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The Psychology of Being Powerless

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People believe that the great background conditions of modern life are beyond our power to influence. The proliferation of technology is autonomous and cannot be checked. The galloping urbanization is going to gallop on. Our over-centralized administration, both of things and men, is impossibly cumbersome and costly, but we cannot cut it down to size. These are inevitable tendencies of history. More dramatic inevitabilities are the explosions, the scientific explosion, and the population explosion. And there are more literal explosions, the dynamite accumulating in the slums of a thousand cities and the accumulating stockpiles of nuclear bombs in nations great and small. The psychology, in brief, is that history is out of control. It is no longer something that we make but something that happens to us. Politics is not prudent steering in difficult terrain, but it is—and this is the subject of current political science—how to get power and keep power, even though the sphere of effective power is extremely limited and it makes little difference who is in power. The psychology of historical powerlessness is evident in the reporting and the reading of newspapers: there is little analysis of how events are building up, but we read—with excitement, spite, or fatalism, depending on our characters—the headlines of crises for which we are unprepared. Statesmen cope with emergencies, and the climate of emergency is chronic.

I believe myself that some of these historical conditions are not inevitable at all but are the working out of willful policies that aggrandize certain interests and exclude others, that subsidize certain styles and prohibit others. But of course, *historically*, if almost everybody believes the conditions are inevitable, including the policy-makers who produce them, then they are inevitable. For to cope with emergencies does not mean, then, to support alternative conditions, but further to support and institutionalize the same conditions. Thus, if there are too many cars, we build new highways. If administration is too cumbersome, we build in new levels of administration. If there is a nuclear threat, we develop anti-

missile missiles. If there is urban crowding and anomie, we aggravate it by stepping up urban renewal and social work. If there are pollution and slums of engineering because of imprudent use of technology, we subsidize Research and Development by the same scientific corporations working for the same ecologically irrelevant motives. If there is youth alienation, we expand and intensify the processing of youth in schools. If the nation-state is outmoded as a political form, we make ourselves into a mightier nation-state.

In this self-proving round, the otherwise innocent style of input-output economics, games-theory strategy, and computerized social science becomes a trap. For the style dumbly accepts the self-proving program and cannot compute what is not mentioned. Individual differences, belief and distrust, history, landscape, the available time, space, and energy of actual people—such things tend to be left out. Then the solutions that emerge ride even more roughshod over what has been left out.

Indeed, at least in the social sciences, the more variables one can technically compute, the less likely it is that there will be prior thinking about their relevance to human life. Our classic example—assuming that there will be a future period to which we provide classic examples—is Herman Kahn on Thermonuclear War.

But what is the psychology of feeling that one is powerless to alter basic conditions? What is it as a way of being in the world? Let me list half a dozen kinds of responses to being in a chronic emergency; unfortunately, in America they are exhibited in rather pure form. I say unfortunately, be-



cause a pure response to a chronic emergency is a neurotic one; healthy human beings are more experimental or at least muddling. Instead of politics, we now have to talk psychotherapy.

BY DEFINITION, governors cannot forfeit the symbol that everything is under control, though they may not think so. During President Kennedy's administration, Arthur Schlesinger expressed the problem poignantly by saying "One simply *must* govern." The theme of that administration was to be "pragmatic"; but by this they did not mean a philosophical pragmatism, going toward an end in view from where one in fact is and with the means one has; they meant turning busily to each crisis as it arose, so that it was clear that one was not inactive. The criticism of Eisenhower's administration was that it was stagnant. The new slogan was "get America moving."

This was rather pathetic; but as the crises have become deeper, the re-

sponse of the present administration is not pathetic but, frankly, delusional and dangerous. It is to *will* to be in control, without adjusting to the realities. They seem to imagine that they will in fact buy up every economy, police the world, social-engineer the cities, school the young. In this fantasy they employ a rhetoric of astonishing dissociation between idea and reality, far beyond customary campaign oratory. For example, they proclaim that they are depolluting streams, but they allot no money; forty "demonstration cities" are to be made livable and show the way, but the total sum available is \$1.5 billion. (John Lindsay says we need \$50

billion for New York alone); the depressed area of Appalachia has been reclaimed, but the method is an old highway bill under another name; poor people will run their own programs, but any administrator is fired if he tries to let them do it; they are suing for peace, but they despatch more troops and bombers. This seems to be just lying but, to my ear, it is nearer to magic thinking. The magic buoys up the self-image; the activity is either nothing at all or brute force to make the problem vanish.

In between the ideality and the brutality there occurs a lot of obsessional warding off of confusion by methodical calculations that solve problems in the abstract, in high modern style. A precise decimal is set beyond which the economy will be inflationary, but nobody pays any mind to it. Eighty-seven per cent of low income nations but only 48 per cent of middle income nations have had violent political disturbances. A precise kill-ratio is established beyond which the Vietcong will fold

up, but they don't. Polls are consulted for the consensus, like the liver of sheep, without noticing signs of unrest and even though the administration keeps committing itself to an irreversible course that allows for no choice. And they are everlastingly righteous.

In more insane moments, however, they manufacture history out of the whole cloth, so there is no way of checking up, at all. They create incidents in order to exact reprisals; they invent (and legislate about) agitators for demonstrations and riots that are spontaneous; they project bogey-men in order to arm ~~to~~ the teeth. Some of this, to be sure, is cynical, but that does not make it less mad; for, clever or not, they still avoid the glaring realities of world poverty, American isolation, mounting urban costs, mounting anomie, and so forth. I do not think the slogan "The Great Society" is cynical; it is delusional.

Perhaps the epitome of will operating in panic—like a case from a textbook in abnormal psychology—has been the government's handling of the assassination of John Kennedy. The Warren Commission attempted to "close" the case, to make it not exist in the public mind. Thus it hastily drew firm conclusions from dubious evidence, disregarded counter-evidence, defied physical probabilities, and perhaps even accepted manufactured evidence. For temporary lull it has run the risk of total collapse of public trust.