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Can Government Do Anything Right?

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Contents

Acknowledgments vi

1 Why is Everyone so Angry? 1
2 The Long Peace 15
3 The Right to Rule 32
4 Taming the Economy 50
5 Battle of the Bulge 67
6 Hard Choices Ahead 83
7 Perestroika 99

Further Reading 110
Notes 115
Why is Everyone so Angry?

Can government do anything right? This brief canvas of public and expert opinion might make us wonder. The purpose of this short book is to provide a framework for answering the question more precisely. It may also put our current worries in perspective. The following chapters will remind us what the basic functions of government are, and suggest that in fundamental ways Western countries are still strong performers. It will also argue that in some ways the problems preoccupying us today are enduring ones, and not portents of imminent collapse. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the aim is to remind us that governing is extraordinarily difficult work, involving the constant adaptation of institutions and laws to suit a complex and turbulent world.

We must begin with a quick survey of some basic ideas. The fundamental unit of governance in the modern world is the state, a body recognized in international law that has jurisdiction over a defined territory and the people within it. There are 195 states in the world today. (That is an approximate number: there is debate among diplomats on whether the existence of a few should be acknowledged.) These 195 states assert authority over almost all the earth’s surface. On average, each state governs 600,000 square kilometers of
Can Government Do Anything Right?

land and thirty million people. All states are bound together by customs and laws within a global system of states, sometimes also called the society of states. The keel of the modern state system was laid down in Europe about 400 years ago.

In every state, there are people who claim to be in charge. We used to call these people “rulers,” and sometimes we still do, mainly when talking about states that are not democracies. For example, we often read about China’s rulers, but rarely about the United States’. More often, we read about leaders, policymakers, or decision-makers in Western democracies. These are euphemisms. Whatever the word, we are talking about the people who exercise power within a state. These leaders have four goals, regardless of whether their states are democratic or non-democratic.

The first goal is the achievement of mastery over circumstances. Like everybody else, leaders dislike uncertainty. They want to know what is going on inside the borders of their territory, so that they can discourage behavior that threatens internal peace and order, and encourage behavior that advances the national interest. There is a similar desire for information about the plans of other states and foreigners, and an ambition to shape their behavior as well, with the aim of creating a state system
Why is Everyone so Angry?

that is stable and serves the national interest. But mastery over circumstances, whether internal or external, is elusive. It is constantly pursued but never fully achieved by any state.

The second goal is the attainment of legitimacy, or a general recognition of a state’s right to govern its territory. This also has an internal and external aspect. A state must be respected by the people living within its borders, and by other states. There is a practical reason why legitimacy matters. Policymakers have a limited capacity to achieve compliance with their commands by force. Most of the time, people living within a state obey its laws because they think that is the right thing to do. Similarly, other countries are more likely to cooperate with a state’s foreign policy, and refrain from attacking it, if they also recognize its right to exist and believe that it is behaving as a responsible member of the society of states.

The third goal is the advancement of human rights. We will define this concept later. Human rights are important as a matter of principle: we want leaders to pay attention to them even if self-interest would not push leaders in that direction. Increasingly, though, it is in the self-interest of leaders to respect human rights, or at least to appear respectful of them. It is hard to achieve
Can Government Do Anything Right?

legitimacy, either at home or abroad, while abusing fundamental rights. A governed population is more likely to resist commands, and other states are more likely to intervene in the internal affairs of a state, if its leaders seem to be maltreating their people.

The final goal for leaders is the promotion of economic growth. A strong and growing economy is essential for the achievement of all other objectives. Prosperity makes it easier to maintain internal order, because people are happier and less likely to fight each other if economic gains are widely distributed. Other countries also have an incentive to get along with a state if it has a thriving economy, because they will seek its largesse or access to its markets. A bigger economy also means more tax revenue, which improves the ability of leaders to police their own land, defend against attack, and provide services that advance human rights.

The simultaneous pursuit of these four goals is hard work, for several reasons. Leaders must make difficult trade-offs between goals. For example, a strong defense against external threats may require high taxes and conscription, which usually undermines public support for government. Similarly, a drive to maintain internal order might undermine human rights. Leaders also wrestle with uncertainty about tactics. The communities that they
Why is Everyone so Angry?

are trying to influence are vast and complex, and it is never clear which of several alternate lines of action is most likely to accomplish a specific goal. Machiavelli had this sort of uncertainty in mind when, in the early sixteenth century, he wondered whether it was better for a prince to be loved or feared. Machiavelli was struggling to determine which path was more likely to maintain the prince’s power. We echo Machiavelli when we argue about the wisdom of zero-tolerance policing or the use of hard power in foreign policy.

