

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 10  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1980

Article 39

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7-4-1980

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### Recommended Citation

Barbara W. Tuchman, "AN INQUIRY INTO THE PERSISTENCE OF UNWISDOM IN GOVERNMENT," *Parameters* 10, no. 1 (1980), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1234.

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# AN INQUIRY INTO THE PERSISTENCE OF UNWISDOM IN GOVERNMENT

by

BARBARA W. TUCHMAN

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**A** problem that strikes one in the study of history, regardless of period, is why man makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom—meaning judgment acting on experience, and on common sense, available knowledge, and a decent appreciation of probability—is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do men in high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often paralyzed?

Why, to begin at the beginning, did the Trojan authorities drag that suspicious-looking wooden horse inside their walls? Why did successive ministries of George III, that “bundle of imbecility” as Dr. Johnson called them collectively, insist on coercing rather than conciliating the colonies, though strongly advised otherwise by many counselors? Why did Napoleon and Hitler invade Russia? Why did the Kaiser’s government resume unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, although explicitly warned that this would bring in the United States and that American belligerency would mean Germany’s defeat? If I may come a little closer to home, why did General MacArthur in the Philippines leave his planes lined up on the ground after learning of the attack on Pearl Harbor? Why did Chiang Kai-shek refuse to heed any voice of reform or alarm until he woke up to find his country had slid

from under him? Why did Lyndon Johnson, seconded by the so-called best and the brightest, progressively involve this nation in a war both ruinous and halfhearted from which nothing but bad for our side resulted? Why does the present administration continue to avoid introducing effective measures to reduce the wasteful consumption of oil, while members of OPEC, on their part, follow a price policy that must bankrupt their customers? How is it possible that the intelligence agency, whose function it is to provide at taxpayers’ expense the information necessary to conduct a realistic foreign policy, could remain unaware that discontent in a country crucial to our interests was boiling up to the point of insurrection and overthrow of the ruler upon whom our policy rested? It has been reported that the agency concerned was ordered *not* to investigate the opposition to the Shah in order to spare him any indication that we took it seriously, but, since this sounds more like the theater of the absurd than like responsible government, I cannot bring myself to believe it.

There was a King of Spain once, Philip III, who is said to have died of a fever he contracted from sitting too long near a hot brazier, helplessly overheating himself because the functionary whose duty it was to remove the brazier when summoned, could not be found. In the late 20th century it begins to appear as if mankind may be approaching a similar stage of suicidal

incompetence. The Italians have been sitting in Philip III's hot seat for some time. The British trade unions in a lunatic spectacle seem periodically bent on dragging their country toward paralysis, apparently under the impression that they are separate from the whole. Taiwan was thrown into a state of shock by the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China because, according to one report, in the seven years since the Shanghai Communique, the Kuomintang rulers of Taiwan had "refused to accept the new trend as a reality."

**W**ooden-headedness is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. Wooden-headedness consists of assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be confused by the facts. A classic case was Plan 17, the French war plan of 1914, conceived in a mood of total dedication to the offensive. It concentrated everything on a French advance to the Rhine, leaving the French left virtually unguarded, a strategy that could only be justified by the fixed belief that the Germans could not deploy enough manpower to extend their invasion around to the French left. This assumption was based on the equally fixed belief that the Germans would never use reserves in the front line. Evidence to the contrary, which began seeping through in the year before the outbreak, had to be, and was, resolutely ignored in order that no concern for invasion on the left should be allowed to divert strength from a French offensive to the Rhine. In the event, the Germans could and did use reserves in the front line with results that determined a long war and its fearful consequences for our century.

Wooden-headedness is also the refusal to learn from experience, a characteristic in which 14th-century rulers were supreme. No matter how often and obviously devaluation of the currency disrupted the economy and angered the people, French monarchs continued to resort to it whenever they were desperate for cash until they provoked

insurrection by the bourgeois. No matter how often a campaign that depended on living off a hostile country ran into want and even starvation, campaigns for which this fate was inevitable were regularly undertaken.

For purposes of this inquiry, I took a very cursory look at the theorists and philosophers of government. For 2500 years, from Plato and Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton, Nietzsche and Marx, they all have devoted their thinking to the major issues of ethics, sovereignty, the social contract, the rights of man, the corruption of power, the balance between freedom and order. Few, except Machiavelli, who was concerned with government as it is, not as it should be, bothered with mere folly, although this has been a chronic and pervasive problem. "Know, my son," said a dying Swedish statesman in the 17th century, "with how little wisdom the world is governed." More recently, Woodrow Wilson warned, "In public affairs, stupidity is more dangerous than knavery."

