

Why I Wrote This Book

Suppose some idiot approaches you and says, "I'm going to cut off one of your legs. Now, which one shall it be the left one or the right one?" It's not as if you could walk better with one or the other. There is no such thing as a right or left legged person. So how could you choose?

This is the analogy I used prior to the presidential elections to explain to a good friend of mine and to my son why as Election Day neared I was still undecided. Not undecided with regard for whom to vote, but whether to vote at all! My ambivalence had led me into lengthy discussions with relatives and friends during the preceding two months. Those who supported the Republican candidate argued that not voting would help the Democrat. And those who favored the Democratic candidate, well ... they argued the opposite.

Not that I didn't listen to all of the criticism. After all, for a political scientist not to vote is drastic stuff, the equivalent of a political mortal sin, I thought. As I chose to let others know about my indecision, immediately they began to offer counsel. One suggested, "Vote for who you think will do the best job." Another said, "I understand, neither one will best represent you, so vote for the lesser of the two evils." Someone else quickly brought the cauldron to a boil: "Just vote your conscience."

This statement hit hard. Civic duty was telling me that I should vote; my conscience was telling me the opposite. Would I have lessened the electoral process by not voting? Election Day has always been special to me, far more important than the Fourth of July. Even though Independence Day is the celebration of the young nation's emancipation from a past colonial master, Election Day is a reminder that we are still politically independent. Election Day is the renewal of our democratic way of life, of our freedoms, our rights, and yes, our duties, too.

That election evening, American politics seemed surreal. Elections today are being staged as political Super Bowls. Festivities, enthusiasm, expert discussions, the two political parties as well as the entire media have conditioned us to feel the competition between two opponents. Once political winners emerge, short of supporters pouring champagne over their heads, celebration in politics and in sports are very similar, and this bothers me. After all, football is only a game! But politics! Politics is about life and death, war and peace, justice and injustice, equality and favoritism, my interests vs. others' interests, discrimination, freedom, poverty and wealth. Politics is about the quality of life, the pursuit of happiness ... need I go on? "It's the stakes, stupid!" I reminded myself. "The stakes are what make

politics different!”

I began to think about what politics is all about. Some say that the essence of politics is power. This is not incorrect, I think. Power is essential to politics, but only after the electorate has chosen those who will represent its views. Politics, viewed from the perspective of the voter, is about having to choose at one point in time one set of values over others. Prior to Election Day, candidates put forth their beliefs, sometimes quite clearly, at times vaguely, still at other times consciously deceptive, hoping to gain adherents to their viewpoints. But following the electoral process, and until the next elections come around, the essence of politics entails the competition of values—moral values—struggling for political predominance. During the past several elections, I've experienced difficulty confronting the competition over these values. What has bewildered me has been a serious case of electoral dilemma that results when neither candidate represents most of the values I deem important. My conscience tells me that by voting for one candidate I betray my other set of values and vice-versa. Psychologically speaking, the voter is in an untenable state of being. Voting is reduced either to a toss of the coin or to skipping the electoral process.

If one candidate had represented my values much better than the other, my decision would have been much easier. But, during this particular election, as well as in past ones, too, one candidate represented part of my values; the other candidate represented another portion, and neither one represented the rest of my values. I felt disenfranchised, without true political representation.

There is another aspect of American politics that has sadly disappointed me as well as millions others. I'm referring to the nature of the political discourse and the role politicians and the media play in conditioning the behavior of the electorate.

Although our elected officials seek to project themselves as being well-educated and espousing moral values, their partisanship—more so than their ideologies—and their desire to be elected quite often inhibit them from acting accordingly. Partisan politics in America has become a sophisticated version of World Wrestling Entertainment. Opponents seek to destroy each other through verbal punches, the put-down, the sarcastic remark, and backstabbing varieties.

Not that in the end they provide us with their sincere beliefs. Fearful that truthful information might leave them over-exposed, our public officials opt for favorably distorting their accomplishments while doing the opposite for their opponents. In the end, we are provided with constant one-sided accounts of political information making it difficult for citizens to distinguish between fact and fiction.

The media reinforces this behavior by broadcasting politics as entertainment (witness CNN's advertising of the political debates) likely under the assumption that viewers prefer personal slugfests to rigorous exchanges that compels them to be more sincere. In the end, lack of sincerity, insecurity, negative role modeling, and condescendence toward the electorate characterize politics in America today. Such state of affairs in the political process is the basis for this book.

The views I discuss in this book involve moral choices on some of today's most significant cultural, social, and political issues that will play significant roles in future congressional and presidential elections. I hope the reader will not consider my stand on the issues as the most important aspect of the book; actually, it is the least important one. Far more significant is the process that takes me to my final position on each one of the issues.

In explaining how I arrived at my views, I seek to convey the process itself: how I debated back and forth; the doubts I entertained; my beliefs, my ignorance, and my prejudices, as well as my efforts to overcome them all through seeking information and relying on the values that ultimately lead everyone to make final moral choices.

