settled either by
custom or by informal operations of the status system in some political systems are settled by litigation and the explicit rendering of written opinions in the United States.

This seems, somehow, entirely apt for a system in which newcomers to the population have played such a large part and in which relations among socially heterogeneous elements must be peacefully maintained and more than occasionally renegotiated. The rigid social separations of a caste system might have worked in some circumstances to order the relations of a heterogeneous people, but not in the presence of a Bill of Rights that extends to cover all inhabitants. Under such a regime, the emergence of legalism as a means of introducing flexibility into human relations seems, if not inevitable, at least plausible.

Thus no fewer than three unusual features of the American political system are woven into the very center of our constitution. All three can be found in some form or other in other political systems, but not, I think, all three together. And each gives rise to further anomalies that have been institutionalized in important ways: the separation of powers to a uniquely powerful Congress, federalism to a devolved and variegated hundred-party system, and the Bill of Rights to an advanced form
of legalism as a method of ordering relations in the society.

III.

It seems almost unnecessary to argue that very great complexity is an emergent property of a political system thus designed and evolved. The complexity of the American political system may as well be directly acknowledged, however: it is, after all, frequently the complexity of the system that stymies proposed reforms based on false analogies with simpler systems.

Perhaps the classic such case is the perennial barrage of complaints about American national elections that they go on too long and are too expensive. What is needed, it is frequently said, is a national election on the British model where expenses are tightly controlled and the whole thing takes only six weeks. Advocates of this particular set of reforms never deal with the elementary fact that American elections require long ballots -- indeed sometimes very long ballots -- to accommodate all the electoral contests that take place concurrently with Presidential elections and that British Parliamentary elections with one contest per constituency
require very short ballots. To simplify elections entails simplification of the underlying governments which elections serve to populate. Complexity in democratic government — among other factors — requires complex electoral arrangements, and American government is both democratic and complex.

A second point along the same lines is perhaps less obvious, but equally consequential. This has to do with the sheer size of the decision-making community in American politics. One way to grasp the elemental force of this point is to pose the issue as an ambassador's problem. An ambassador newly arrived in most of the world's capital cities can, over a reasonable length of time, get to know virtually everybody who is instrumental to governmental decision-making. Even in the most greatly advanced and civilized democratic nations, there is a not impossibly large group of parliamentarians and civil servants who, to all intents and purposes, run the country. In authoritarian regimes, of course, the number of key actors is much smaller.

In the United States, that number is dauntingly large. It is large in part because policy-making is not contained within the government, or even within the interplay between the two political branches of
government, but spills out into think tanks, law firms, and interest groups. Different policies, from public housing to military procurement to the management of trade deficits, activate different congeries of political leaders, Congressional staff members, bureaucrats and interested bystanders. Over relatively short periods of time occupants of these varied roles change jobs, and new people are rotating in all the time.\textsuperscript{14} The idea that a new ambassador could get to know all the American players that matter to his country in any reasonable time seems very doubtful; and to attempt to have them all in for dinner, as ambassadors sometimes do, would bankrupt the home economies of all but the most robust nation states.

It is, of course, not merely the responsibility of newly arrived ambassadors to keep track of the players in American policy-making. In some respects, players are obliged to keep track of one another, and of the ongoing state of policy-making in the arenas that interest them. For subject matter specialists this is not an impossible job. For generalists, it may be. In any event, the very size of American policy-making communities frequently requires recourse to means of internal communication unheard of in other nations, namely, publication in the national general circulation press (as well as in trade
papers) as a device for sending messages among political leaders. This means that a rich menu of information about proposed, tentative and internally contested governmental action is regularly available in Washington to observers who can afford the price of the daily newspapers. It means also that many policies that become publicly known do not necessarily become the law of the land.

These are some of the consequences of the complexity and size of the American policy-making community: complicated elections and policy-making in the open, both processes importantly mediated by news media that are far more integral to elite political behavior than is commonplace abroad.

IV.

In very short compass it has been possible to generate a discussion of a sizeable number of features that not only underwrites the notion that there is indeed something exceptional about the American government but also shows in a preliminary way that many of these features do not stand alone but are linked functionally with others in a true system that has properties of
organic wholeness. This should discourage at least one possible strategy for dealing with the cognitive difficulties that strangers have in understanding American government, namely, to simplify American government itself.