Stupidity is not related to type of regime: monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy produce it equally. Nor is it peculiar to nation or class. The working class as represented by the communist governments function no more rationally or effectively in power than the aristocracy or the bourgeois, as has been notably demonstrated in recent history. Mao Tse-tung may be admired for many things, but the Great Leap Forward, with a steel plant in every backyard, and the Cultural Revolution were exercises in un wisdom that greatly damaged China's progress and stability, not to mention the Chairman's reputation. The record of the Russian proletariat in power can hardly be called enlightened, although after 60 years of control it must be accorded a kind of brutal success. If the majority of Russians are better off now than before, the cost in cruelty and tyranny has been no less and probably greater than under the Czars.

In the French Revolution the early regimes could muster the strength to exterminate internal foes and defeat foreign enemies, but

they could not manage their own following sufficiently to maintain domestic order, install a competent administration, or to collect taxes. The new order was rescued only by Bonaparte's military campaigns, which brought the spoils of foreign wars to fill the treasury, and subsequently by his competence as an executive. He chose officials not on the basis of origin or ideology but on the principle of "*la carrière ouverte aux talents*"—the desired talents being intelligence, energy, industry, and obedience. That worked for a while, until the day of his own fatal mistake.

I do not wish to give the impression that men in office are incapable of governing wisely and well. Occasionally the exception appears, rising in heroic size above the rest, a tower visible down the centuries. Greece had her Pericles, who ruled with authority, poise, moderation, sound judgment, and a certain nobility that imposed natural dominion over others. Rome had Julius Caesar, a man of remarkable governing talents, although it must be said that a ruler who arouses opponents to assassination is probably not as smart as he ought to be. Later, under Marcus Aurelius and the other Antonines, Roman citizens enjoyed good government, prosperity, and respect for about a century. Charlemagne was able to impose order upon a mass of contending elements. He fostered the arts of civilization no less than those of war and earned a prestige supreme in the Middle Ages—probably not equaled in the eyes of contemporaries until the appearance of George Washington.

**P**ossessor of that inner strength and perseverance that enabled him to prevail over a sea of obstacles, Washington was one of those critical figures but for whom history might well have taken a different course. He made possible the physical victory of American independence, while around him in extraordinary fertility, political talent bloomed as if touched by some tropical sun. For all their flaws and quarrels, the Founding Fathers who established our form of government were, in the words of Arthur

Schlesinger Sr., "the most remarkable generation of public men in the history of the United States or perhaps of any other nation." It is worth noting the qualities Schlesinger ascribes to them: they were fearless, high-principled, deeply versed in ancient and modern political thought, astute and pragmatic, unafraid of experiment, and—this is significant—"convinced of man's power to improve his condition through the use of intelligence." That was the mark of the Age of Reason that formed them, and although the 18th century had a tendency to regard men as more rational than in fact they were, it evoked the best in government from these men.

For our purposes, it would be invaluable if we could know what produced this burst of talent from a base of only two million inhabitants. Schlesinger suggests some contributing factors: wide diffusion of education, challenging economic opportunities, social mobility, training in self-government—all these, he says, encouraged citizens to cultivate their political aptitudes to the utmost. Also, he adds, with

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the church declining in prestige, and business, science, and art not yet offering competing fields of endeavor, statecraft remained almost the only outlet for men of energy and purpose. Perhaps the need of the moment is what evoked the response—the opportunity to create a new political system. What could be more exciting, more likely to summon into action men of energy and purpose?

The system they worked out was founded on the clear understanding that, as Madison said, “men are not angels,” and that conflicting interests required a firm arrangement of checks and balances and explicit guarantees of civil rights. Not before or since, I believe, has so much careful and reasonable thinking been invested in the creation of a new political system. In the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, too much class hatred and bloodshed were involved to allow for fair results or permanent constitutions. The American experience was unique, and the system so far has always managed to right itself under pressure. In spite of accelerating incompetence, it still works better than most. We have not had to discard the system and try another after every crisis as have Italy and Germany, Spain, and France. The founders of the United States are a phenomenon to keep in mind to encourage our estimate of human possibilities, but their example, as a political scientist has pointed out, is “too infrequent to be taken as a basis for normal expectations.”

The English are considered to have enjoyed reasonably benign government during the 18th and 19th centuries, except of course for their Irish subjects, debtors, child laborers, and other unfortunates in various pockets of oppression. The folly that lost the American colonies reappeared now and then, notably in the treatment of the Irish and the Boers, but social systems can survive a good deal of folly when circumstances are historically favorable, or when it is cushioned by large resources, as in the heyday of the British Empire, or absorbed by sheer size, as in this country during our period of expansion. Today there are no more cushions, which makes folly less affordable.

