Chapter 6

Prolegomenon

Plato long ago suggested that the first step in the journey to knowledge consists in distinguishing appearance from reality, illusion from truth. A fork, when placed in a glass of water, may appear to bend, but a theoretical physics based on the assumption that "solid objects bend when placed in water" does not go very far. By the same token, before one can engage in American political theory it is necessary that certain facts be rehearsed and working assumptions examined, so that even if we do not agree on where to begin we do not unconsciously or uncritically begin with equivalents to the water-bends-solids premise, such as the assumption that political theories are only ideologies or that texts in political theory must always be approached as complete and ideal. A pretheoretical analysis that undergirds, informs, and directs inquiry is a necessary part of true theoretical thinking; the previous chapters are designed to contribute to a pretheoretical analysis of American political theory.

The analysis reveals a number of assumptions that must be examined. How we answer the questions that result from a confrontation with these assumptions will determine how we define the discipline, and so it is worth our assembling here an overview of the position that is being offered. To sharpen the discussion, the position will be presented as a series of premises that read like theorems or settled propositions, although it should be remembered that the premises are not designed as assumptions to be accepted as much as they are matters that need to be addressed more explicitly.

First Premise: Any theory worthy of the name is a claim for some
truth that transcends not only its historical era but also its culture and the intent of its creator. I have focused this discussion heavily on the American founding era because it is the preface to 200 years of American political events and theoretical analysis. Also, space does not permit a discussion of American political theory since 1800. Yet the implications of the first premise include the absolute necessity that the study of American political theory cover the entire American experience, from 1620 to the present, not just the founding era, for two reasons. First, a theory that is true can be supported by evidence from any era and in fact must be so if its truth is to be established. It will not do to claim that a certain generation or a certain group had a special hold on the truth and we must believe what they say because they said it. Second, the political thinking of the founding era was grounded in theory that came before it and that has been confirmed or modified by thinking that came after it. We do ourselves no favors by pretending that the nineteenth century was a wasteland in American political thinking or that the twentieth century is only the source of theoretical perversity. A complete preface to American political theory would include a beginning list of post-1800 texts worth our attention, a task that has yet to be carried out adequately by anyone.

Just as we should not seek the intentions of the founders under the assumption that a special genius automatically makes their theories true, neither should we reject the truth of their theories based on any personal failings they may have had. It is a logical fallacy to accept or reject an act or an idea because of its source—the genetic fallacy. Yet there are those who, with a straight face, indulge in the following logical sequence:

Major premise: A person who does a bad thing cannot produce anything that is of value or is true.

Minor premise: Person "A" has done a bad thing.

Conclusion: Person "A" cannot have produced anything of value or said anything that is true.

If a man proves to be a "womanizer" or a woman a "manizer," we, as American political theorists, should be able to distinguish our dismay and approbation over that person's casual and preda-
tory treatment of members of the opposite sex or flaunting of marriage vows or both from our estimation of the truth and utility of that person's political theory. Truth, like beauty, does not depend upon the intentions or character of the person who offers it; otherwise, we would examine the moral life of Mozart, Einstein, Meryl Streep, or Billie Jean King before judging whether to appreciate their music, science, acting, or tennis. The same principle, it would seem, applies to the political theories of John C. Calhoun, Abraham Lincoln, Herbert Croly, and Martin Luther King.

Similarly, we should treat slaveholding with the opprobrium it deserves but distinguish our anger and disappointment in this regard from the truth that may be found in the theoretical political thinking of those people who owned slaves, or who did not own slaves but failed to condemn it, or who condemned it but failed to act effectively against it. There are gradations of evil, and slavery has to rank high on the scale, but logic that is true and useful to humans with lesser failings should not be rejected solely on the grounds that the theory is generated by someone whose sins are greater. If the evil in a person's life informs and warps his or her theory, as has been concluded about Adolph Hitler, we can then reject the theory on its own merits. Our experience has shown that the political theory underlying the U.S. Constitution was not warped but has led Americans to inevitable, straightforward conclusions that required the elimination of slavery, the expansion of the electorate, and the broadening of rights. One does not have to read very far in the pamphlet literature of the 1780s to discover that many members of the active political class, north and south, were perfectly well aware of these deductions. Still, as is often the case, the theory was strong, but the political will was weak.