I decided that this exercise needed to be undertaken from the standpoint of the average voter. Instead of depending on rigorous academic research for each of the issues, I decided that, as much as possible, I would rely on the daily information being provided to the average voter by the mainstream media, namely newspapers, radio and television news, and magazines. Only when sheer ignorance proved to be an obstacle or substantial information became necessary did I browse through the library shelves.

As to the book's format and its content, well, it does need a word or two of explanation. I chose fictional settings and characters to illustrate how I debated the issues in my mind in order to stress the importance of both the dialectical approach and the dialogue. Also, I thought that by examining the complexity of these issues through a fictional dialogue would make the reading process more enjoyable and easier to follow.

Thus, characters are not well defined, lest they detract from the dialogues themselves. Narratives of public events, including publicly recognizable names, however, are not fictional, and when necessary, have been footnoted. In the end, this book is about ideas. How I present these ideas is merely the envelope in which they are delivered.

I described the process I follow in the book, as well as further define my views on moral/political values in the first chapter in order to assist the reader in understanding the dialectical process within the text. Several chapters are self-contained and bear little or no relation to others. Such is the case with chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 13, and 14. On the other hand, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are one lengthy discussion about the American Sexual Revolution. I chose to divide it into three smaller ones to facilitate its reading. Chapters 8 and 9, on the issue of Gay and Heterosexual Marriage, and Chapters 11 and 12, on the application of a *Just War* criteria to our current military conflicts, were also long discussions that were divided to assist the reader in dealing with the multitude of nuances within these topics. Chapter 14 is a discussion of the most important issues demanding immediate attention by a responsible political leadership in the country today.

Why Talk About Moral Values

One major characteristic that sets humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom is that, somehow, we are *wired* to be able to distinguish between right and wrong, even when we make the wrong decision. Hence, to be human is to be moral and vice-versa.

Social issues tend to compete for political relevance. From the standpoint of the voter, once social issues become politically significant they tend to be formulated in terms of values that in turn are manifested through moral choices. In voting, citizens select candidates who stand for issues, make decisions, and formulate policies that deal with matters of right and wrong, thereby making politicians instruments of moral values. Hence, politics, for the most part—setting aside practical and technical decision-making—is about morality. Accordingly, this book deals with the interaction of moral values within American politics. Which moral values, we may ask, are we talking about? Actually, all.

There really is not much difference between the terms *political* and *moral*. Once we dig deep enough, most political issues relate to morality. This is because political issues concern themselves with ultimate values that are downright moral in nature: truth, justice, rights, obligations, freedom, life, death, equality, human dignity, as well as those means-ends values that are specifically American, such as our democratic way of life and the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

The above view takes me to a resultant problem: the mistaken notion that only certain political viewpoints are moral. Thus, candidates who espouse a particular position on specific issues and those who vote for these candidates are said to uphold moral values, while failing to take into account that the opposite position on those same issues likely involves a moral dimension, too.

We may remember how exit polls following the 2004 Elections seemed to indicate that a significant bloc that helped re-elect President Bush was made up of voters who claimed that the President stood for moral values, suggesting—naturally but mistakenly—that those who supported Senator Kerry did not.

Opposition to gay marriages and abortion was seen as taking a stand on morality, while those who fought such views, opposed the war in Iraq, and favored a health care system for the underprivileged were not perceived as promoting moral issues. Cleverly, those managing the Republican campaign, including the President and the Vice President, went along with the misconception while Democrats foolishly failed to depict their views in terms of morality.

One of our greatest stumbling blocks in American politics today is that of *Moral Partisanship*, the propensity to align and subordinate a specific moral ideology to a political party in order to accuse the opposition of immorality. Moral Partisanship reduces the possibility of engaging voters and politicians in a meaningful political dialogue while it makes agreement on issues of national significance often difficult to attain. As political independence, personal wisdom, and judgment become prisoners of partisanship, ideology ends up taking precedence over reason and conviction.

Discussing politics in terms of morality presents other problems. One of them has to do with how a large segment of the population views morality. Today, judging politics from a moral standpoint has become quite contentious. Many pass *holier-than-thou* judgments on political issues, suggesting that the holders of such beliefs are morally superior to those with whom they disagree.

Those not seeing themselves as morally inferior view this behavior as obnoxious—and counterproductive, insofar as it is repelling—and react by labeling the *holier-than-thou* type as self-righteous, arrogant or hypocritical.

Moreover, many believe that, given our human condition, no one should be able to cast a stone against those who do wrong since all of us are prone to make moral mistakes at one point or another throughout our lives.

And yet, we all do it; we cast barrages of moral stones, directly, through insinuations or through cynical remarks. One would think, at the very least, that while engaging in moral partisanship, we should be mindful that the focus of our critique ought be on the action rather than the person, since none of us are without blemish. In effect, words of wisdom come to mind as a means to combat moral partisanship:

And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

Not considering members of the opposition to be one's brothers, of course, would be a convenient reason for disregarding the biblical recommendation. Beyond that, considering the moral logic inherent in Jesus' saying, does that mean that no one should be critical of the political process or that one needs to abstain from rendering social and political judgments of others' behavior?

