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## CORRUPTION IN AMERICA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The word "corruption" itself, as the numerous definitions attached to it in the *Oxford English Dictionary* attest, is an elusive and ambiguous one. For some it is a strongly normative concept, describing an illegal or immoral transgression of prevailing mores for the benefit of oneself or one's group. In this sense the presence of corruption usually is as much dependent upon the stance of the observer as it is on the act of the transgressor: I am reality-oriented; you are self-interested; he is corrupt. Often the corrupt do not regard themselves as such; and rightly so, by their own frame of values. Often enough (as in tyrannies) the most corrupt act is to accord with law and custom; to violate or subvert authority may well be the higher morality. Nor is corruption, even when accepted as such, necessarily harmful. No less than reform, as Samuel Huntington observed, it "may . . . be functional to the maintenance of a political system."<sup>1</sup>

Corruption has been understood in yet another sense: as something natural, organic, an ineluctable part of the business of living. The trouble with the house of politics, Mr. Dooley observed, "is that it is occupied by human bein's. If 'twas a vacant house it cud aisily be kept clean."<sup>2</sup> Lord Acton's more elegant aphorism about power and corruption conveys the same meaning, but it does so in the darker, more pessimistic sense of the inevitable decay and degeneration of institutions—a process that has been commented upon by political philosophers since Plato.

These semantic and philosophical problems, and indeed the

larger question of the functional or dysfunctional character of corruption, can be left to those better suited to deal with them. The intention here is to offer instead a historian's-eye view of the place that corruption in the popular sense of the word—the misuse of power for personal gain—has had in the history of American public life.

Historians appear to have an unconquerable affinity for triads. They speak of ancient, medieval, and modern history; or, in the more parochial American case, of the colonial period, the nineteenth century and modern America. The following remarks, too, will focus on these three stages of the American past.

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Along with their Bibles, their charters and their desires for freedom and fortune, the early English settlers in America brought with them a distinctive set of attitudes toward government. In light of what was to follow, their outlook was a strikingly traditional one, steeped in the social assumptions of late medieval and early modern Europe. Huntington has observed that in many respects early American government was a Tudor polity. As such it inherited principles of deference, of hierarchy—and of public office being one's property rather than a public trust—which were characteristic of English and other early modern European governments.<sup>3</sup>

John Winthrop may have had religious attitudes that upset his Church of England contemporaries, but there was nothing avant-garde about his view of power and authority. For all his Puritan sense of early seventeenth century England as a corrupt society (he was convinced that he lived in "evil and declining times"), his belief in hierarchy and good order would have gladdened the heart of Marsilius of Padua. "God Almighty," he wrote on his way to the New World, "in His most holy and wise providence has so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times, so some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection."<sup>4</sup>

The closed, aristocratic system of politics in eighteenth century England, like that of seventeenth century France, fostered a rich system of corruption. Crown offices, parliamentary votes and the franchise of the sparse electorate were openly and expensively for sale. What Bernard Bailyn has called a "private, informal

constitution" of patronage and influence prevailed in that hermetic public life.<sup>5</sup>

The upper levels of colonial American government closely paralleled eighteenth century England in developing an elaborate system of nepotism, sale of offices and kept supporters in the legislature. What has been called the anglicization of American society, that is, the self-conscious aping of the mores and institutions of the mother country, was well advanced by the mid eighteenth century. It is revealing that the same political vocabulary—faction, clique, junto—flourished on both sides of the Atlantic. Great New York families like the Delanceys and the Livingstons, Crown and assembly (or "country") parties in the colonies everywhere, jostled for place and perquisites as did Whig and Tory magnates in Sir Lewis Namier's England. As late as 1811, the Virginia planter John Campbell wrote to his son David in terms that would have been quite familiar to an English squire sitting for a rotten borough: "I have heard with much pain that you have not recovered your health yet. Would a session in the legislature be of benefit to you?"<sup>6</sup>

Those opposing the Crown in eighteenth century England often focused their attention on political corruption. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, who wrote the influential "Cato Letters" of the 1720s, declaimed: "Public corruptions and abuses have grown upon us; fees in most, if not in all, offices are immensely increased; places and employments, which ought not to be sold at all, are sold for treble values." This was an attack not only on the abuse of aristocratic politics but on aristocratic politics itself. As such it struck a responsive note with those who were creating the American Revolution, and the "Cato Letters" became a rhetorical model for the growing colonial assault on the imperial system.<sup>7</sup>

In fact the American colonies were remote and different enough from the motherland to be spared the full impact of this politics of aristocracy and monarchy. The special qualities of American life—the availability of land, the shortage of labor, the lack of a past—already were stripping that system of much of its force. Refractory colonial legislatures steadily chipped away at the patronage powers of the royal governors; the electoral system by the mid eighteenth century was far broader and more representative than its English counterpart.