Second Premise: American political theory can be defined as the normative, analytic, and empirical study of American political texts, institutions, processes, issues, and values derived from and defined by its constitutional tradition. This working definition of the discipline contains a number of crucial points. One aspect, the blending of empirical, normative, and analytic concerns, deserves extended comment. Political theory properly understood is not opposed to the empirical study of politics but encompasses it. Indeed, American political theory, because it rests upon the analysis of experience, requires the development of data-based analysis using sophisticated math-
ematical and statistical techniques. At the same time, because American political theory engages in the constant evaluation of the American experiment and aims at improving the capacity of the experiment to achieve its ends, the discipline requires that empirical study be driven by theory that explains why a given empirical question is worth studying and that evaluates the results in a context that has normative implications. Empiricists, despite disclaimers, always end up, often covertly, putting their findings in such a context; and normative theorists inevitably make use of factual statements if their words are to have any relationship to the world in which we live but frequently use empirical statements in an unsystematic or unexamined fashion. The tendency by both sides to view their questions and approach as the only legitimate one rests ultimately upon a peculiar logic about life.

Imagine a person who spends her day earning a living as an accountant. Imagine that person coming home and using the same methodology on the family as at work—calculating the costs and benefits of spouse and children to see if their “costs and benefits to the life of the accountant” balance. Imagine now that same accountant going to work and using “family logic” to sort numbers on the basis of how she feels about them, preferring, for example, the number six, to which she has developed an attachment or fondness, over the number three, which once let the accountant down by being misplaced. Or imagine a physician using techniques of close textual analysis on his patients or in dealings with the spouse and kids.

Life does not allow us to use the same approach in every circumstance any more than it presents us with morally perfect people whose political theories we can then adopt in preference to those devised by evil people. Life is messy, often lacks logic, and presents us with a multitude of problems and opportunities that yield to approaches appropriate to each. Why should we expect that American political theory will be an exception to life and be any more susceptible to a single, universally applicable approach? In order to defend such an exceptional view political scientists of one persuasion or another inevitably are pushed to the position that certain questions are “trivial” or “not worth asking”; or, in its milder form, certain questions are “not very interesting.” The deep structure of such a response, ultimately, is to say that life is
not interesting, since life presents us with questions, problems, and challenges that will not yield to a single "nontrivial" or "interesting" perspective.

There are many scholars in political science who see the divisions as being far more than methodological in origin. Some insist that the normative approach is inherently oppressive since it seeks to explain or enforce values that can be only personal and idiosyncratic; others insist that empirical research somehow fiddles with nature and corrupts our moral vision. The arguments here are unlikely to change many of these minds, nor is that the intent. Rather, the intent is to suggest that the discipline of American political theory requires us to remain open to a variety of systematic approaches that together reflect our total experience of life. It is the discipline of architects who cannot ignore the laws of physics that underlie lines of loadbearing any more than they can ignore the factual characteristics of each material used in construction or the aesthetics of design. It is a discipline of integration and synthesis.

A complete preface to American political theory would show how to link empirical research with analytic and normative concerns. Historical research is one form of empirical inquiry, but what I have in mind here includes behavioral and aggregate data analysis using the most advanced statistical and methodological techniques. In the absence of space to develop a full model one could point to the work of Calvin Jillson as one of many examples. Jillson applied factor-analytic techniques typically used in legislative roll-call analysis to examine roll-call coalitions in the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. His systematic empirical approach allows him to identify voting coalitions, to determine that there were several realignments during the Convention—each resulting in a new coalition over a number of issues—and to sort out the mix of principles and interests that went into the final accommodation. Along the way he puts to rest several puzzles or debates that historians had developed in working with different techniques. Jillson's book, when read together with other studies that work from close textual analysis of primary theoretical tracts, illustrates how empirical research can be generated and guided by questions raised through other methodologies and then made to serve and support textual and historical analyses with quite explicit normative implications.
Another example of such integrated research might be Christian Bay's *The Structure of Freedom*, in which the author analyzes the components of a definition of freedom, conducts a comprehensive exploration of the empirical literature of the social sciences for evidence relevant to the implications of his analysis, and discusses the normative implications of his findings.²

Of course, empirical research is not limited to the use of data susceptible to statistical analysis. Historical research is an empirical enterprise that attempts a systematic analysis of data that frequently are not reducible to numerical form. The same is true of legal research, an important component of and contributor to the enterprise being defined here. American political theory has always worked implicitly from an operational definition of politics based on constitutionalism. Thus, because of the role of the Supreme Court in the American constitutional system, the Court has been a major generator of American political theory since 1800. Therefore, one major implication of the definition that constitutes our second premise is that American political theory must devote a significant amount of its attention to Supreme Court decisions and to their implications.

