The Washington Political Environment

Most of the other chapters in this *Handbook* refer to theories of political behavior and are relevant here at least to the problem of why people spend their time on other things than thinking and learning. All other variables in this chapter are linked with the political environment - the structure of incentive and risk systems, money, cognitive abilities of elites, action moods, presidential leadership and goals, stress, recruitment patterns, top level inexperience, bureaucratic design, and much else. I will leave these implicit and, in the interest of an efficient use of space, select only four specific issues. These will include the impact of time structures, lobbying, accountability processes and possible trade-offs between learning and legitimacy, and the adequacy of information channels. I will then structure a discussion of two general problems in the explanation of political behavior, the case for behavioral theories unique to political life and the meta-issue of the politics of politics.

The Structure of Time in Washington

To an investigator who adopts an anthropologist s sensibility, political and bureaucratic life is strikingly rhythmic and cyclical: the diurnal and workweek cycles, the budget and congressional-year cycles, summer vacations, the two- and four-year electoral accountability cycles, and press deadlines. Also striking are the periodic ceremonies and rites (not always successful) to achieve transitions in action moods, identities, and leadership directions through annual executive-branch budget preparations, the State of the Union Address, and congressional hearings for each agency. Most of the activity at middle and higher levels in Washington is orchestrated to respond to such deadlines, and the risk is that everyone concentrates only on the short term, with superficial thought and the norm of quick turnaround. In all likelihood, one simple reason that there is little concern for long-range learning is that there are no scheduled final exams to create, within the executive branch,

cycles of agenda creation and review of long-range learning activities in preparation for public scrutiny.

Lobbying

Both Congress and the executive branch depend heavily on lobbying-group representatives for proposals, criticism, and information on substantive programs and for learning the likely political reactions of different constituencies. In addition to private enterprise and professional and trade associations, most states and large cities have opened offices in Washington to facilitate lobbying communication (see Haider, 1974). Between elections, policy formation is largely intra-Washington politics. A research program might: (a) address what groups or interests, from the standpoint of democratic theory, are not represented effectively or are over-represented, and (b) develop a theory of the most effective selling points, to different actors, of how to be represented effectively (see Bacheller, 1977).

Accountability and Review Systems: Legitimacy Trade-Offs

Washington life is often an adversarial process; initiators specialize in presenting the merits of their proposal and others act as critics (Wildavsky, 1964). And it is a standard human tendency to be sympathetic to those with whom one deals (Edelman, 1964). However, the standard monitoring agent theory of how to design intellectual integrity into collective processes that recognize these individual tendencies and compensate for them is not universally applied. To be sure, the presence of OMB helps keep agencies honest (and gives department leadership the breathing space to please internal constituents and pass along more dubious requests knowing that rejection will probably occur and be blamed on someone else). But, like having outside examiners in the academic world, or the structures of appeal courts for review in the judicial world, or independent auditing in the business world, the executive branch could probably become more honest and effective in

its learning processes by a system of independent critics who, though increasing headaches in the short run, could reduce them in the long run. The bases for such monitoring are present - the staffs of congressional committees have increased markedly in recent decades, both in number and formal academic credentials. Members of Congress have traditionally developed expertise in selected areas, and the General Accounting Office and Legislative Reference Service of the Library of Congress have been expanding their roles. Brookings Institution has always played an important role, and the American Enterprise Institute may become similarly important. Foundation studies have often been crucial. But even allowing for such capacity and change as has occurred, there may not be enough heterodoxy and independence among the people who are now funded: J. Coleman (1978, pp. 701-702), for example, reports evidence from a review of 38 cases of policy research that government contract research (as opposed to independent agent research) produced interpretations of results substantially less critical of the policymaker and less sensitive to the interests of people affected by programs.

Perhaps the bottom-line problem in the political fate of learning agendas is the potential trade-off between legitimacy and learning. Admitting that you have something to learn implies your competence cannot be completely trusted now.

News Media Effects

Although they can use many channels in their areas of responsibility, most people in Washington generally rely on only a few sources of information (even for knowing what the government is doing): *The Washington Post, The New York Times, Newsweek,* and *CBS Evening News.* A crucial and unresolved issue is what is missed or received in distorted form *(Editor and Publisher,* 1979; Gans, 1979) and especially whether the causal explanations received are accurate. Another issue is the degree to which the level of intelligence and sophistication in these channels probably affects the general quality of elite

thinking.

Media fear is probably one of the central psychological facts in political life; to survive, officials must automatically ask how their actions and words might appear in the press. Thus, good, sophisticated reporters probably help to keep government responsive, but their breathless tendency to sensationalize and their love for symbolic politics may keep many critical studies from being done. As well, some editorials, some columnists, and humor (e.g., *Doonesbury* and Art Buchwald s columns) probably contribute significantly to perspective and, occasionally, to a public philosophy (e.g., George Will, David Broder) and to greater compassion (e.g., Tom Wicker).

