

THE MARCH OF FOLLY

FROM TROY TO VIETNAM

BARBARA W. TUCHMAN



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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“*The March of Folly* is, at one level, a glittering narrative of three “major events.... At another, it is a moral essay on the crimes and follies of governments and the misfortunes the governed suffered in consequence.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“The specter of this ultimate folly [nuclear war] hangs over Barbara Tuchman’s brilliant and troubling book, *The March of Folly*, like a ghost from the future. She addresses to it not a word. She doesn’t have to. No one could read her accounts of the powerful of this world—corrupt Renaissance popes, the arrogant ministers of King George III of Britain who looted America, the confident Cold War mandarins of Washington ... without thinking of the solemn warnings since 1945 that we are building the weapons of our own destruction. For Tuchman this is the essence of folly: disaster plainly foreseen by many in good time, ready and feasible alternatives, willfully ignored by men obsessed with power.”

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Vogel

“Like her past books, her new one is witty, intelligent and elegant. Tuchman without question is the most skilled popular historian in practice.”

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THE MARCH OF FOLLY

From Troy to Vietnam

BARBARA W. TUCHMAN

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“And I can see no reason why anyone should suppose that in the future the same motifs already heard will not be sounding still ... put to use by reasonable men to reasonable ends or by madmen to nonsense and disaster.”

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Foreword to *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, 1969

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PURSUIT OF POLICY CONTRARY TO SELF-INTEREST

A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests. Mankind, it seems, makes poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere of wisdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?

Why, to begin at the beginning, did the Trojan rulers drag that suspicious-looking wooden horse inside their walls despite every reason to suspect a Greek trick? Why did successive ministries of George III insist on coercing rather than conciliating the American colonies though repeatedly advised by many counselors that the harm done must be greater than any possible gain? Why did Charles XII and Napoleon and successively Hitler invade Russia despite the disasters incurred by each predecessor? Why did Montezuma, master of fierce and eager armies and of a city of 300,000, succumb passively to a party of several hundred alien invaders even after they had shown themselves all too obviously human beings, not gods? 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 do the oil-importing nations engage in rivalry for the available supply when a firm united front vis-à-vis the exporters would gain them control of the situation? Why in recent times have British trade unions in a lunatic spectacle seemed periodically bent on dragging their country toward paralysis, apparently under the impression that they are separate from the whole? Why does American business insist on “growth” when it is demonstrably using up the three basics of life on our planet—land, water and unpolluted air? (While unions and business are not strictly government in the political sense, they represent governing situations.)

Elsewhere than in government man has accomplished marvels: invented the means in our lifetime to leave the earth and voyage to the moon; in the past, harnessed wind and electricity, raised earth-bound stones into soaring cathedrals, woven silk brocades out of the spinnings of a worm, constructed the instruments of music, derived motor power from steam, controlled or eliminated diseases, pushed back the North Sea and created land in its place, classified the forms of nature, penetrated the mysteries of the cosmos. “While all other sciences have advanced,” confessed our second President, John Adams, “government is at a stand; little better practiced now than three or four thousand years ago.”

Misgovernment is of four kinds, often in combination. They are: 1) tyranny or oppression, of which history provides so many well-known examples that they do not need citing; 2) excessive ambition, such as Athens’ attempted conquest of Sicily in the Peloponnesian War, Philip II’s of England via the Armada, Germany’s twice-attempted rule of Europe by a self-conceived master race, Japan’s bid for an empire of Asia; 3) incompetence or decadence, as in the case of the late Roman empire, the last Romanovs and the last imperial dynasty of China; and finally 4) folly or perversity. This book is concerned with the last in a specific manifestation; that is, the pursuit of policy contrary to the self-interest of the constituency.

state involved. Self-interest is whatever conduces to the welfare or advantage of the body being governed; folly is a policy that in these terms is counter-productive.

To qualify as folly for this inquiry, the policy adopted must meet three criteria: it must have been perceived as counter-productive in its own time, not merely by hindsight. This is important, because all policy is determined by the mores of its age. "Nothing is more unfair than as an English historian has well said, "than to judge men of the past by the ideas of the present. Whatever may be said of morality, political wisdom is certainly ambulatory." To avoid judging by present-day values, we must take the opinion of the time and investigate only those episodes whose injury to self-interest was recognized by contemporaries.