Given the changing character of American public life and the nature of eighteenth century English government, it is understandable that the American revolutionaries teamed corruption with tyranny as the major themes in their assault on the colonial system. They found particularly congenial a view of themselves as incorruptible advocates of republicanism, in the imagined mold of the ancient Roman Republic. The great popular hero of the early United States was not Benjamin Franklin, that lovable man of humble origins and ready adapter to the corrupt ways of eighteenth century politics and court life. Rather it was the austere, incorruptible, classically republican George Washington who was first in the hearts of his countrymen.

Of course the American revolutionaries were doing more than recreating republican Rome. The emerging model of American government, where power and legitimacy were held, as it were, on loan from their ultimate repository—the people, was in fact a dramatic inversion of the hierarchical, deferential theory that underlay the politics of the rest of the eighteenth century western world.

Yet this turned out to be a mixed legacy. Republicanism, liberty, sovereignty stemming from the people remained important underlying principles of American public life. The accompanying model of austere public incorruptibility met a far less happy fate. None of the Founders (except perhaps Alexander Hamilton) would have thought of doing what President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana did: have inscribed on the base of his statue in front of the Law Courts in Accra the inscription “Seek ye first the Kingdom of Politics and all else shall be added unto you.” But in the democratic politics of nineteenth century America this would not have been inappropriate at all.<sup>8</sup>

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The corruption that so thoroughly permeated American politics and government in the nineteenth century had certain things in common with the misdoings of the eighteenth century public order. It reflected and enhanced the constant inflow of new men and new interests into public life and it served as a means of perpetuating established interests. But there the resemblance ends. Nineteenth century American corruption in fact was part

of a very different political system, far more democratic and far more deeply worked into the life of the society than any that preceded it.

Massive, popular political parties and an elaborate system of local, state and national officeholding, related to the needs of the party system rather than to the needs of government, rose through the nineteenth century. It was estimated in the 1870s that one in twelve heads of households in New York City had a public position. The lawyer David Dudley Field, an opponent of efforts to prohibit civil servants from participating in politics, pointed out in 1877 that there were more than 140,000 federal, state and local officeholders in New York—one in eight voters. “The exclusion of public servants from political action,” he concluded, “would disfranchise a great body of our fellow-citizens.”<sup>9</sup>

The vocabulary of nineteenth century American politics is that of a vigorous, active institution, filled with words drawn from the home, the farm, the factory. By the 1820s American candidates were running for office; in England they still stood. Politicians did more than run: they dodged, bolted, backed and filled, bluffed. There were planks, platforms, favorite sons, party wheelhorses and lots of buncombe—soon to be shortened to bunk. And very soon there were gerrymanders, bosses, machines, lobbyists, repeaters, floaters, graft, boodle, loot and rakeoffs.

This democratization of politics—and of corruption—served purposes beyond the timeless one of enriching the participants. Widespread payoffs lessened the need for prior wealth as a condition of entry into politics or government. And the monetary lures of a public career may have kept the level of nineteenth century American politics and government from being worse than it was—or, occasionally, made it as good as it was.

Nineteenth century American political corruption was closely linked as well to the sustenance of increasingly large and costly political parties, which for all their faults did provide broader representation of a diverse (if white and male) electorate than any previous system. As political machines became more and more highly organized, so too was the collection of the funds that sustained them. The machines and their bosses became what James Russell Lowell called “majority manufacturers” and like their counterparts in industry they needed growing amounts

of capital to pay for an ever larger and more complex system of production. As Tammany boss William Tweed observed: "The money . . . was distributed around in every way, to everybody, and paid for everything, and was scattered throughout the community." Officeholder kickbacks and political workers on the public payroll—in the customhouses, post offices and the like—were the primary sources of party support during the mid-century decades. In 1878 the secretary of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee asked all federal officeholders making \$1,000 a year or more to contribute at least 1% of their salaries. Twelve separate dunning letters went from the New York Republican Committee to federal employees in 1880. Payments for congressional, judicial and other party nominations were more and more systematic, with fixed schedules.<sup>10</sup>