These decisions establish a data base that can be used to test important empirical propositions in American political theory. Together these decisions also serve as a summary of the changes that American political theory has undergone and of the theoretical positions currently contending for supremacy. An interesting book by Martin Edelman uses Supreme Court decisions as a data base for systematic textual analysis and delineates the competing democratic theories that justices have developed through their legal reasoning in a constitutional context. Edelman's book provides a good example of how analytic, normative, and empirical concerns overlap in American political theory, how they need to be addressed using a variety of appropriate methods, and how a constitutional context provides a useful focus for distinguishing theoretical positions that would otherwise be abstract and amorphous.³

The nature of constitutionalism and its importance for American political theory require that our enterprise blend normative, analytic, and empirical research, which leads us to the next premise.

_Third Premise: To define American political theory in terms of consti-
tutionalism means that the empirical study of human behavior in light of popularly approved ends and process stands at the center of the enterprise. Although this premise has already been discussed, it is worth considering the assumptions that underlie it. The idea of constitutionalism, properly understood, assumes (1) that humans can together design a binding, mutually acceptable political process based upon reflection and choice, (2) that constitutions define the political process and the general ends that have been so chosen and accepted, (3) that constitutions and the laws derived from them generate collective human behavior with predictable patterns, and (4) that this behavior ought to be congruent with the ends and process consented to by those humans whose behavior is being structured.

Among those scholars who study constitutions a tendency exists to treat them either as a set of philosophical principles that establishes prescriptive goals or as a set of legalistic doctrines that can be used as trump cards in resolving political controversy. The first tendency belongs to those whose training is in the more traditional political philosophy; the second is typical of those who teach in law schools. Neither tendency is perverse, but together they still add up to an inadequate understanding of constitutions.

Constitutions summarize the relationship that experience and reflection have thus far shown to exist between institutional design and the resulting patterns of political behavior. For example, bicameralism does not rest upon a free-floating philosophical principle but upon a set of ideas connected theoretically, which experience has shown results in a certain pattern of legislative behavior. To the extent that the institutional design is viewed as causing a pattern of behavior, to that extent it also provides an explanation for it. In this sense the set of constitutional rules that define an institution stand as a prediction, as an empirically testable hypothesis, that a certain pattern of behavior will result. Institutions that remain stable over time imply that the resulting behavioral pattern is more or less in line with expectations, and they also imply continuing approval for the predicted pattern of behavior—that we choose this pattern as preferable to any other known alternative.

Therefore, in order to understand the normative prescriptions in a constitution, we need to do more than focus on the more obviously normative statements such as those in a bill of rights. Until and unless we understand the predicted patterns of behavior con-
tained in the institutions defined by the constitution and the manner in which these patterns interact, we will not understand which behavior is preferred and thus which precept is normatively sought.

By the same token, to treat constitutional provisions merely as trump cards is to focus upon winning an argument rather than upon understanding the extent to which political behavior is congruent with predictions or preferences or both. The trump-card approach also is inclined to view the trumping passage in isolation from the rest of the constitution and thus to read it out of context. Constitutions are made up of interlocking institutions and therefore of interacting patterns of behavior; any piece of the pattern must be understood as part of a whole.

Finally, the constitutional approach puts empirical political scientists on notice that their methodology is critically important because the predicted behavioral patterns mediate between the normative, philosophical theorizing and the use of constitutions as the trump card. Without the behavioral understanding to connect them, the normative and legal aspects float free. At the same time, the constitutional approach imposes upon empiricists the responsibility to investigate the important as opposed to the trivial and to conduct research in such a way that operational definitions are compatible enough to result in cumulative knowledge. Until or unless empirical political science becomes part of a larger project that brings it greater coherence, it too will tend to float free. The centrality of constitutionalism to American political theory results also in the next premise.