Secondly a feasible alternative course of action must have been available. To remove the problem from personality, a third criterion must be that the policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one political lifetime. Misgovernment by a single sovereign or tyrant is too frequent and too individual to be worth a generalized inquiry. Collective government or a succession of rulers in the same office, as in the case of the Renaissance popes, raises a more significant problem. (The Trojan Horse, to be examined shortly, is an exception to the time requirement, and Rehoboam to the group requirement, but each is such a classic example and occurs so early in the known history of government as to illustrate how deeply the phenomenon of folly is ingrained.)

Folly's appearance is independent of era or locality; it is timeless and universal, although the habits and beliefs of a particular time and place determine the form it takes. It is unrelated 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 Communist governments functions no more rationally or effectively in power than the middle class, 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 unwisdom 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 sixty years of control it must be accorded a kind of brutal success. If the majority of Russians are materially better off than before, the cost in cruelty and tyranny has been no less and probably greater than under the czars.

The French Revolution, great prototype of populist government, reverted rapidly to crowned autocracy as soon as it acquired an able administrator. The revolutionary regimes of the Jacobins and Directorate 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 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 on the principle of "*la carrière ouverte aux talents*"—the desired talents being intelligence, energy, industry and obedience. That worked for a while until he too, the classic victim of hubris, destroyed himself through overextension.

It may be asked why, since folly or perversity is inherent in individuals, should we expect anything else of government? The reason for concern is that folly in government has more impact on more people than individual follies, and therefore governments have a greater duty to act according to reason. Just so, and since this has been known for a very long time, why

has not our species taken precautions and erected safeguards against it? Some attempts have been made, beginning with Plato's proposal of selecting a class to be trained as professionals in government. According to his scheme, the ruling class in a just society should be apprenticed to the art of ruling, drawn from the rational and wise. Since he recognized that in the 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. His solution, beautiful and unattainable, was philosopher-kings. "The philosophers must become kings in our cities or those who are now kings and potentates must learn to seek wisdom like true philosophers, and so political power and intellectual wisdom will be joined in one." Until that day, he acknowledged, "there can be no rest from the troubles for the cities, and I think for the whole human race." And so it has been.

Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists in 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 deflected by the facts. It is epitomized in a historian's statement about Philip II of Spain, the surpassing wooden-head of all sovereigns: "No experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence."

A classic case in action 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, allowing the French left to remain 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 through western Belgium and the French coastal provinces. The 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 to the French General Staff in 1913 had to be, and was, resolutely ignored in order that no concern about a possible German invasion on the west should be allowed to divert strength from a direct French offensive eastward to the Rhine. When war came, the Germans could and did use reserves in the front line and did come the long way around on the west with results that determined a protracted war and its fearful consequences for our century.

Wooden-headedness is also the refusal to benefit from experience, a characteristic in which medieval rulers of the 14th century were supreme. No matter how often and obvious the devaluation of the currency disrupted the economy and angered the people, the Valois monarchs of France resorted to it whenever they were desperate for cash until they provoked insurrection by the bourgeoisie. In warfare, the *métier* of the governing class, wooden-headedness was conspicuous. No matter how often a campaign that depended on living off a hostile country ran into want and even starvation, as in the English invasions of France in the Hundred Years' War, campaigns for which this fate was inevitable were regularly undertaken.

There was another King of Spain at the beginning of the 17th century, 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 folly. Cases come so thick and fast that one can select only the overriding one: why do the superpowers not begin mutual divestment of

the means of human suicide? Why do we invest all our skills and resources in a contest for armed superiority which can never be attained for long enough to make it worth having rather than in an effort to find a modus vivendi with our antagonist—that is to say, a way of living, not dying?

For 2500 years, political philosophers from Plato and Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton, Nietzsche and Marx, 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 folly has been a chronic and pervasive problem. Count Axel Oxenstierna, Chancellor of Sweden during the turmoil of the Thirty Years' War under the hyperactive Gustavus Adolphus, and actual ruler of the country under his daughter Christina, had ample experience on which to base his dying conclusion, "Know, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed."