Massive contractor kickbacks for public works and payments to avoid the growing licensing and regulatory apparatus of late nineteenth century America were increasingly important sources of funds. And by the turn of the century large-scale corporate contributions had become a major source of money for state and national elections.<sup>11</sup>

Gilded Age corruption in government, as in politics, is a familiar theme. The dreary litany of wrongdoing includes the *Crédit Mobilier* affair, in which a number of prominent men (including Vice President Schuyler Colfax and Congressmen James G. Blaine and James A. Garfield) accepted stock in the Union Pacific's construction company; the Belknap scandal, in which the secretary of war took bribes from an Indian post trader; the Whiskey Ring, an elaborate system of collusion between internal-revenue agents and whiskey distillers designed to avoid the federal excise tax on alcohol; and the Star Route scandals, where lucrative western mail delivery franchises were given to favored contractors.

This surge of scandal usually is linked to the slackened morality of post-Civil-War American life and to a burgeoning capitalism that contaminated the political system. But it had another dimension as well. It involved activities that were part of the post-Civil-War expansion of the national government: the Pacific Railroad, Indian policy, excise taxes, the postal services. The late nineteenth century American polity had neither the ideological nor the organizational means to deal with this

growth. Elitist manipulation and control belonged to the rejected aristocratic governmental model of the past; the bureaucratic, administrative state lay in the future. Bribery and kickbacks were a form of accommodation, a way of getting things done—much as the raw bribery required of and provided by multinational corporations today is an apparent necessity in the anarchic world of international dealings.<sup>12</sup>

The American polity by the late eighteenth century was unique in the western world in its commitment to republican rule, popular sovereignty and civic rectitude. By the same token its yeasty mix of administrative weakness and large-scale corruption seemed to set the United States apart by the end of the nineteenth century. In nineteenth century America the springs of government were weakened, in Moisei Ostrogorski's phrase. Government in nineteenth century England underwent a dramatically different evolution: from its eighteenth century state—what Edmund Burke called a "loaded compost heap of corrupt influence"—to a model of probity and efficiency, one fit to rule an empire. Elsewhere in Europe too (in Prussia, Austria, France) the professional civil servant and the bureaucratic world in which he moved became the governmental norm. European government went more or less directly from the nepotism and purchased offices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the routinized, professional bureaucracy of modern times.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to say that the civil-service concept failed to take root in nineteenth century America as well. Civil-service reform in the United States was close in time and spirit to its British counterpart. Rule by an educated social elite, the ideals of government economy and efficiency, a new attitude toward morality in government derived from the religious and social values of middle-class Victorian culture—these were the stock in trade of American civil-service reformers no less than of their opposite numbers in England.

But there was a revealing difference in the English and American civil-service-reform movements. The object of the British assault was the old system of aristocratic nepotism and sale of office. The target of the American movement was democracy—or at least its excesses. Insofar as civil-service reform and a professional bureaucracy succeeded in England, they coincided with

the values, interests and growing political power of that country's middle class. The American equivalent was far less successful because it went against the grain of increasingly powerful mass party machines and a deep popular distrust of government divorced from politics. England's aristocratic past made possible the triumph of efficient, honest bourgeois government; America's democratic polity assured its failure. American critics of civil-service reform could argue persuasively that competitive written examinations would be "practically limiting entry to the graduates of colleges" and thus narrow, not broaden, access to government. Indiana Senator Oliver P. Morton condemned the "restlessness and the spirit of change" of elite reformers in comparison with the broad, middle-class "balance wheel in our political machine."<sup>14</sup>

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The classic nineteenth century modes of American political and economic corruption—graft, bribery, kickbacks and the like—continue to lead a hearty life in American society, but other modes of corruption have become conspicuous in the twentieth century world. They are the concomitants of the rise of large bureaucratic institutions in both the public and the private sectors and of the spread of political ideology as a primary form of self-definition.