Over time, the leaders of a state develop a broad strategy that establishes the relative importance of these four goals and lays out a path for pursuing them. When people talk about the “American way of life,” they are describing the governance strategy pursued by one country, which emphasizes limited government, strong protection of a limited set of human rights, and free markets. In 2002, President George W. Bush argued that this was the “single sustainable model for national success.” Many people think that this is open to debate. When experts talk about the “China model,” they are describing a very different governance strategy, one which emphasizes centralized government, weak protection for human rights, and extensive government intervention in the economy.
Can Government Do Anything Right?

Throughout history, leaders have pursued many other governance strategies as well. We can make moral judgments about each of these strategies. We can also make purely practical judgments about which strategies will hold up in the long run – that is, about the survival prospects of a state that pursues one strategy or another.

Governance strategies begin as ideas, but they are articulated through institutions and laws. Leaders invest a lot of effort in building the institutions and drafting the laws that breathe life into a governance strategy. This process is referred to as institutional consolidation. It takes many years to construct institutions and laws, to persuade powerful interests that they should be taken seriously, and to educate the public about how they work. In the early years of the American republic, for example, policymakers established expansive civic education programs to promote “sympathy with our institutions and ideals,” especially among immigrants. Similarly, Chinese policymakers have undertaken programs of “patriotic education” to promote the virtues of strong central government and leadership by the Communist Party. This labor does not end when institutions and laws are finally established. Institutions must also be administered, which is not easy. Sometimes institutions ignore the instructions
given to them by leaders. Sometimes institutions break down and do nothing at all.

There is a final difficulty that complicates the work of designing and implementing governance strategies. Each strategy is tailored to fit the realities confronting a specific country at a specific moment in history. But we live in a turbulent world, and the domestic and international conditions that undergird a governance strategy never remain fixed. Power shifts within the society of states, people move around, industries rise and fall, and technologies evolve. We have even learned that climate and geography change over time. All of this means that governance strategies, and the institutions and laws that give life to those strategies, must be renovated constantly to fit new conditions. As John Dewey said, the design of any state is an experimental process: “Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made.”

It is easy to show that governance strategies do change dramatically over time. Thomas Jefferson would be stunned by the modern-day version of the “American way of life,” which includes a vast military-industrial complex and alliances spanning the globe. Similarly, Mao Zedong would be appalled to see how free markets and private wealth are tolerated under the today’s “China
Can Government Do Anything Right?

model.” In both cases, governance strategies have been adapted because leaders thought that they were ill-suited to new realities. This process of strategic adaptation can be slow and painful. It involves institutional deconsolidation – that is, overcoming vested interests and changing public opinion so that outmoded institutions and laws can be torn down and rebuilt. People must be persuaded that yesterday’s institutions and laws should not be taken so seriously after all, and educated about the need for new institutions and laws.

We are talking about the problems of statesmanship. Leaders must juggle competing objectives, gamble on the best ways of pursuing those objectives, and build up and tear down institutions and laws. And they must do this under conditions of unrelenting political, social, economic, and technological change. It is hard not to have sympathy with our leaders as they do this work. We could paraphrase Samuel Johnson here: modern governance may not be done well, but perhaps it is a surprise to see it done at all. Indeed, we shall see that in most of the world it is done very poorly. Leaders cannot formulate and execute strategies that advance the welfare of their people.

The remainder of this book explores a few of the challenges of governance in more detail. In the
Why is Everyone so Angry?

next chapter, we will look at the challenge of establishing peace and order, which is one aspect of the general project of achieving mastery over circumstances. I will argue that some recent tensions in European and American politics are related to this centuries-old challenge. Then we will look at the task of establishing legitimacy – another enduring problem, which leaders struggle constantly to manage. The same can be said about the problem of promoting economic growth, examined in Chapter 4: a tricky assignment because markets are constantly changing their shape.

The following two chapters focus on more recent events. In Chapter 5, I will examine a problem that has preoccupied leaders over the last forty years. This is the apparent tension between the principle of democratic control, which is a key technique for establishing legitimacy, and the drive to recover from the economic doldrums of the 1970s. The “neoliberal paradigm” (sometimes known as Reaganism or Thatcherism) was a strategy for managing this tension, but I will argue that it has exhausted its usefulness. In Chapter 6, I will look to next thirty years, and describe the fundamental choice that must be made as we deal with terrorism, great power conflict, inequality, and climate change.
Can Government Do Anything Right?

In all these chapters, we will see leaders struggling to steer the ship of state. There are moments when the weather is fine and the ship of state sails smoothly with little need for direction. More often, the weather is rough and captaincy is more demanding. In the final chapter, I will argue that we are in a patch of rough weather right now. Ideas about governance whose soundness was generally acknowledged only a few years ago, now seem stale and outmoded. We see a need to abandon the status quo, but we are not sure what the new governance strategy should be. These moments of strategic change are difficult. They can generate deep anxieties about the future. But these moments are also unavoidable, and I will argue that democratic systems are better than most in responding constructively to them. The world is not falling apart, as the déclinistes would have you think. We are just inventing a new way forward.