Because individual sovereignty was government's normal form for so long, it exhibits the human characteristics that have caused folly in government as far back as we have records. Rehoboam, King of Israel, son of King Solomon, succeeded his father at the age of 41 approximately 930 B.C., about a century before Homer composed the national epic of his people. Without loss of time, the new King committed the act of folly that was to divide his nation and lose forever its ten northern tribes, collectively called Israel. Among them were many who were disaffected by heavy taxation in the form of forced labor imposed under King Solomon, and had already in his reign made an effort to secede. They had gathered around one of Solomon's generals, Jeroboam, "a mighty man of valor," who undertook to lead them into revolt upon a prophecy that he would inherit rule of the ten tribes afterward. The Lord, speaking through the voice of a certain Ahijah the Shilonite, played a part in the affair, but his role then and later is obscure and seems to have been inserted by narrators who felt the Almighty's hand had to be present. When the revolt failed, Jeroboam fled to Egypt where Shishak, the King of that country, gave him shelter.

Acknowledged King without question by the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, Rehoboam, clearly aware of unrest in Israel, traveled at once to Shechem, center of the north, to obtain the people's allegiance. He was met instead by a delegation of Israelite representatives who demanded that he lighten the heavy yoke of labor put upon them by his father and said that if he did so they would serve him as loyal subjects. Among the delegation was Jeroboam who had hurriedly been sent for from Egypt as soon as King Solomon died and whose presence must certainly have warned Rehoboam that he faced a critical situation.

Temporizing, Rehoboam asked the delegation to depart and return after three days for his reply. Meanwhile he consulted with the old men of his father's council, who advised him to accede to the people's demand, and told him that if he would act graciously and "speak good words to them they will be thy servants forever." With the first sensation of sovereignty heating his blood, Rehoboam found this advice too tame and turned to the "young men that were grown up with him." They knew his disposition and, like counselors of any time who wish to consolidate their position in the "Oval Office," gave advice they knew would be

palatable. He should make no concessions but tell the people outright that his rule would be not lighter but heavier than his father's. They composed for him the famous words that could be any despot's slogan: "And thus shalt thou say to them: 'Whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. Whereas my father chastised you with whips, I shall chastise you with scorpions.' " Delighted with this ferocious formula, Rehoboam faced the delegation when it returned on the third day and addressed them "roughly," word for word as the young men had suggested.

That his subjects might not be prepared to accept this reply meekly seems not to have occurred to Rehoboam beforehand. Not without reason he earned in Hebrew history the designation "ample in folly." Instantly—so instantly as to suggest that they had previously decided upon their course of action in case of a negative reply—the men of Israel announced their secession from the House of David with the battle cry "To thy tents, O Israel! See to thine own house, David!"

With as little wisdom as would have astonished even Count Oxenstierna, Rehoboam took the most provocative action possible in the circumstances. Calling upon the very man who represented the hated yoke, Adoram, the commander or overseer of the forced labor tribute, he ordered him, apparently without providing supporting forces, to establish his authority. The people stoned Adoram to death, upon which the rash and foolish King speedily summoned his chariot and fled to Jerusalem, where he summoned all the warriors of Judah and Benjamin for war to reunite the nation. At the same time, the people of Israel appointed Jeroboam their King. He reigned for twenty-two years and Rehoboam for seventeen, "and there was war between them all their days."

The protracted struggle weakened both states, encouraged the vassal lands conquered by David east of the Jordan—Moab, Edom, Ammon and others—to regain their independence and opened the way to invasion by Egypt. King Shishak "with a large army" captured fortified border posts and approached Jerusalem, which Rehoboam saved from conquest only by paying tribute to the enemy in the form of golden treasure from the Temple and royal palace. Shishak penetrated also into the territory of his former ally Jeroboam as far as Megiddo but, evidently lacking the resources necessary to establish control, faded back into Egypt.

The twelve tribes were never reunited. Torn by their conflict, the two states could not maintain the proud empire established by David and Solomon, which had extended from northern Syria to the borders of Egypt with dominion over the international caravan routes and access to foreign trade through the Red Sea. Reduced and divided, they were less able to withstand aggression by their neighbors. After two hundred years of separate existence, the ten tribes of Israel were conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and, in accordance with Assyrian policy toward conquered peoples, were driven from their land and forcibly dispersed, to vanish into one of the great unknowns and perennial speculations of history.