Elsewhere than in government, man has accomplished marvels: invented the means in our time to leave the world and voyage to the moon; in the past, harnessed wind and electricity, raised earthbound stone into soaring cathedrals, woven silk brocades out of the spinnings of a worm, composed the music of Mozart and the dramas of Shakespeare, classified the forms of nature, penetrated the mysteries of genetics. Why is he so much less accomplished in government? What frustrates, in that sphere, the operation of the intellect? Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, discoursing on mankind, offered the opinion that God had been frugal in bestowing intellect but lavish with passions and emotions. “He gave us,” Singer says, “so many emotions and such strong ones that every human being, even if he is an idiot, is a millionaire in emotions.”

I think Singer has made a point that applies to this inquiry. What frustrates the workings of intellect are the passions and the emotions: ambition, greed, fear, face-saving, the instinct to dominate, the needs of the ego, the whole bundle of personal vanities and anxieties.

Reason is crushed by these forces. If the Athenians out of pride and overconfidence had not set out to crush Sparta for good, but had been content with moderate victory instead of seeking supremacy, their ultimate fall might have been averted. If 14th-century knights had not been obsessed by the idea of glory and personal prowess, they might have defeated the Turks at Nicopolis with incalculable consequence for all of Eastern Europe. How different might the world be if the English, 200 years ago, had heeded Chatham’s knocking on the door of what he called “this sleeping and confounded Ministry” and followed his urgent advice to repeal the Coercive Acts and withdraw the troops from America before the “inexorable drop of blood is shed in an impious war with a people contending in the great cause of public liberty.” Or, given a last chance, if they had heeded Edmund Burke’s celebrated plea for conciliation and his warning that it would prove impossible to coerce a “fierce people” of their own pedigree, we might still

be a united people bridging the Atlantic with incalculable consequence for the history of the West. It did not happen that way because King and Parliament felt it imperative to affirm sovereignty over arrogant colonials. The alternative choice, as in Athens and medieval Europe, was close to psychologically impossible.

**I**n the case we know best—the American engagement in Vietnam—fixed notions, preconceptions, wooden-headed thinking, and emotions accumulated into a monumental mistake and classic humiliation. The original idea was that the lesson of the failure to halt Fascist aggression during the appeasement era dictated the necessity of halting the so-called aggression by North Vietnam, conceived to be the spearhead of international communism. This was applying the wrong model to the wrong facts, which should have been obvious if our policymakers had taken into consideration the history of the place and people instead of charging forward wearing the blinkers of the cold war.

The reality of Vietnamese nationalism, of which Ho Chi Minh had been the standard-bearer since long before the war, was certainly no secret. Indeed, Roosevelt had insisted that the French should not be allowed to return after the war, a policy that we instantly abandoned the moment the Japanese were out. Ignoring the Vietnamese demand for self-government, we first assisted the return of the French and then, incredibly, after they had been put to rout by the native forces, we took their place as if Dien Bien Phu had no significance whatever. Policy founded upon error multiplies, never retreats. The pretense that North versus South Vietnam represented foreign aggression was intensified. If Asian specialists or other advisers with knowledge of the situation suggested a reassessment, they were not persuasive. As a communist aggressor, Hanoi was presumed to be a threat to the United States; yet the vital national interest at stake, which alone might have justified belligerency, was never clear enough to sustain a declaration of war.

A further, more fundamental, error confounded our policy. This was the nature of the client. In war, as any military treatise or soldier who has seen active service will tell you, it is essential to know the nature—that is, the capabilities *and* intentions—of the enemy and no less so of an ally who is the primary belligerent. We fatally underestimated the one and foolishly overestimated the other. Placing reliance on, or hopes in, South Vietnam was an advanced case of wooden-headedness. Improving on the Bourbons who forgot nothing and learned nothing, our policymakers forgot everything and learned nothing. The oldest lesson in history is the futility and often fatality of foreign interference to maintain in power a government unwanted or hated at home. As far back as 500 B.C., Confucius stated, “Without the confidence of the people, no government can stand,” and political philosophers have echoed him down the ages. What else was the lesson of our vain support of Chiang Kai-shek, within such recent experience? A corrupt or oppressive government may be maintained by despotic means, but not for long, as the English occupiers of France learned in the Middle Ages. The human spirit protests and generates a Joan of Arc, for people will not passively endure a government that is in fact unendurable.