**Fourth Premise:** The constitutions, documents, and writings upon which American political theory is built require that we construct complete texts that cannot be studied the same way as philosophical texts. How we assemble a text and the use we make of the text we assemble are crucially affected by the attitude we bring to it. The implications of this premise have been discussed in chapter 3, but one implication in particular deserves a little more explication. The analysis shows that the authors of constitutions and other writing designed for public understanding and approval must consider the meaning that would be supplied by an active citizenry. That is, the meaning of a political text in a system based upon popular control is a function of the interplay between the author's intended meaning, the
words as written, and the citizens’ appropriation. Analysis of texts in American political theory thus cannot meaningfully proceed from the stance of an indifferent philosopher but must proceed instead from the stance of an interested, educated citizen. Since a citizen’s education results prominently from participation in politics, the manner and extent of citizen participation takes on particular importance in American political theory. Finally, then, American political theory inherently involves analysis of democratic and republican theory.

In other words, American political theory inevitably involves itself with questions concerning a string of concepts that, when properly understood, lead inexorably to each other. One can conceive of such a string of concepts beginning with the concept most fundamental to democratic theory, popular sovereignty, followed by political participation, political equality, majority rule, individual and minority rights, the common good, political virtue, representation, deliberative processes, procedural fairness, effective institutional design, liberty, and a government that combines justice with power. Although the list is not meant to be exhaustive, it does set forth basic concepts that lie at the core of our concern.

That these concepts are central to American political theory explains and justifies our continuing interest in the study of such matters as electoral behavior, legislative process and behavior, public-policy evaluation, interest-group behavior, the operation of political parties, the status and treatment of minorities, public law and judicial behavior, and so on. To put it most clearly, our concept of modern political science is the direct result of American political theory defining what subjects are worth our study as well as strongly inclining us to use systematic empirical methods. European political science differs in its methods and objects of study precisely to the extent that it is not guided by American political theory; the extent to which overlap exists between American political science and political science elsewhere results from others adopting the research agenda that has been defined by American political theory.

Opposition to the integrated, constitutional approach that is distinctively American rests ultimately upon European perspectives that are in some sense hostile to American political theory. One such European perspective, which is based upon the extreme
logical positivism developed by the Vienna Circle, supports American empiricism but neglects or rejects the assumptions that underlie American commitments to liberty, the organization of a free people for collective political ends, and the evaluation of those ends by standards that are not merely ideological, irrational, or grounded in psychological self-interest. The other European perspective, which has its roots in the European idealist tradition, supports the American commitment to a higher law and the insistence upon a value context for political activity, but it is hostile to American insistence that political theory be grounded in experience and built upon the consent of the many as opposed to the imposition from above of an agenda developed by a few great minds who are more able to understand the requirements of reason. The former European-derived position defines the extreme empiricist wing; the latter defines the extreme philosophical wing in the study of American politics. The former tends to deny the relevance for politics of any human experience that is not clearly reducible to a statement of fact, and the latter tends to deny the relevance of experience that is not conformable to a coherent theory developed by a great European mind. Each position, for its own reasons, sees the study of history as worthless at best, if not pernicious. Each brings its own attitude to the analysis of a political text, the first to reject the text as worthy of study, the second to enshrine the text. Not to be confused with these positions are the extreme left and right ideological perspectives in American political theory derived from European Marxist or Nietzschean sources.

On the other hand, American political theory, as we have seen in the earlier discussion on the origin of the Bill of Rights and in the analysis on American use of European political writing, suggests a different operating premise.

*Fifth Premise: American constitutionalism, and thus American political theory, although resting in part on English and other European sources, is grounded most importantly in American experience, American needs, and thus in American history, which makes the study of history an essential part of American political theory.* The peculiar relevance of American history for American political theory results from the very nature of our political culture. Our theoretical thinking rests upon our own experience, our collective experience of living together as a people, and our experience in self-government. Too
many students who begin their academic lives in philosophy fail to appreciate how central this last point is. Because Americans have been a self-governing people, their history is the story of their own attempts at collective self-definition, and thus their story cannot be appropriated to the theory of some philosopher who has not had their experience; instead, philosophical theories must be appropriated by them to their experience. Americans, after reflecting upon their experience, write public documents that embody their collective, agreed-upon sense of selves; the reflection is deepened by other writing surrounding and explaining these documents. The history of these documents and their ancillary writings thus becomes the very stuff of American political theory.