The kingdom of Judah, containing Jerusalem, lived on as the land of the Jewish people. Though regaining at different times much of the northern territory, it suffered conquest, total and exile by the waters of Babylon, then revival, civil strife, foreign sovereignty, rebellion, another conquest, another farther exile and dispersion, oppression, ghetto and massacre—but not disappearance. The alternative course that Rehoboam might have taken, advised by the elders and so lightly rejected, exacted a long revenge that has left its mark for 2800 years.

Equal in ruin but opposite in cause was the folly that brought about the conquest of Mexico. While Rehoboam is not difficult to understand, the case of Montezuma serves to remind us that folly is not always explicable. The Aztec state of which he was Emperor from 1502 to 1520 was rich, sophisticated and predatory. Surrounded by mountains on a plateau in the interior (now the site of Mexico City), its capital was a city of 60,000 households built upon the piles, causeways and islets of a lake, with stucco houses, streets and temples, brilliant in pomp and ornament, strong in arms. With colonies extending east to the Gulf coast and west to the Pacific, the empire included an estimated five million people. The Aztec rulers were advanced in the arts and sciences and agriculture in contrast to their ferocious religion, whose rituals of human sacrifice were unsurpassed in blood and cruelty. Aztec armies conducted annual campaigns to capture slave labor and victims for sacrifice from neighboring tribes, and to bring new areas into subjection to provide food supplies, of which they were always short, and to bring new areas into subjection to punish revolts. In the early years of his reign, Montezuma led such campaigns in person, greatly extending his boundaries.

Aztec culture was in thrall to the gods—to bird gods, serpent gods, jaguar gods, to the rain god Tlaloc and the sun god Tezcatlipoc, who was lord of the earth's surface, the "Tempter" who "whispered ideas of savagery into the human mind." The founding god of the state, Quetzalcoatl, had fallen from glory and departed into the eastern sea, whence his return to earth was expected, to be foreshadowed by omens and apparitions and to portend the downfall of the empire.

In 1519 a party of Spanish conquistadors coming from Cuba under the command of Hernán Cortés landed on the Mexican Gulf coast at Vera Cruz. In the twenty-five years since Columbus had discovered the Caribbean islands, Spanish invaders had established a rule that rapidly devastated the native people. If their bodies could not survive Spanish labor, their souls, in Christian terms, were saved. In their mail and helmets, the Spaniards were not settlers with patience to clear forests and plant crops, but restless ruthless adventurers greedy for slaves and gold, and Cortés was their epitome. More or less at odds with the Governor of Cuba, he set forth on an expedition with 600 men, seventeen horses and ten artillery pieces ostensibly for exploration and trade but more truly, as his conduct was to make plain, for glory and an independent domain under the Crown. His first act on landing was to burn his ships so that there could be no retreat.

Informed by the local inhabitants, who hated the Aztec overlords, of the riches and power of the capital, Cortés with the larger part of his force boldly set out to conquer the great city of the interior. Though reckless and daring, he was not foolhardy and made alliances along the way with tribes hostile to the Aztecs, especially with Tlaxcala, their chief rival. He set word ahead representing himself as the ambassador of a foreign prince but made no effort to pose as a reincarnated Quetzalcoatl, which for the Spaniards would have been out of the question. They marched with their own priests in very visible presence carrying crucifixes and banners of the Virgin and with the proclaimed goal of winning souls for Christ.

On report of the advance, Montezuma summoned his council, some of whom strongly urged resisting the strangers by force or fraud, while others argued that if they were indeed ambassadors of a foreign prince, a friendly welcome would be advisable, and if they were supernatural beings, as their wondrous attributes suggested, resistance would be useless. Their "gray" faces, their "stone" garments, their arrival at the coast in waterborne houses

with white wings, their magic fire that burst from tubes to kill at a distance, their strange beasts that carried the leaders on their backs, suggested the supernatural to a people for whom the gods were everywhere. The idea that their leader might be Quetzalcoatl seemed however, to have been Montezuma's own peculiar dread.

Uncertain and apprehensive, he did the worst thing he could have done in the circumstances: he sent splendid gifts that displayed his wealth, and letters urging the visitors to turn back that indicated his weakness. Borne by a hundred slaves, the gifts of jewels, textiles, gorgeous featherwork and two huge plates of gold and silver "as large as cart wheels" excited the Spaniards' greed, while the letters forbidding further approach to the capital and almost pleading with them to return to their homeland and couched in so flattering language designed to provoke neither gods nor ambassadors were not very formidable. The Spaniards marched on.