I shall assume that for practical purposes constitutional or institutional reform is not a sensible method for curing these misunderstandings. I do believe, however, that it is not wholly the responsibility of observers abroad to learn as best they can what manner of beast the American government is. It is possible to conceive of an American sponsored program of international communication that addresses the sizeable problem of improving foreign knowledge about American government and its workings.

There are, as I see it, two main strategies that a nation might use in conducting a program of international communication. One is targeted to general publics, and sticks fairly close to the ebb and flow of current events. This is the strategy that supports and sustains such projects as the Voice of America, or overseas tourist bureaus, or that puts on publicity campaigns such as the "Let Poland Be Poland" effort of the early Reagan administration.16
An alternative strategy targets elites, and attempts a longer-range form of education. International visitor programs fall into this category, as do such efforts as the Rhodes Scholarships, the Harkness and Fulbright programs.

Clearly, a nation having large resources and global interests like the United States is obliged to pursue both strategies. There is an issue, however, having to do with the proper proportions in the mixture. I should argue that there has been an overinvestment in the first strategy and an underinvestment in the second in recent years.

Most government-sponsored activities targeted to general publics abroad attempt to reach populations that, as regards foreign affairs, are politically powerless, at best only marginally attentive, and short of memory. Moreover governmental efforts targeted in this fashion are bound to be utterly swamped by private sector cultural imperialism -- the cumulative effects of movies exported for foreign showing and U.S. television shows. In light of the great popularity of American popular entertainment abroad, there is little or nothing to be done by governments to add or detract from the images of American
life that leak through the pores of ordinary American movies or television programs.

Undervalued, meanwhile, is the strategy that targets elites abroad, and is oriented to political education of a more fundamental sort. The evidence suggests that a rudimentary understanding of the operations of our complex democratic republic is beyond the powers of more than a handful of those overseas political elites, friends and adversaries alike, who must deal with us on a serious basis. This even includes elites in client states overwhelmingly dependent on American goodwill, like Israel, and allies with "special relationships" like the U.K. and Canada.

On the whole political elites abroad live within systems that are authoritarian or parliamentary in character. Reasoning from analogy out of experience of their own systems in attempts to fathom what goes on in ours, as they continually do, leads them nowhere, or worse, to totally erroneous conclusions about what to expect of U.S. performance. Yet, it is, or should be, obvious, that the asymmetries between the United States and most nations are very great: Because of America's size and resourcefulness, when the U.S. fails to understand others, the others frequently suffer. When
others fail to understand the United States, the others still suffer.

Wisely, many foreign governments attempt to compensate for their lack of understanding of the intricacies of American government by hiring American advisors and lobbyists. This merely locates the difficulty back another step and the problem then becomes how to be a sophisticated and discerning client of one's American lobbyist. How to reconcile conflicting advice, or evaluate advice that is given without benefit of a second opinion? There seems to me to be an irreducible need for some greater level of understanding than currently prevails.

One approach, focused on the long range, asks whether a better job might be done in enhancing the teaching of American government and politics in universities abroad where foreign elites are educated. It is important to distinguish between what is available on a world wide basis for the study of American government and the existence of an overseas curriculum in "American studies", which commonly excludes politics and government and concentrates on American literature, culture and history. These latter are worthy, but different topics, and do not answer the need.
Nor does the vast preponderance of faculty and student exchange programs, which enable thousands of students from abroad to study engineering in America, or which sends hundreds of American faculty in every imaginable subject to universities in other countries to teach and do research. In such programs the study of American government and politics is a very small drop in the bucket.

Large scale philanthropy is probably needed to address the problem directly, philanthropy such as created the first chair in American government ever endowed outside the United States at Oxford two years ago. Creation of a number of such chairs is not beyond the resources of the American government. On a smaller scale, far more can and should be done to reach out to those students of American government who already teach abroad. At a bare minimum it should be possible to create a network of communication among such scholars in mitigation of what John Lees called "the loneliness of the long-distance observer of American politics". It should be possible also to provide for exchanges of syllabi, prompt and reliable reviews of new textbooks, the identification of significant new research on American political institutions and behavior, and the circulation of
important resource materials like election statistics or C-Span broadcasts of Congress in session.