If the job of history is to help us recover the meaning of these writings for those who wrote and read them, the job of American political theory is to help us decide what the meaning in those documents signifies for us today. Obviously, the former must precede the latter; thus American political theorists in political science departments often seem to be historians. Historians explicitly do not wish to work on the latter task, however, and it is at this point that we become political theorists.

The continued appropriation of a meaning by citizens over generations makes an idea or a theory timeless. Political theorists look for regularities and enduring patterns; historians seek an explanation for events that are viewed as discrete, independent, and unrepeatable. In looking for these stable patterns, political theorists make use of history in a way that historians cannot and will not. History is for American political theory the repository of data. In this sense, behavioral research by political scientists is a form of history since it establishes facts that can be reflected upon as well as examined for enduring patterns, and thus all empirically oriented political scientists are contemporary historians.

Still, the key point is that although those scholars working in American political theory can study and in some small way contribute to the enterprise, since American political theory is grounded in the experience of a people who are self-governing, in the end American political theory is defined by the people. Americans tell their own story, define their own values, create their own institutions, and establish their own political theory in the documents that they together approve. There is no evidence that Amer-
icans decide which European political philosopher to adopt whole-
sale as their own; instead, members of the political class work up
competing theoretical syntheses that are presented for approval. A
theoretical position is not accepted on the basis of philosophical
niceties but because it meets the needs of most of the people, for
which we can read "interests," and is part of a self-conception,
part of a story about themselves, that they approve.

Sixth Premise: American political theory is grounded in, conditioned by,
and ultimately approved by a self-governing, self-defining people. This prem-
ise raises questions about the function of those individuals who work
in a discipline of American political theory if the enterprise belongs to
the people. Essentially we play a multifaceted yet specialized role
within the active political class. Through our writing we assist histo-
rans in the recovery of original meaning, offer interpretations of the
American experience, suggest extensions or alterations in the theory
that take into account changing circumstances, and pass this on to oth-
ers in the politically active class. We teach our students how to read
texts for original meaning, how to systematically reflect upon the
American experience, how to interpret this experience (as well as intro-
duce them to the major interpretations currently in contention), and
perhaps most important we teach our students how to become mem-
ers of the politically active class, which brings us to our final premise.

Seventh Premise: The study of American political theory would be
best served by focusing more broadly on the writing and activities of the
active political class. Premise seven is required by the sixth premise.
If a people are self-governing and their self-government is em-
-bodied in an evolving set of public documents that rests upon
their consent, then it would seem perverse to focus American po-
litical theory upon a study of writings by a tiny elite. A portion of
the population plays a disproportionate role in the design, opera-
tion, and analysis of the American political system. Far too nu-
umerous to be called an elite, the political activist class interprets
and organizes politics for the rest of the population and interprets
and organizes the needs and demands of the broader population
for presentation to those in government. These people together
carry in their heads American political culture. From the ranks of
this active political class come the people who engage in the pro-
cess of self-reflection that we call American political theory.

The juxtaposition of the two preceding sentences highlights a
final aspect of American political theory that must be addressed in this preface—the relationship of political theory to political myth and the difficulties that result when both are the product of the same part of the population. First we must speak a bit about political culture.

There are basically three ways in which humans learn: directly, indirectly, and symbolically. If I strike a match and put my finger into the flame, the experience of heat and pain is a direct one that leads me to avoid putting my finger in a flame again. If I watch someone else put a finger in the flame and observe the response, I learn indirectly that I should not put my finger in a flame. If, however, I avoid putting my finger in a flame because my parents or others have used language to tell about the pain, I have learned symbolically.

Language is a shared system of symbols that must be taught to the next generation if continued symbolic learning is to take place. Indeed, since culture may be defined as the shared symbol system that is passed from generation to generation, language is the primary cultural artifact. Culture produces a collective orientation or set of attitudes toward various aspects of human experience and the world around us, and therefore political culture refers to the shared orientation or set of attitudes of a people toward the basic elements in their political system that is passed symbolically across generations.