Montezuma made no move to stop them or bar their way when they reached the city. Instead, they were greeted with ceremonial welcome and escorted to quarters in the palace and elsewhere. The Aztec army waiting in the hills for the signal to attack was never called, although it could have annihilated the invaders, cut off escape over the causeways or isolated and starved them into surrender. Just such plans had in fact been prepared, but were betrayed to Cortés by his interpreter. Alerted, he put Montezuma under house arrest in his own palace as a hostage against attack. The sovereign of a warlike people outnumbering the captors by a thousand to one, submitted. Through an excess of mysticism or superstition, he had apparently convinced himself that the Spaniards were indeed the party of Quetzalcoatl come to register the break-up of his empire and, believing himself doomed, made no effort to avert his fate.

Nevertheless it was plain enough from the visitors' ceaseless demands for gold and provisions that they were all too human, and from their constant rituals in worship of a naked man pinned to crossed sticks of wood and of a woman with a child, that they were not connected with Quetzalcoatl, to whose cult they showed themselves distinctly hostile. Whether in a spasm of regret or at someone's persuasion, Montezuma ordered an ambush of the garrison that Cortés had left behind at Vera Cruz, his men killed two Spaniards and sent the head of one of them to the capital as evidence. Asking no parley or explanation, Cortés instantly put the Emperor in chains and forced him to yield the perpetrators whom he burned alive at the palace gates, not forgetting to exact an immense punitive tribute in gold and jewels. Any remaining illusion of a relationship to the gods vanished with the severed Spaniard's head.

Montezuma's nephew Cacama denounced Cortés as a murderer and thief and threatened to raise a revolt, but the Emperor remained silent and passive. So confident was Cortés that, on learning that a force from Cuba had arrived at the coast to apprehend him, he went back to deal with it, leaving a small occupying force which further angered the inhabitants by smashing altars and seizing food. The spirit of revolt rose. Having lost authority, Montezuma could neither take command nor suppress the people's anger. On Cortés' return, the Aztecs under the Emperor's brother, rebelled. The Spaniards, who never had more than thirteen muskets among them, fought back with sword, pike and crossbow, and torches to set fire to houses. Hard pressed, though they had the advantage of steel, they brought out Montezuma to call for a halt in the fighting, but on his appearance his people stoned him as a coward and

traitor. Carried back into the palace by the Spaniards, he died three days later and was refused funeral honors by his subjects. The Spaniards evacuated the city during the night with a loss of a third of their force and their loot.

Rallying his Mexican allies, Cortés defeated a superior Aztec army in battle outside the city. With the aid of the Tlaxcalans, he organized a siege, cut off the city's supply of fresh water and food and gradually penetrated it, shoveling the rubble of destroyed buildings into the lake as he advanced. On 13 August 1521, the remnant of the inhabitants, starving and leaderless, surrendered. The conquerors filled in the lake, built their own city on the debris and stamped their rule upon Mexico, Aztecs and allies alike, for the next three hundred years.

One cannot quarrel with religious beliefs, especially of a strange, remote, half-understood culture. But when the beliefs become a delusion maintained against natural evidence to the point of losing the independence of a people, they may fairly be called folly. The category is once again wooden-headedness, in the special variety of religious mania. It has never wrought a greater damage.

Follies need not have negative consequences for all parties concerned. The Reformation brought on by the folly of the Renaissance Papacy, would not generally be declared misfortune by Protestants. Americans on the whole would not consider their independence provoked by the folly of the English, to be regrettable. Whether the Moorish conquest of Spain, which endured over the greater part of the country for three hundred years and over lesser parts for eight hundred, was positive or negative in its results may be arguable depending on the position of the viewer, but that it was brought on by the folly of Spanish rulers at the time is clear.

These rulers were the Visigoths, who had invaded the Roman empire in the 4th century and by the end of the 5th century had established themselves in control of most of the Iberian peninsula over the numerically superior Hispano-Roman inhabitants. For two hundred years they remained at odds and often in armed contention with their subjects. Through the unrestrained self-interest normal for sovereigns of the time, they created only hostility and at the end became its victims. Hostility was sharpened by animosity in religion, the local inhabitants being Catholics of the Roman rite while the Visigoths belonged to the Arian sect. Further contention arose over the method of selecting the sovereign. The native nobility tried to maintain the customary elective principle, while the kings, afflicted by dynastic longings, were determined to make and keep the process hereditary. They used every means of exile or execution, confiscation of property, unequal taxation and unequal land distribution to eliminate rivals and weaken the local opposition. These procedures naturally caused the nobles to foment insurrection and hatreds to flourish.

