

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

325

**Political Errors at  
the End of the  
Twentieth Century**

**Part II:**

**Democratic Errors**

*By Russell Kirk*



The Heritage Foundation was established in 1973 as a non-partisan, tax-exempt policy research institute dedicated to the principles of free competitive enterprise, limited government, individual liberty, and a strong national defense. The Foundation's research and study programs are designed to make the voices of responsible conservatism heard in Washington, D.C., throughout the United States, and in the capitals of the world.

Heritage publishes its research in a variety of formats for the benefit of policy makers; the communications media; the academic, business, and financial communities; and the public at large. Over the past five years alone The Heritage Foundation has published some 1,500 books, monographs, and studies, ranging in size from the 927-page government blueprint, *Mandate for Leadership III: Policy Strategies for the 1990s*, to the more frequent "Critical Issues" monographs and the topical "Backgrounders," "Issue Bulletins," and "Talking Points" papers. Heritage's other regular publications include the *Business/Education Insider*, *Mexico Watch*, and *Policy Review*, a quarterly journal of analysis and opinion.

In addition to the printed word, Heritage regularly brings together national and international opinion leaders and policy makers to discuss issues and ideas in a continuing series of seminars, lectures, debates, briefings, and conferences.

Heritage is classified as a Section 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, and is recognized as a publicly supported organization described in Section 509(a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(A)(vi) of the Code. Individuals, corporations, companies, associations, and foundations are eligible to support the work of The Heritage Foundation through tax-deductible gifts.

*Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.*

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999  
U.S.A.  
202/546-4400

# Political Errors at the End of the Twentieth Century

## Part II: Democratic Errors

By Russell Kirk

In commencing this second lecture on the sorry state of political parties in these United States, I ask you to indulge me in quoting a passage from Edmund Burke's *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, a political tract, published in 1770, mordantly critical of the ways of George III with Parliament. In this famous essay Burke defines the phrase "political party":

When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle....

Party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed. For my part, I find it impossible to conceive that anyone believes in his own politics, or thinks them of any weight, who refuses to adopt the means of having them reduced into practice. It is the business of the speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect.

Now I confess myself to be one of those speculative philosophers, mentioned by Burke, whose business it is to mark the proper ends of government; I do not pretend to possess remedies for all the political ills to which our nation is heir. But I venture to criticize those politicians, in either great party, who, far from being philosophers in action, are merely what Burke and his contemporaries called "placemen": that is, seekers after the power and the emoluments of public office, not scrupulous as to the means by which advantages for themselves may be obtained. The demagogue seeks for himself a cozy place in the political sunshine.

In my previous lecture of this series, I touched upon some errors of the Republican Party, under George Bush, in affairs domestic and in affairs abroad. Today I turn to the errors of the Democratic Party, under leaders of recent years. For the past decade the Democrats have been an opposition party — that is, in opposition to the national Executive Force. In their opposition the Democrats, with some honorable exceptions, have gained little credit for themselves.

**Difficult Attitudes.** The Democratic party claims descent from Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans, but any remaining relationship to Jeffersonians is difficult to discern. In its origins, the Democratic Party at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the champion of the agricultural and rural interest, the defender of states' powers as opposed to political

---

Russell Kirk is a Distinguished Scholar at The Heritage Foundation.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on May 6, 1991, delivering the second in a series of four lectures examining "Political Errors at the End of the Twentieth Century." Part I, "Republican Errors," was published as *Heritage Lectures* No. 321.

ISSN 0272-1155. © 1991 by The Heritage Foundation.

centralization, the advocate of hard money and the opponent of national debt. Democratic attitudes nowadays are very different.

For at Democratic national conventions, the cry is all for grander federal expenditures and piling up of more debt, in consequence. With few exceptions, the leading Democrats would centralize everything, not bothering to reflect upon what the word "federal" signifies. For the most part ignoring the remnant of America's rural population, the Democrats are subservient to organized "minorities" in America's great decayed cities; upon the proletariat they are sedulous to confer more "entitlements," on humanitarian principles. Senator Moynihan and a handful of other Democratic legislators think seriously about our urban afflictions, seeking practical remedies, a difficult task; but most Democrats in office hold by the exploded notion that legislative bodies can sweep away social conundrums by throwing money at them.

**Democratic Majorities.** In presidential contests, the Democrats have won only one of the past six elections, and take a dim view of their own prospects in the election of 1992. The ethnic coalition from which they drew a great part of their support in the Roosevelt and Truman years has been dissolving; the labor unions that delivered a massive Democratic vote have been diminishing in numbers and in zeal; white voters in the Old South have shifted, a great many of them, to the Republican ticket; the Democratic party seems devoid of imagination and deprived of true leadership. How is it, then, that Democratic majorities prevail in House and Senate?