I would think not. Unless we know that we have philosopher kings for rulers—and even then—the only way to improve the well being of society lies in the continued political exorcism of our own faults and weaknesses.

Nonetheless, I presume that writing about morality and ethics is not an easy task for anyone—certainly, not for me. I have always thought that whoever dares to call the kettle black needs to be of a different shape and color than the proverbial black pot. So, if a great deal of credibility is required to call balls and strikes, having fallen short of the standards I use to judge others' behavior, I may not possess the necessary standing to make a very good umpire.

So why do it?

I can think of two reasons: the first one, civic duty, my obligation to fulfill that part of the social contract I entered when I became a political citizen, to feel a sense of responsibility toward one's social and political environment. And the second one, because being just as human and fallible as anyone else is, I cannot find in my own flaws an excuse to remain silent amidst the wrongs I see around me.

But the fact that we all share in our weak human condition does not necessarily provide us with a renewed ethical credibility to pass judgment on rights and wrongs, even if we have the freedom and the capacity to do so, which we do.

The many who choose to indict social and political behavior carry a rather heavy burden; one that I regard as a moral imperative: a steadfast determination to establish consistency in one's behavior; to line up, conform, harmonize one's beliefs and values with one's actions and judgments. In other words, our behavior needs to measure up to our standards. The only way to regain a weakened or lost credibility is not only to stop acting like the pot and the kettle; we also have to transfigure ourselves and become something other than... the pot and the kettle.

One last set of questions are in order regarding morality in politics: Is it possible for two opposite moral stands on the same issue to be regarded as equally moral? Yes, indeed, and this should not surprise us; it happens all the time. Each one regards his or her own view as being the moral one while denying the morality of the other, thus, the attitude reflected in the book's title. This point takes me to somewhat more complex questions. For example, can both sides be morally right?

Setting aside issues dealing with the individual's conscience, in principle, *right* and *wrong* are mutually exclusive terms. This means that, objectively speaking, if one side is right, the other one is wrong. If so, how do we know which side is right? In politics, we do not know. That is what elections and politics are all about. Well, almost.

It would appear as if political morality, as presented on the above terms, is relativistic—one's idea of what is moral is just as good as another's. I think that, until human consensus on what constitutes moral behavior is attained, political morality, indeed, shall remain relativistic.

Does this mean that there is no way of knowing what is morally right or wrong? Naturally, this is not the case. On an individual level, each person, ultimately paying attention to his or her conscience, decides what is right and what is wrong.

At the political level, however, there exists in a democracy a *moral* arbiter. While individuals and parties may continue to insist on their own righteousness, the political process, reconfigured by elections, decides, not upon the morality of issues or political behavior, but rather which moral values gain political ascendancy, and often, legality.

Thus, politics allocates moral values through elections and decision-making. In the end, governmental policies may be perceived as moral expressions of values, mindful that legality is not equated with morality.

While affirming the necessity to consider political reality, I strongly believe that we need to set for ourselves ideal forms of behavior. I dislike the Machiavellian School that claims that, because evil dwells in world politics, politicians need to become as devious as the Devil itself in order to be successful.

I prefer a different, more mature, type of idealism. If we think about it, idealism, like morality, needs to be practical and its goals attainable. Its means-to-ends strategies need to be regularly scrutinized and closely reviewed to ensure that we

continuously strive toward loftier, yet realistic goals.

And, if morality is to be practical, then morality needs to take into account political reality as well. Another way of saying this is that moral ideals that cannot be humanly attainable are useless and impractical.

How would such a mixture of realism and idealism in politics work? Both in domestic and foreign policy, idealism sets the agenda while realism imposes limits and configures policy; when realism gets out of hand, it is idealism's turn to check its advances, and vice-versa. I firmly believe that there is a difference between taking into account the reality of power politics on the one hand, and being guided by this reality on the other, under the assumption that *that's the only way politics operate*.

I do not think I am being naïve in arguing for an improved political environment. Idealistic, yes, but not naïve.

Some may argue that, in politics, idealism is for the naïve-minded, the faint of heart.

Cynics decry social and moral ideals as daydreaming, as a foolish conduct that would not stand a chance in the presence of power-hungry individuals who roam throughout the land we call politics.

Yet, the closer I look at these individuals, the more their behavior begins to resemble the actions of those cynics who deprecate idealism in our political life. Curiously enough, when election time comes, these realists and cynics of the world opt for different clothing. Idealism then becomes acceptable, as candidates, using lofty rhetoric, make promise after promise through old-fashioned demagoguery.

I may be wrong, but I am of the opinion that whoever cannot blend realism and morality, each one of which are essential to the body politic, is likely to fall short of attaining what I think should be politics' highest goal: to constantly strive toward the greatest possible common good for all.