Meanwhile, through the stronger organization and more active intolerance of the Roman Church and its bishops in Spain, Catholic influence was gaining, and in the late 6th century, succeeded in converting two heirs to the throne. The first was put to death by his father, but the second, called Recared, reigned, at last a ruler conscious of the need for unity. He was the first of the Goths to recognize that for a ruler opposed by two inimical groups, it is folly to continue antagonizing both at once. Convinced that union could never be achieved under Arianism, Recared acted energetically against his former associates and proclaimed Catholicism the official religion. Several of his successors, too, made efforts to placate former

adversaries, recalling the banished and restoring property, but divisions and cross-currents were too strong for them and they had lost influence to the Church, in which they had created their own Wooden Horse.

Confirmed in power, the Catholic episcopate lunged into secular government, proclaiming its laws, arrogating its powers, holding decisive Councils, legitimizing favored usurpers and fatefully promoting a relentless campaign of discrimination and punitive rules against anyone “not a Christian”—namely the Jews. Beneath the surface, Arian loyalties persisted; decadence and debauchery afflicted the court. Hastened by cabals and plots, usurpations, assassinations and uprisings, the turnover in kings during the 7th century was rapid, none holding the throne for more than ten years.

During this century, the Moslems, animated by a new religion, exploded in a wild career of conquest that extended from Persia to Egypt and, by the year 700, reached Morocco across the narrow straits from Spain. Their ships raided the Spanish coast and though beaten back, the new power on the opposite shore offered to every disaffected group under the Goths the ever-tempting prospect of foreign aid against the internal foe. No matter how often repeated in history, this ultimate resort ends in only one way, as the Byzantine emperors learned when they invited in the Turks against domestic enemies: the invited power stays and takes over control.

For Spain's Jews, the time had come. A once tolerated minority who had arrived with the Romans and prospered as merchants, they were now shunned, persecuted, subjected to forced conversion, deprived of rights, property, occupation, even of children forcibly taken from them and given to Christian slave owners. Threatened with extinction, they made contact with and provided intelligence to the Moors through their co-religionists in North Africa. For them anything would be better than Christian rule.

The precipitating act came, however, from the central flaw of disunity in the society. In 710, a conspiracy of nobles refused to acknowledge as King the son of the last sovereign, defeated and deposed him and elected to the throne one of their own number, Duke Rodrigo, throwing the country into dispute and confusion. The ousted King and his adherents crossed the straits and, on the theory that the Moors would obligingly regain their throne for them, invited their assistance.

The Moorish invasion of 711 smashed through a country at odds with itself. Rodrigo's army offered ineffective resistance and the Moors won control with a force of 12,000. Capturing city after city, they took the capital, established surrogates—in one case handing a city over to the Jews—and moved on. Within seven years their conquest of the peninsula was complete. The Gothic monarchy, having failed to develop a workable principle of government or to achieve fusion with its subjects, collapsed under assault because it had put down no roots.

In those dark ages between the fall of Rome and the medieval revival, government had no recognized theory or structure or instrumentality beyond arbitrary force. Since disorder is the least tolerable of social conditions, government began to take shape in the Middle Ages and afterward as a recognized function with recognized principles, methods, agencies, parliaments, bureaucracies. It acquired authority, mandates, improved means and capacities, but not a noticeable increase in wisdom or immunity from folly. This is not to say that

crowned heads and ministries are incapable of governing wisely and well. Periodically the exception appears in strong and effective, occasionally even benign, rulership, even more occasionally wise. Like folly, these appearances exhibit no correlation with time and place. Solon of Athens, perhaps the wisest, was among the earliest. He is worth a glance.