Culture makes society possible, and political culture makes the political system possible. Note that since political culture as a subpart of general culture rests upon the language used to transmit it, the meaning of words and concepts can have a profound effect on how a political system is perceived, evaluated, and operated. At a deeper level, although it is possible to develop a political institution or practice before a word or concept exists to describe it, that institution or practice will require a name if it is to be passed successfully to future generations. Therefore, the creation of new words and concepts and the control of their usage can have a profound effect on politics. In fact, much of politics involves a struggle over the meanings of words and the evaluation of their referents. That is, much if not most of politics is a symbolic struggle or negotiation among people who share a political culture.
The struggle, in its most fundamental form, proceeds at either a mythic or a theoretical level. We need briefly to discuss myth in order to distinguish it from, and then to relate it to, theory. Contrary to the loose usage common in ordinary language, "myth" does not refer to a story or belief that is false or perhaps made up. As one student of myth puts it:

A myth, I suggest, is an interpretation of what the myth-maker rightly or wrongly takes to be hard fact. It is a device men adopt in order to come to grips with reality; and we can tell that a given account is a myth, not by the amount of truth it contains, but by the fact that it is believed to be true and, above all, by the dramatic form into which it is cast.5

A myth, then, refers to a shared story or narrative that provides a common understanding of a civil society's origin, its long-term goals, the justification of its institutions, and some sense of a connection with transcendent value or values shared by a people. The mythic form was more formally codified in earlier times, but modern nations have their myths as well. Myths are generated for the simple reason that a political culture must be passed to the next generation, and the mythic form is a highly efficient and effective way of doing this. Although a myth is usually based on facts or actual events, the significance that people give to the facts and events, the meaning they derive and then believe, is the key to myth. The commonly understood meaning, which is the core of the myth, is inevitably an important component of the political culture that is passed on.

Furthermore, as Eric Voegelin suggests, political analysis should begin with the study of a people's attempt at self-definition or self-interpretation.6 At some point, if a political system is to endure, a people must constitute themselves as a people by achieving a shared psychological state in which they recognize themselves as engaged in a common enterprise and as bound together by widely shared commitments, values, interests, and goals. Essentially a people share symbols and myths that provide meaning for their existence and link them to some transcendent order. Far from being the repository of irrationality, these shared symbols and myths are the basis upon which collective, rational action is possible.
Voegelin says that these shared myths and symbols can be found in embryonic form in a people's earliest political expressions and in "differentiated" form in later writings. By studying the political documents of a people, we can watch the gradual unfolding, elaboration, and alteration of the myths and symbols that define them. For example, the "American Dream," the idea that people migrated to American shores in order to improve their condition, to pursue and achieve happiness, is part of our political myth that can be found expressed embryonically in colonial documents, and then in differentiated form in our Declaration of Independence.

The narrative quality of myth, and the place it has in politics, is nicely summarized by David Carr.

A community exists wherever a narrative account exists of a "we" which has continuous existence through its experiences and activities. When we say that such an account "exists," we mean to say that it gets articulated or formulated, perhaps by only one or a few of the group's members . . . and is accepted or subscribed to by the other members. It is their acceptance that makes them members. Where such a community exists it is constantly in the process . . . of composing and recomposing its own autobiography. Like the autobiography of an individual, such a story seeks a unifying structure for a sequence of experiences and actions. . . . A community at any moment has a sense of its origins and the prospect of its own death as it seeks to articulate its own coherence and integrity over time. Such articulation involves an interplay of formulation and acceptance on the part of the participants. It may also take the form of a kind of negotiation among participants or even between parties to different versions of the group's story.7

"Negotiation" may not be the best word. Since attempts to formulate a new myth, alter an old one, or force acceptance of the current myth may threaten the existence of individuals, minorities, or the entire community, these political "negotiations" are often highly charged or conflictful. Much of politics is quite symbolic and proceeds at the mythic level. Examples abound. Characterizing the founders as "Founding Fathers" is part of a mythic narrative that can be threatened by those people who oppose the capi-
talization as needless deification or who oppose "fathers" as too gender specific. The television series "Roots," like the book, can be seen as an attempt to make Americans of African heritage more explicitly a part of the American story—an alteration in the myth. The addition of Labor Day, Martin Luther King Day, Veterans' Day, and St. Patrick's Day to our national celebrations, official or otherwise, reflects alterations in our national autobiography. What material to put in American history textbooks is not simply an academic matter, since these texts are a means for passing on our mythic autobiography to the next generation.