The corruption that characterizes bureaucracies consists of intricate webs of nepotism, subtle forms of favoritism and preferment, fierce jockeying for place and status, and an assumption on the part of the participants that they are entitled as of right to tenure in office and a certain level of income, status and perquisites. In this sense the twentieth century world of public and private bureaucracy is reminiscent of nothing so much as the early modern state.

But there is something new that is peculiarly the province of our own time, and that is the presence as well of strong ideological commitments—sometimes in conjunction with bureaucracy, sometimes against it—that generate their own forms of malfeasance.

The corruption attendant upon bureaucracy and ideology has gone furthest in the twentieth century totalitarian states: Fascist Italy and Spain, Nazi Germany, the Marxian Socialist states of

Eastern Europe. *The New Class* by Milovan Djilas is perhaps the best formulation of the prevailing style of governance and its characteristic corruption in those societies.

But the "new class" may be found in the more open societies of the West as well: in government, business corporations, foundations, universities. The behavior of those who staff these institutions is for the most part muted and benign, but they are still susceptible to the temptations that beset any member of a large, impersonal, amorphous bureaucracy. Consider, for example, the activities and life style of the Ford Foundation: the expensive lunches and expansive expense accounts; the not unostentatious headquarters on Forty-Second Street in New York City, complete with the world's largest greenhouse—according to Martin Mayer, the most stunning piece of architectural symbolism in the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

And then there are the government bureaucracies of the West: vast grey units where nothing is very dishonest but which are highly susceptible to the occasional buccaneer like the "educational entrepreneur" that Congresswoman Edith Green described several years ago in *The Public Interest*. This academic grantsman sliced through the soft bureaucracy of the Office of Education like a knife through butter. Congresswoman Green's account of heavy funding and sparse results recalls George Washington Plunkitt's classic description of the big city as a spoilsman's Garden of Eden:

It's an orchard full of beautiful apple trees. One of them has got a big sign on it, marked: "Penal Code Tree—Poison." The other trees have lots of apples on them for all. Yet, the fools go to the Penal Code Tree. Why? For the reason, I guess, that a cranky child refuses to eat good food and chews up a box of matches with relish. I never had any temptation to touch the Penal Code Tree. The other apples are good enough for me, and O Lord! how many of them there are in a big city!<sup>16</sup>

Another and more sinister form of modern corruption has been very evident in recent years. Revelations about the Central Intelligence Agency fall into this category, as does that collection of attitudes and actions with the generic name of Watergate. It is instructive to compare this latter episode with its major counterparts of the past: the scandals of the Ulysses S. Grant administration or Teapot Dome. During the Grant years

two things were being greased: the workings of government and the pockets of the participants. Much the same can be said of Teapot Dome: corrupt politicians and oilmen worked their way through problems posed by the conservationist movement of the early twentieth century and the growing role of the national defense establishment.<sup>17</sup> But Watergate was different. The principals took the law into their hands not because they saw a quick buck to be made or because they felt a need to circumvent administrative obstacles but because they were driven by a vision of what was right and true.

The Watergate conspirators were odious and maladroit and the scale of what they did rightly outraged public opinion. But purloining documents and betraying a public trust to serve one's own higher goals hardly began in 1972. During the 1950s an incredulous Senator John McClellan taxed Senator Joseph McCarthy for calling on government employees to turn over to him confidential documents that in their view revealed subversion in high places: "You are advocating government by individual conscience as against government by law." McCarthy's response was: "The issue is whether the people are entitled to the facts."<sup>18</sup>

This view and its implementation by such as the State Department's Otto Otepka earned the censure of the right-thinking in the 1950s. Its implementation by others for other reasons in the 1960s and early 1970s often earned a different judgment. But the point is not the morality or immorality of these acts. Rather, it is that they are threads in a pattern of behavior that can be seen as a characteristic and perhaps at times quite functional part of a polity in which bureaucracy and ideology play commanding roles.

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In one sense the character of public corruption has changed enormously over two centuries of American life. It has moved from the patronage and nepotism of the essentially aristocratic polities of early modern times, through but not out of the full-throated graft and bribery of a democratic politics and a burgeoning market economy, into the more subtle and complex deviations of an age of bureaucracy and ideology.

