A Preface to American Political Theory
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Introduction

What follows is a book aimed at the student or researcher who is about to begin disciplined study of American political theory. Considerable emphasis is placed on clarifying the core of that discipline and its attendant methodologies, so that it will be clearly distinguishable from other intellectual enterprises. Such clarification is essential if we are to emancipate American political theorists from dominance by either an antitheoretical empiricism or by European methodologies and theories that are inappropriate to the American context. Such emancipation requires a more distinct and coherent identity for American political theory than it has now, but the task of clarifying its identity is complicated because that identity includes parts of those very approaches from which it is to be distinguished. For example, American political theory must be distinguished from narrow empiricism, yet systematic empirical study is an essential part of American political theory. Indeed, the very essence of American political theory, that which identifies its core and differentiates it from other branches of study, is the insistence on yoking together intellectual traditions and modes of study—normative, empirical, and analytic—that have tended to drift apart into camps characterized by either antagonism or mutual indifference.

If successful, what follows will help rescue American political theory from the undeserved status of a very subordinate subfield of political theory. This subordination results from the tendency of people in other areas of inquiry to claim the entire enterprise as their own and either to apply narrow criteria from their respective approaches, against which American political theory fails to mea-
sure up, or to use methodologies that intrude upon a balanced study and skew the results. American political theory from these various points of view is theoretically derivative, nonphilosophical, merely ideological, or empirically incoherent. That is, the tendency of scholars to treat American political theory in an offhanded manner largely reaffirms the status of the field as an intellectual backwater. The solution is to create a standard of scholarship against which these intrusions will be seen for what they are. Such a standard of scholarship requires us to define a body of material to be mastered, to learn a set of relevant methodologies and their proper usage, and to think through more carefully the mental stance the material and its study require us to adopt. In sum, this book is an introduction to the mental discipline required of students of American political theory who will set the standards for inquiry in the future.