Chosen archon, or chief magistrate, in the 6th century B.C., at a time of economic distress and social unrest, Solon was asked to save the state and compose its differences. Harsh debt laws permitting creditors to seize lands pledged as security, or even the debtor himself for slave labor, had impoverished and angered the plebeians and created a rising mood of insurrection. Having neither participated in the oppressions by the rich nor supported the cause of the poor, Solon enjoyed the unusual distinction of being acceptable to both; by the rich, according to Plutarch, because he was a man of wealth and substance, and by the poor because he was honest. In the body of laws he proclaimed, Solon's concern was not partisanship, but justice, fair dealing between strong and weak, and stable government. He abolished enslavement for debt, freed the enslaved, extended suffrage to the plebeians, reformed the currency to encourage trade, regulated weights and measures, established legal codes governing inherited property, civil rights of citizens, penalties for crime and finally, taking no chances, exacted an oath from the Athenian Council to maintain his reforms for ten years.

Then he did an extraordinary thing, possibly unique among heads of state: purchasing voluntary exile on the pretext of traveling to see the world, he sailed into voluntary exile for ten years. Fair and just as a statesman, Solon was no less wise as a man. He could have retained supreme control, enlarging his authority to that of tyrant, and was indeed reproached because he did not, but knowing that endless petitions and proposals to modify this or that law would only gain him ill-will if he did not comply, he determined to leave, in order to keep his laws intact because the Athenians could not repeal them without his sanction. His decision suggests that an absence of overriding personal ambition together with shrewd common sense are among the essential components of wisdom. In the notes of his life, writing of himself in the third person, Solon put it differently: "Each day he grew older and learned something new."

Strong and effective rulers, if lacking the complete qualities of Solon, rise from time to time in heroic size above the rest, visible towers down the centuries. Pericles presided over Athens' greatest century with sound judgment, moderation and high renown. Rome had Julius Caesar, a man of remarkable governing talents, although a ruler who arouses opponents. His assassination is probably not as wise as he might be. Later, under the four "good emperors" of the Antonine dynasty—Trajan and Hadrian, the organizers and builders; Antoninus Pius, the benevolent; Marcus Aurelius, the revered philosopher—Roman citizens enjoyed good government, prosperity and respect for about a century. In England, Alfred the Great repelled the invaders and fathered the unity of his countrymen. Charlemagne was able to impose order on 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, not equalled until four centuries later by Frederick II, called Stupor Mundi, or Wonder of the World. Frederick took a hand in everything: arts, sciences, laws, poetry, universities, crusades, parliaments, wars, politics and contention with the Papacy, which in the end, for all his remarkable talents, frustrated him. Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent, promoted the glory of Florence but through his dynastic ambitions undermined the republic. Two queens, Elizabeth I of England and Maria Theresa of

Austria, were both able and sagacious rulers who raised their countries to the highest estate.

The product of a new nation, George Washington, was a leader who shines among the best. While Jefferson was more learned, more cultivated, a more extraordinary mind, a unsurpassed intelligence, a truly universal man, Washington had a character of rock and a kind of nobility that exerted a natural dominion over others, together with the inner strength and perseverance that enabled him to prevail over a flood of obstacles. He made possible both the physical victory of American independence and the survival of the fractious and tottering young republic in its beginning years.

Around him in extraordinary fertility political talent bloomed as if touched by some tropical sun. For all their flaws and quarrels, the Founding Fathers have rightfully been called by Arthur M. 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 that the historian 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.

It would be invaluable if we could know what produced this burst of talent from a base of only two and a half million inhabitants. Schlesinger suggests some contributing factors: wide diffusion of education, challenging economic opportunities, social mobility, training in self-government—all these encouraged citizens to cultivate their political aptitudes to the utmost. With 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 above all the need of the moment was 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?

Not before or since has so much careful and reasonable thinking been invested in the formation of a governmental system. In the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, too much class hatred and bloodshed were involved to allow for fair results or permanent constitutions. For two centuries, the American arrangement has always managed to right itself under pressure without discarding the system and trying another after every crisis, as have Italy and Germany, France and Spain. Under accelerating incompetence in America, that may change. Social systems can survive a good deal of folly when circumstances are historically favorable, or when bungling is cushioned by large resources or absorbed by sheer size as in the United States during its period of expansion. Today, when there are no more cushions, folly is less affordable. Yet the Founders remain a phenomenon to keep in mind to encourage our estimate of human possibilities, even if their example is too rare to be a basis of normal expectations.

In between flashes of good government, folly has its day. In the Bourbons of France, it burst into brilliant flower.

Louis XIV is usually considered a master monarch, largely because people tend to accept successfully dramatized self-estimation. In reality he exhausted France’s economic and human

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