These changes have occurred, however, in a social system

whose character and values have shown great tenacity over centuries of enormous socioeconomic change. The distinctive characteristics of American life—its persistent individualist ethos, the distrust of centralized, indeed, of any, authority, capitalist materialism, democratic political theory, a plenitude of contesting groups—have tended to constrain the baleful impact both of pre-1776 aristocratic government and post-1900 bureaucracy and ideology, even while they fed the modes of corruption that flourished in the nineteenth century. As William Allen White once observed, with some sadness but more relief, the United States "is a country where you can buy men only with money."<sup>19</sup>

This does not dictate complacent acceptance of those forms of corruption that are as American as apple pie or that, because everything can be understood, it can be forgiven. The tendency of people and their institutions to fix things to suit themselves, whether that self-suiting be status, or wealth or power, must always be resisted, even if it will always be present. "Continuity with the past," said Oliver Wendell Holmes, "is only a necessity and not a duty."<sup>20</sup> It may well be a necessity that such things exist, but it is no less a necessity—and more, a duty—to try to counter them. The point is not that corruption then will cease to exist but rather that without that endless counterthrust it will be far worse than it is.

One final word. Disorder, dishonesty and the like are not necessarily proof that now, finally, the American sky is falling in and the American way of life is past redemption. The cause for concern but not despair was eloquently put a century ago—also a time of corruption in high places and a widespread sense that the system had failed—by the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev:

In my opinion, he who is weary of democracy because it creates disorder, is very much in the state of one who is about to commit suicide. He is tired of the variety of life and longs for the monotony of death. For as long as we are created individuals, and not uniform repetitions of one and the same type, life will be motley, varied, and even disorderly. And in this infinite collision of interests and ideas lies our chief promise of progress. To me the great charm of American institutions has always been in the fact that they offer the widest scope for individual development, the very thing which despotism does not and cannot do.<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

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2. Dooley quoted in Carl J. Friedrich, *The Pathology of Politics* (New York, 1972), p. 171.
3. Samuel Huntington, "Political Modernization: America vs. Europe," *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968), pp. 93-139.
4. Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," *Winthrop Papers*, II (Boston, 1931), 282.
5. Ronald Wraith and Edgar Simpkins, *Corruption in Developing Countries* (London, 1963); Bernard Bailyn, "The Origins of American Politics," *Perspectives in American History*, I (1967), 26.
6. Campbell quoted in Anthony F. Upton, "The Road to Power in Virginia in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXII (1954), 275.
7. Bailyn, *op. cit.*, 36-37.
8. Wraith and Simpkins, *op. cit.*, 14.
9. David D. Field, "Corruption in Politics," *International Review*, IV (1877), 85.
10. Lowell quoted in George F. Howe, *Chester A. Arthur* (New York, 1934), p. 204; Tweed quoted in Alexander B. Callow, Jr., *The Tweed Ring* (New York, 1966), p. 196; Thomas C. Reeves, "Chester A. Arthur and Campaign Assessments in the Election of 1880," *Historian*, XXXI (1969), 573-582. See also Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 238-258, 522-544.
11. Morton Keller, *The Life Insurance Enterprise, 1885-1910* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 227-230.
12. Keller, *Affairs of State*, p. 245.
13. Burke quoted in Heidenheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 17. On Europe, *ibid.*, pp. 90 ff.
14. Keller, *Affairs of State*, pp. 272-275, 313-314; William M. Dickson, "The New Political Machine," *North American Review*, CXXXIV (1882), 42-43; Oliver P. Morton, "The American Constitution," *ibid.*, CLVI (1887), 343-345. See also Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils* (Urbana, 1961).
15. Mayer, "What to Do about Television," *Commentary*, No. 53 (May 1972), p. 69.
16. Green, "The Educational Entrepreneur," *The Public Interest*, No. 28 (Summer 1972), pp. 12-25; William L. Riordon, *Plunkett of Tammany Hall* (New York, 1948), p. 41.
17. J. Leonard Bates, *The Origins of Teapot Dome* (Urbana, Ill., 1963).
18. Michael P. Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 230.

19. White, "The Old Order Changeth," *American Magazine*, LXVII (1909), 218.
20. Holmes, *Collected Legal Papers* (New York, 1920), p. 211.
21. Hjalmar H. Borgeson, "A Visit to Tourguénoff," *Galaxy*, XVII (1874), 459-460.