The answer to that question seems to be that in presidential elections, the voting public becomes fairly well aware of the issues in dispute and of the personalities of the candidates: massive television coverage, prolonged newspaper discussion, and candidates' debates give the typical voter some notion of what the Republican presidential candidate and the Democratic candidate respectively think and propose. So informed, the majority of citizens then vote for the Republican, having found him nearer to their hearts' desire.

For the Democrats, in their endeavor to cater to even the most unlikely "minority," have alienated the majority in nearly every state of the Union. The American public is conservative in its sentiments, for the most part; and when the contest occurs between candidates recognizably conservative and candidates recognizably liberal or radical, the public prefers the conservative. The governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, so often mentioned as a possible Democratic presidential candidate, at present is vigorously advocating a bill in the New York legislature to confer special privileges upon homosexuals. The fancied political advantage to be gained by pleasing pathics will be overwhelmed by public opinion if ever Mr. Cuomo confronts President Bush or any other Republican nominee who does not endeavor to reward sexual deviancy. What a genius the Democrats this past quarter-century have developed for misjudging public opinion!

**Republican Goal.** How is it, then, that nevertheless the Democratic party holds a majority, most of the time, in both Senate and House? Why, in the election of Senators and Representatives, the typical voter is ill informed about the views of the respective candidates, and knows next to nothing of their voting records, supposing them to be incumbents of the offices at stake. The voter tends to approve a candidate according to what the candidate claims to have accomplished by way of securing benefits at federal expense for his state or his congressional district, regardless of the chief political issues of the hour. Also the voter in many such elections is powerfully influenced by name-recognition, so that Democratic incumbents, long

entrenched in office, are almost impossible to dislodge in many districts and states. In the long run, possession of the executive branch of the federal government by Republicans will work to erode the Democratic majority in both legislative houses. But to achieve that success, Republican presidential candidates might have to forgo the goal of winning all fifty states for their personal triumph, and instead spend money and time upon electing senators and representatives. Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush, although virtually certain to be elected by wide popular and electoral majorities, somewhat neglected their duty of trying hard to bring in Republican Congresses — or at least their campaign managers failed them in that respect.

However that may be, time is not on the side of the Democratic Party: their leaders talk the language of yesteryear. Mr. Carter, addressing the Democratic convention that had nominated him in 1976, made promises and employed a rhetoric that would have gone down very well in 1932 or 1936, but were absurdly archaic in the very different era of the Bicentenary. Nevertheless, Mr. Carter won the election — not because of what he said, but in spite of it. His successors as Democratic presidential candidates have behaved with equal absurdity — being their own worst enemies — but did not enjoy the good fortune to run against a Republican candidate who fancied that Poland was not Soviet dominated. Like the Bourbons, the Democrats since F.D.R. have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.



Time has been when the Democratic leaders were great men. One thinks of John C. Calhoun, or Grover Cleveland. It has been otherwise since World War II. An impartial observer — from Mars, say — necessarily would regard with some misgiving a party headed by Lyndon Johnson, whose infamy has been exposed by careful biographers; or a party whose most conspicuous United States Senator nowadays is the amorous and bibulous gentleman from Massachusetts. Yet have there not been Democratic leaders of recent decades who were veritable Galahads or Percivals, you may inquire? Why, there were some honest and able men among those leaders; yet not, perhaps, precisely those eminent Democrats whom the party panegyrists delight to honor.

Take, for instance, the Honorable Hubert Humphrey, long United States Senator from Minnesota, who since his death has been politically canonized. Once upon a time I debated Mr. Humphrey before a huge audience in Ann Arbor. I found him an amiable man, courteous, forthright when assailed by a band of student *fidelistas* in the crowd; but excessively fond of the sound of his own voice, for which indeed he apologized to me at the debate's end. Yet Senator Humphrey did not lead a career free of all stain and reproach. I do not refer to peccadillos of the sort committed by Mr. Gary Hart: rather, I mean a conflict of interest of the gravest kind, in which Humphrey put his own interest above the interest of the foreign policy of the United States — a case involving the security of the North Atlantic Treaty allies.

**Primary Defeat.** What I am about to tell you never has been published before, although some reference to it will appear in my memoirs. Let me preface my narration by reminding you, ladies and gentlemen, of the hard-fought Democratic primary in West Virginia during the year 1960. Senator Kennedy was pitted against Senator Humphrey; a vast amount of money was expended by both presidential aspirants. Eugene McCarthy, a Democrat as honest as he is interesting, said to me once that this West Virginia primary was the most corrupt episode in the political history of the United States. However that may be, Humphrey

lost the primary, if somewhat narrowly; therefore he lost his party's presidential nomination. And he was left forlorn with a great mass of West Virginia debts upon his shoulders.