The deeper we became involved in Vietnam during the Johnson era, the greater grew the self-deception, the lies, the false body-counts, the cheating on Tonkin Gulf, domestic dissent, and all those defensive emotions in which, as a result, our leaders became fixed. Their concern for personal ego, public image and government status determined policy. Johnson was not going to be the first President to preside over a defeat; generals could not admit failure; and civilian advisers would not risk their jobs by giving unpalatable advice.

Males, who so far in history have managed government, are obsessed with potency, which is the reason, I suspect, why it is difficult for them to admit error. I have never known a man who, with a smile and a shrug, could easily acknowledge being wrong. Why not? *I* can, without any damage to self-

respect. I can only suppose the difference is that deep in their psyches, men somehow equate being wrong with being impotent. For a chief of state it is almost out of the question, and especially so for Johnson and Nixon who both seem to me to have had shaky self-images. Johnson showed this in his deliberate coarseness and compulsion to humiliate others in crude physical ways. No self-confident man would have needed to do that. Nixon was a bundle of inferiorities compounded by a sense of persecution. I do not pretend to be a psycho-historian, but, in pursuit of this inquiry, the psychological factors must be taken into account. Having no special knowledge of Johnson and Nixon, I will not pursue the question, other than to say that it was our misfortune during the Vietnam period to have had two Presidents who lacked the self-confidence for a grand withdrawal. "Magnanimity in politics," said Edmund Burke, "is not seldom the truest wisdom and a great Empire and little minds go ill together."

An essential component of that "truest wisdom" is the self-confidence to reassess. This point was made in the first few days after the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island when it was still not clear whether the danger could be contained. Congressman Morris K. Udall, Chairman of the House Interior Committee, cautioning against a hasty decision on the future of nuclear power, said, "We have to go back and reassess." There is nothing wrong about being optimistic or making a mistake. The thing that is wrong, as in Vietnam, is *persisting* in a mistake when you see you are going down the wrong road and are caught in a bad situation.

The test comes in recognizing when persistence has become a fatal error. A prince, says Machiavelli, ought always to be a great asker, and a patient hearer of truth about those things of which he has inquired, and he should be angry if he finds that anyone has scruples about telling him the truth. Johnson and Nixon, as far as an outsider can tell, were not great askers; they did not want to hear the truth, or face it.

Chiang Kai-shek knew virtually nothing of real conditions in his domain because he lived a headquarters life amid an entourage all of whom were afraid to be messengers of ill report. When, in World War I, a general of the Headquarters Staff visited for the first time the ghastly landscape of the Somme, he broke into tears, saying, "If I had known we sent men to fight in that, I could not have done it." Evidently he was no great asker either.

Neither, we now know, was the Shah of Iran. Like Chiang Kai-shek, he was isolated from actual conditions. He was educated abroad, took his vacations abroad, and toured his country, if at all, by helicopter. As regards the United States, the only difference between him and Chiang Kai-shek was that the Shah was a paying proposition, a purchaser of American arms, while the Generalissimo got them for free, otherwise known as Lend-Lease.

Why is it that every major client of the United States, a country founded on the principle that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed, tends to be an unpopular autocrat? A certain schizophrenia between our philosophy and our practice afflicts American policy, and this split will always make the policy based on it fall apart. On the day the Shah left Iran, an article summarizing his reign said that "except for the generals, he has few friends or allies at home." How useful to us is a ruler without friends or allies at home? He is a kind of *luftmensch*, no matter how rich or how golden a customer for American business. To attach American foreign policy to a ruler who has no roots in the acceptance of his countrymen is hardly intelligent. By now, it seems to me, we might have learned that. We must understand conditions—and by conditions, I mean people and history—on the spot. Wise policy can only be made on the basis of *informed*, not automatic, judgments.

When it has become evident to those associated with it that a course or policy is pointed toward disaster, why does no one resign in protest, or at least for the peace of his own mind, his own soul? They rarely do. In 1917, the German Chancellor Bethmann-

Hollweg pleaded desperately against the proposed resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare since, by bringing in the United States, it would revive the Allies' resources, their confidence in victory, and their will to endure. When he was overruled, he told a friend who found him sunk in despair that the decision meant "*finis Germaniae*." When the friend said simply, "You should resign," Bethmann said he could not for that would sow dissension at home and let the world know he believed Germany would fail.

This is always the refuge. The officeholder tells himself he can do more from within and that he must not reveal division at the top to the public. In fact, if there is to be any hope of change, at least in a democratic society, that is exactly what he must do. No one of major influence in Johnson's circle resigned over our Vietnam policy, although several, hoping to play it both ways, discreetly hinted their disagreement. Humphrey, waiting for the nod, never challenged the President's policy, although he campaigned afterwards as an opponent of the war. Since that time, I have always thought the adulation given to him misplaced.