Uniqueness and Self-Transforming Capacity

- The Uniqueness of Political Behavior. One implicit issue in the analysis of political behavior is the extent to which political behavior is qualitatively different from behavior in other arenas. For example, if you want to explain what people are doing in some competitive sport, the main outlines of behavior (and good understanding and accurate predictions) fall into place through simply knowing the rules, rationales, and standard plays developed in the history of the game; football is not baseball or golf. Nor does explaining the behavior of short-order cooks (if that is what most politicians are) require a doctorate in biochemistry.

The issue is simply whether people behave in qualitatively different - and especially in highly sociologically constrained - ways in political life. If the answer is yes, although we can point to these differences using a social science vocabulary (there are different roles, norms, and motives engaged there), political scientists are alone to chart a unique and well-bounded field of inquiry and also have a warrant for considering much theoretical and empirical work in other disciplines to be irrelevant. But to the extent that there is nothing

unique or constrained about the ecology of games (Bardach, 1977) and other features of American political life, political scientists are also *de facto* psychologists and sociologists who need to integrate - and can aid their understanding by doing so - the developing intelligence of these disciplines.

I do not intend here to resolve the issue of the extent to which all the theories and concepts in this chapter can or should substitute for, expand, deepen, and/or place in context a *sui generis* understanding of the game of politics. I simply want to illustrate the issue with respect to two traditions: hardball politics analysis and group-level analysis.

   - Hardball Politics Assumptions. One well-honored tradition of political analysis sees the game of Washington politics as solely that of tough-minded, Machiavellian players, striving and maneuvering - behind a public facade of idealism and altruistic concern - primarily to achieve well-defined self-interests for power, money, and status. There has been a sociology of knowledge in sectors of political science so that this interpretation of the political game is taken *prima facie* as the mark of being a realistic political analyst. But the diverse theories and concepts considered in this chapter call into question the adequacy of such a tradition. Hardball politics is only one syndrome of behavior, cognition, and motivation (Etheredge, 1979b), and although it is clear that some political actors are of this stripe (and perhaps that people with such concerns are especially drawn to Washington politics) there is a growing view that a wide variety of motivations exist in elite American politics and often within individuals (Barber, 1965, 1972; Etheredge, 1978; Meltsner, 1976; Payne & Woshinsky, 1972; Winter, 1981), and that politicians act not solely for themselves but also from ambivalences and sympathetic identifications with other actors (Edelman, 1964; Searles, 1979, on symbiosis and ambivalence in countertransference). Thus we have the paradox that *realpolitik* analyses may be a bit naive. Even if political actors want to be successfully selfish, however, it has been proposed that on most issues, the

majority of them find themselves quite unsure and confused about where their true self-interest (selfish or enlightened) lies (Bauer, Pool, & Dexter, 1972).

In raising these issues of whether everyone in political life is selfishly political in the hardball, realpolitik sense, I must of course anticipate scorn for being naive from those who already know that this is why people do things. Still, the predictive value of the traditional hardball selfishness model as the unique nature of Washington political games can be tested rigorously.

– When is Group Sociology a Complete Explanation? The second issue raised implicitly by this review is whether political actors in Washington are organized into groups by strong sociological constraints which limit players to certain roles in distinctive units with well-specified rule-like relations: Banfield (1964), Altshuler (1977), and many others have proposed that organized groups are the central determinants in our political life. But an increasing number of political analysts are arguing that such constraints, if once present, might be dissolving (Gergen, 1973). They suggest that American politics is more chaotic than it seemed, that group loyalties are weak, that social class explains less and less, that individual entrepreneurship is central in Congress, that both bureaucracies and the executive branch itself are often loosely coupled congeries of individuals, that alliances are *ad hoc* and shifting, that the concept of individual networks of contacts and influence may be more useful (Pool & Kochen, 1978/1979), that norms of party discipline are largely nonexistent, and that it is the unique personality traits and operational codes of individual decision makers that are decisive in policy formation across a wide range of politically feasible options (Barber, 1972; Bauer *et al!.,* 1972; Etheredge, 1978; Heclo, 1977; Mayhew, 1974; Wyden, 1979). Thus, the argument that analysis of American political life is almost exclusively that of a well-defined and predictable minuet of group conflict and accommodation is probably in trouble, and adequate political analysis may often (although

not always) require more than the traditional explanatory repertoire if it is to keep up with the intelligence and sophistication of behavioral science.

Self-Transformation Capability. A final issue for political analysis is the politics of politics. Or, as one reformer put it, Is American politics an explanation or an excuse? Thus, to the extent that politics is governed by norms, these norms themselves might be transformed through the political process. And, for example, if muddling through incremental adjustment (Lindblom, 1959) actually arises partly from characteristics of actors (e.g., the context embeddedness of Jaques s lower level cognitive capacities, which now preclude synoptic understanding and statesmanlike vision), these too might be changed. At the moment, however, behavioral research on politics has yet to clarify whether there is a major potential for qualitative transformation - in the present case, the potential for giving greater collective priority to statesmanlike long-range learning. It may be [sec the previous discussion of Active Learning - Developmental processes] that most of our theories and estimated coefficients for explaining political life will turn out, in retrospect, to be mere place-holders, that is, answers to the question how did people and organizations behave before they became smarter and wiser?