So much for that, just now. Our scene shifts from West Virginia to Turkey; the events to be described occur three to four years after Hubert Humphrey's defeat. I am about to quote to you, *verbatim*, a report made to me by a retired Foreign Service officer who at the time of those events was assigned to duties in the Near East and the Middle East. I have known this former diplomat for a good many years and have complete confidence in his veracity.

"One of the kindest and most helpful men in the Senate," my informant commences, "was Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota."

He seemed sensitive to the national interest, willing to resist special interests of the financial or ethnic sort, and always ready to understand State's views, to advise, and to help when he could. He even "condescended" to me socially in the grand old meaning of that word.

In the mid-fifties, the legendary hero Ismet Inonu, successor to Kemal Ataturk, surprised the world by permitting a free and fair national election, and by giving up power peacefully when he lost to Adnan Menderes. Menderes, with broad peasant support, won handily and installed his own regime in place of that of Inonu, who became leader of the Opposition. Within a short time the Menderes government became the stage of typical Third World financial corruption, much of it involving rake-offs in alleged "development" contracts with foreign firms. When Menderes began to deprive the Opposition of its political rights and even threatened the personal safety of Inonu, the armed forces, feeling that their role in society had been betrayed, threw out Menderes and his friends and reinstalled Inonu.

Inonu, whose administration was reasonably honest by Turkish standards, had the backing of the Army in bringing to trial and punishment Turkish politicians and officials believed to have been among the worst of the grafters. In one of many cases, several officials were punished for accepting large bribes from an American ("The Promoter") who had contracted to provide a complete small steel mill to Turkey. It was shown in the trial that the "mill" was actually the old, rusted, and broken-down hardware from a plant on the southern U.S. coast which had been closed as obsolete and sold by the owners to The Promoter for one or two million dollars; for the plant owners it was of value only as scrap. The Turkish regime was no more than amused when The Promoter, who would have been arrested for fraud, bribery, and conspiracy if he had entered Turkey, formally asked the Turkish government for his final payment of ten million dollars under the contract. He pointed out that the machinery in question had been delivered, even though it was just rusting on the docks in Turkey. The Turkish government refused, noting that expert testimony in the trial had proved the machinery to be inoperable, worthless, and not as specified in the contract. It suggested that if The Promoter wished to pursue his claim further, he follow the contract and file suit in a Turkish court, and that if he

felt this clause was not binding, that he join the Turkish government in submitting the dispute to international commercial arbitration through established private institutions. The Promoter refused to accept that he had not fulfilled his contract, refused to pursue the matter through either of the suggested channels, and again demanded early payment. The Turks paid no further attention to him; they were convinced he would lose an arbitration and be assessed the costs of arbitration.

The annual foreign-aid legislation then came before the Senate. To our stupefied surprise, Senator Humphrey offered and pushed to adoption an amendment so worded as to apply only to The Promoter's claim, to the effect that no U.S. military assistance would be provided to any country under the bill as long as claims by an American contractor for goods or services already provided had not been met in full. It was further specified that the alleged quality of goods/services delivered could not affect the requirement, nor could any provisions of a contract providing for means of adjudicating or arbitrating the amount claimed. This was called The Humphrey Amendment, and was an object of amusement or outrage at State and on Capitol Hill, but was never the subject of press inquiry, analysis, or interest. The White House and State queried Humphrey's staff about the possibility of a compromise, but were told that if Senator Humphrey were to be kept on board the entire foreign-aid project, the Amendment must become law. Our own bureau queried the staffs of Senators Fulbright and Mansfield to see if they couldn't make Humphrey back off or at least compromise. One of Fulbright's top staffers told me that Humphrey, very uncharacteristically, refused to discuss the Amendment, except to say that it was a matter of principle to avoid the robbing of one of his constituents (The Promoter), and that he, the Senator, would not change a word of it. Humphrey's prestige was such that he easily beat back the half-hearted move to reconsider the Amendment, and the Administration did not want to tangle with him over a measly ten million dollars.

The bill became law with the Amendment. Reluctantly we told the Turks that deliveries of new material as provided in the legislation and as planned by NATO could not be made until The Promoter was paid. The Turks, who were as loyal as any ally we had, and Inonu, who had always co-operated with us fully, pointed out the effect on the Turkish armed forces of the delay of scheduled deliveries, and, conversely, the effect on Turkish public opinion as to both the U.S. and Inonu government if the money were paid to The Promoter. There was nothing we could do. Finally Inonu had to ask his Parliament for ten million dollars in public funds to pay The Promoter before hundreds of millions of dollars worth of NATO materials could be delivered. The Opposition pointed out with gusto the overwhelming proof advanced in earlier legal proceedings that the project was one of bribery and fraud from the beginning, and that the machinery was nothing but scrap. Inonu swallowed the dishonor, got the money, paid The Promoter, and got the arms and ammunition.