**B**asically, what keeps officeholders attached to a policy they believe to be wrong is nothing more nor less, I believe, than the lure of office, or Potomac fever. It is the same whether the locus is the Thames or the Rhine or, no doubt, the Nile. When Herbert Lehman ran for a second term as Senator after previously serving three terms as Governor, his brother asked him why on earth he wanted it. "Arthur," replied the Senator, "after you have once ridden behind a motorcycle escort, you are never the same again."

Here is a clue to the question why our performance in government is worse than in other activities: because government offers power it excites that lust for power that is so subject to emotional drives, to narcissism, fantasies of omnipotence, and other sources of folly. The lust for power, according to Tacitus, "is the most flagrant of all the

passions," and cannot really be satisfied except by power over others. Business offers a kind of power, but only to the very successful at the very top, and even they, in our day, have to play it down. Fords and Duponts, Hearsts and Pulitzers nowadays are subdued, and the one Rockefeller who most conspicuously wanted power sought it in government. Other activities—in sports, science, the professions, and the creative and performing arts—offer various satisfactions but not the opportunity for power. They may appeal to status-seeking and, in the form of celebrity, offer crowd-worship and limousines and recognition by headwaiters, but these are the trappings of power, not the essence. Of course, mistakes and stupidities occur in nongovernmental activities too, but, since these affect fewer people they are less noticeable than they are in public affairs. Government remains the paramount field of unwisdom because it is there that men seek power over others—only to lose it over themselves.

There are, of course, other factors that lower competence in public affairs, among them the pressure of overwork and over-scheduling; bureaucracy, especially big bureaucracy; the contest for votes which gives exaggerated influence to special interests and an absurd tyranny to public opinion polls. Any hope of intelligent government would require that the persons entrusted with high office should formulate and execute policy according to their best judgment and the best knowledge available, not according to every breeze of public opinion. But reelection is on their minds and that becomes the criterion. Moreover, given schedules broken down into 15-minute appointments, and staffs numbering in the hundreds, and briefing memos of never less than 30 pages, policy-makers never have time to *think*. This leaves a rather important vacuum. Meanwhile, bureaucracy rolls on, impervious to any individual or cry for change, like some vast computer which, when once penetrated by error, goes on duplicating it forever.

Under the circumstances, what are the chances of improving the conduct of government? The idea of a class of



professionals trained for the task has been around ever since Plato's *Republic*. Something of the sort animates, I imagine, the new Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. According to Plato, the ruling class in a just society should be men apprenticed to the art of ruling, drawn from the rational and wise. Since he acknowledged that in natural distribution these are few, he believed they would have to be eugenically bred and nurtured. Government, he said, was a special art in which competence, as in any other profession, could be acquired only by study of the discipline, and could not be acquired otherwise.

Without reference to Plato, the Mandarins of China were trained, if not bred, for the governing function. They had to pass through years of study and apprenticeship and weeding out by successive examinations, but they do not seem to have developed a form of government much superior to any other, and, in the end, they petered out in decadence and incompetence. The Prussian system too had a specially trained civil service. But eventually it congealed and in the 19th century lost its best people to emigration. Its very success contained the seed of ruin, for it nourished the arrogance and power-hunger that in 1914-18 was to bring it down.

In the United States, civil service was established chiefly as a barrier to patronage and the pork-barrel, rather than in search of excellence. By 1937, a Presidential Commission, finding the system inadequate, urged the development of a "real career

service . . . requiring personnel of the highest order, competent, highly trained, loyal, skilled in their duties by reason of long experience, and assured of continuity." After much effort and some progress, that goal is still not reached, but even if it were, it would not take care of elected officials and high appointments, that is, of government at the top.

I do not know if the prognosis is hopeful or, given the underlying emotional drives, whether professionalism is the cure. In the Age of Enlightenment, John Locke thought the emotions should be controlled by intellectual judgment and that it was the distinction and glory of man to be able so to control them. But as witnesses of the 20th century's record, which is comparable to the worst in history, we have less confidence in our species. Although professionalism can help, I tend to think that fitness of character is what government chiefly requires. How that can be discovered, encouraged, and brought into office, I have no idea.

No society has yet managed to implement Plato. Now, with money-making and image-making manipulating our elective process, the chances are reduced. Perhaps, rather than educating officials, we should concentrate on educating the electorate—that is, ourselves—to look for, to recognize, and to reward character in our representatives, and to reject the *ersatz*.