Political myth is both related to and clearly distinguishable from political theory. Both seek to explain who we are as a people, what we hold in common, what we should and should not do politically, and so on. Political theory, however, tends inherently to undermine the existing political myths. First, political theory works from a careful, systematic study of history, and the factual nature of events is carefully uncovered and insisted upon. Almost no political myth, no matter how factually grounded, will meet the rigorous tests imposed by historians simply because the meaning of an event has priority in myth over factual content. Furthermore, political theory, built upon history, attempts to extract meaning that is rational, logical, and removed from the logic of myth.

To a certain extent the same disjunction obtains between all political activity and political science. Those people engaged in political activity rely on what Abraham Kaplan calls "logic-in-use"; political science in any form uses a "reconstructed logic." Logic-in-use tends to be oriented toward problem solving, has a severely limited time horizon, and operates in the context of ambiguity, contingency, conflict, and ignorance. On the other hand, political science tends to isolate questions or problems in ways that those engaged in politics cannot do, imposes an orderliness and consistency that is usually not possible in day-to-day life, and can eliminate the distractions of conflict. Political science in general, including political theory, abstracts itself from the logic and reasoning used by those people who are engaged in politics. It then attempts, through systematic study, to clarify the events, actions, motives, and implications of the political process. Political theory is suspicious of the thinking offered by political actors and is always seeking a more adequate, logical explanation—one that can be general-
ized. Political logic-in-use in general, and political myth in particular, rarely measures up to the factual accuracy demanded by history and empirical political science or to the logical coherence and depth of meaning sought by political theory.

A reconstructed political logic inherently threatens political logic-in-use by calling into question the latter's adequacy. By so doing, political theory, which is a reconstructed logic, threatens to undermine the political myth upon which the political system is built; this is part of the age-old conflict between the polis and political philosophy.

What happens when a self-governing, self-defining people find themselves with a politically active class that is at one and the same time (1) disproportionately influential in the ongoing political process, (2) the primary manipulator and defender of political myth, and (3) the generator of political theory? The resulting tension constantly calls the political myth into question, dilutes political theory, and confuses or conflates myth and theory.

A nation in which there is a coherent elite allows for the possibility that those who largely run the political system can do so based upon a theory that is understood. The elite can use the theory as they alter the political system to meet changing circumstances. The unifying political myth, which the elite control, can be gradually altered to support needed changes in the political system and can be maintained in such a way as to support the political theory. That is, the political myth, which structures the behavior of the many, can be made supportive of the ends of the political theory, which the many do not understand. Elitists often cite this coherence as a strength of elitism.

In the United States, however, although there may be elites, the open, relatively democratic system makes them part of a broader active political class, which is fragmented and fairly porous from below. The inclusion of new members from new groups leads the active political class to alter the unifying political myth accordingly. Yet since political theory is also generated by members of this class, theory is often appropriated for political purposes, sometimes in the service of maintaining or altering the myth, sometimes in the service of undermining the myth. The conflation of theory and myth simply worsens the confusion between theory and ideology. It also has the often unrecognized effect of injecting
into a consensual political myth the logical imperative of theory, which too often results in a politics of perfectionism or fanaticism.

Fanaticism is, at its heart, the attempt to create perfection on earth, to eradicate the illogical or the imperfect or both. Part of the task assigned to American political theory is to remind us of the difference between a theory that explains political actions and the logic-in-use that produces political action. The ability to distinguish the two, to use theory to advance political reasoning without collapsing one into the other, defines the peculiar mental discipline of American political theory. It is a discipline sorely needed by a system of popular control, in which the active political class has a double role and is large, diverse, and open.

Those of us who pursue American political theory must attempt to be rational and objective, but we must also try to be responsible. Responsibility entails maintaining a constant vigil against the imperfections of the political logic-in-use, but it also means avoiding the destruction of that common logic, whether by undermining the shared political myth completely or by destroying the morale of those people who must use political logic to achieve the ends needed for the common good.

Finally, if American political theory is to become whole again, we will need to ignore those people who cannot resist the more extreme forms of the natural human inclination to think that whatever they do is the most important or the only activity worth pursuing. There are issues that separate students of American politics and theory, and these issues are real enough and important enough for us to treat them seriously through a continuing discussion, no matter how heated. Perhaps the one quality most needed for our discipline to thrive, the last element in a successful preface, is a continued dedication to truth in its various guises, coupled with humility.