At an intermediate level, research workshops, summer institutes, and seminars might be provided for teachers and for policy-makers in a way that combines travel and first-hand exploration with serious efforts at interpretation and discussion. The U.S. government now provides valuable opportunities for foreign leaders to junket around the United States in a way that combines tourism with occasional lectures and meetings with prominent citizens. If it were possible to add some intellectual meat and potatoes to these attractive hors d'oeuvres in the form of reading material and a focused seminar format over a month or six-week period perhaps more than pleasant memories would stick in the minds of those visitors who were interested in such a program.

When in 1980 I undertook to discover how much attention was paid to the teaching of American government in the higher education systems of other nations, the responses to my two hundred-odd letters of inquiry abroad were so sparse that I turned to American embassy cultural affairs officers in two European nations to supplement my survey with their own. Their replies broadly corroborated my own findings: a handful of relevant courses in the
higher education systems of Germany and Italy. This, to me, puts American democracy into world perspective; it should prompt further thoughts on what to do about it.
**FOOTNOTES**

* I thank Timothy S. Prinz, Maura Barrios and Nancy Palmer for their excellent help on this paper. Geoffrey Smith, Bernt Haas and Joseph LaPalombara supplied useful information and encouragement.


4. See, for example, Lloyd Cutler, "To Form A Government", *Foreign Affairs* 59 (Fall 1980), pp. 126-143, and James L. Sundquist, *Constitutional Reform and*


7. Jean Blondel identifies 17 federal systems in existence at the end of the 1960s: United States, Switzerland, Australia, Canada, West Germany, Austria, USSR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, India, Malaysia, Burma, Nigeria, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Mexico. He also finds 16 separation of powers systems, and though he does not explicitly identify them, these no doubt include the United States, the Philippines, Liberia, and 12 Latin American nations. The United States is the only member of both sets. See Jean Blondel, An Introduction to


10. Even its state capitol building in Lincoln is atypically built in the shape of a skyscraper rather than around the conventional dome.
11. For recent examples see: Jesse Choper, Judicial Review and the National Process: A Functional Reconsideration of the Role of the Supreme Court (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); John Hart Ely, Democracy and Distrust: A Theory of Judicial Review (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); and Alexander M. Bickel, The Least Dangerous Branch: The Supreme Court at the Bar of Politics, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). In Federalist 78, Alexander Hamilton says, "The complete independence of the courts of justice is peculiarly essential in a limited Constitution. By a limited Constitution, I understand one which contains certain specified exceptions to the legislative authority; such, for instance, as that it shall pass no bills of attainder, no ex post facto laws, and the like. Limitations of this kind can be preserved in practice no other way than through the medium of courts of justice, whose duty it must be to declare all acts contrary to the manifest tenor of the Constitution void. Without this, all the reservations of particular rights and privileges would amount to nothing."
12. Tocqueville wrote: "Democratic government favors the political power of lawyers. When the rich, the noble and the prince are excluded from the government, the lawyers then step into their full rights, for they are then the only men both enlightened and skillful, but not of the people, whom the people can choose." And a little later in the same discussion his famous statement occurs: "There is hardly a political question in the United States which does not sooner or later turn into a judicial one." Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 285-6, 290.


14. Assistant Secretaries of Cabinet departments, for example, stay an average of 2 years. Dean E. Mann with Jameson W. Doig, The Assistant Secretaries: Problems of

15. Illuminating on this point is the classic by Bernard C. Cohen, The Press and Foreign Policy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963). Cohen describes a number of instances where elites used the press to communicate their ideas to one another. For example, "A
freshman Congressman wanted to reach the State Department, the White House, and his fellow members of Congress with his foreign policy ideas, but he felt that his junior status in itself gave him no platform from which to reach his audience. So he chose to communicate to the foreign policy-making community by writing letters to the editor of the New York Times, for publication, hoping to make a substantive contribution to policy that way."

(p. 135)

Cohen quotes one State Department official as saying, "The embassies do not attempt to cover the news; they assume that people in the State Department read newspapers."

(p. 209)

16. A shrewd observer, John Spencer Nichols, writes,"... in 1984, Washington will spend more than three quarters of a billion dollars on propoganda, much of it on overtly persuasive programming that, for the most part, will fall on deaf ears. At the same time, President Ronald Reagan's policy has been slighting the more information-oriented programs that can better promote U.S. interests abroad."

John Spencer Nichols, "Wasting the Propoganda Dollar," Foreign Policy 56 (Fall 1984) pp. 129-130. See also Kenneth L. Adelman, "Speaking of America: Public


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