While the legislation was still before the Senate, we enlisted the help of a friendly office of the FBI, which had helped us in the past, to check The Promoter's background on this and earlier deals, in the hope of finding something which could be used to influence other Senators. The world-weary FBI man, an old friend, who had conducted most of the search and directed it all, came in to tell me that The Promoter was quite shady and could be termed a boardroom confidence man, but that he had never been convicted — only a couple of unpursued indictments in minor scandals. As we talked I opined that The Promoter just couldn't by himself wield that much influence with the Senator — that there must be a more weighty partner in the woodpile. I asked him if he could, strictly on his own and to satisfy my personal curiosity, try to dig up such a partner. The FBI man came in a week or two later, warned me that this meeting with me was not occurring, and informed me that there was a partner on halves with The Promoter who bought in for a pittance during the past year, and that the partner's name was the maiden name of Muriel Humphrey.

During the rest of my assignment at State we continued to receive the best possible co-operation from Senator Humphrey in all other matters, and his personal affability was undiminished. On reflection, and considering the common gossip that Humphrey was tragically in debt following his primary collision with the Kennedy moneybags, I could not work up much indignation against the Senator personally. I saved my indignation for the interface between foreign aid and the American political system, and slowly began to drift toward the conclusion that any good done by foreign aid was outweighed by the damage it caused here and abroad.

At this point, my friend's narrative ceases. Permit me to comment that I have no animus against Hubert Humphrey. I recount this episode merely to suggest that even the more genuine of democratic idols may be found to have feet of clay. At least Senator Humphrey needed the money in question. During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, probably the richest man in the Senate was the most corrupt of senators: Kerr of Oklahoma, whose devious enriching ways are candidly described by his lieutenant, Bobby Baker, in the latter scoundrel's memoirs. To perceive how deep in peculation was President Johnson himself, assisted by his agents Bobby Baker and Billy Sol Estes, one may turn to the recent memoirs of a Republican of integrity, Senator Carl Curtis, entitled *Forty Years Against the Tide*.

Doubtless a number of persons present today have read Henry Adams' novel *Democracy*. In that book, an elderly diplomat from Eastern Europe grows exasperated with a pompous American senator whose character is suspect. Baron Jacobi is referring to political corruption about the year 1870:

You Americans believe yourselves to be exempted from the operation of general laws. You care not for experience. I have lived seventy-five years, and all that time in the midst of corruption. I am corrupt myself, only I do have the courage to proclaim it, and you others have it not. Rome, Paris, Vienna, Petersburg, London, all are corrupt; only Washington is pure! Well, I declare to you that in all my experiences I



than the Republicans, the Democrats have become suspect to a great part of the American public. They are suspected of ignoring the national interest.

This present decade, just begun, will be a time when the United States of America must make irrevocable decisions, in affairs domestic and affairs international. We would be foolish to fancy that a *pax Americana* will settle upon the world. Rather, our situation is very like that of Britain just two centuries ago. As Burke wrote then:

I despair neither of the public fortune nor of the public mind. There is much to be done undoubtedly, and much to be retrieved. We must walk in new ways, or we can never encounter our enemy in his devious march. We are not at an end of our struggle, nor near it. Let us not deceive ourselves; we are at the beginning of great troubles.

**Party Reform.** Just so. In our time of troubles, either great political party requires high prudence, high imagination, high honesty. Surely the Bush Administration, which I criticized somewhat mordantly in the course of my preceding Heritage lecture in this series, ought to be the object of severe but honest scrutiny by the opposing Democrats. There are yet active in the Democratic ranks many honorable men and women capable of working a party reform. May they come forward, for the sake of the Republic!

After all, reform is within the power of honest members of the party. Here I quote Burke's *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* once more:

Until a confidence in government is re-established, the people ought to be excited to a more strict and detailed attention to the conduct of their representatives. Standards for judging more systematically upon their conduct ought to be settled in the meetings of counties and corporations. Frequent and correct lists of the voters in all important questions ought to be procured.

By such means something may be done. By such means it may appear who those are that, by an indiscriminate support of all administrations, have totally banished all integrity and confidence out of public proceedings; have confounded the best men with the worst; and weakened and dissolved, instead of strengthening and compacting, the general frame of government.

From the precinct and the township upward, conceivably, the Democratic Party may be chastened and reinvigorated. Certain Democratic office-holders need to be taught afresh the old lesson, "Honesty is the best policy." In a genuine parliamentary system, at least two strong and principled parties are required. A party dominated by frauds and fantastics cannot long endure. If the Democrats fail at reform, some other party, the nature of which cannot now be predicted, will supplant the Democratic Party. That is what happened to the Liberal party in Britain. Democratic reform lacking, the American public may be tempted to shout an old Republican partisan cry: "Rotten eggs and dead cats are good enough for Democrats!"

